

## DOCTORAL THESIS IN BRIEF

**NGUYỄN VĂN CHIẾN. *Study of Hán Nôm script on Vietnamese ceramics from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century***

*Specialty: Hán Nôm*

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Hán Nôm scripts on ceramics can prove a culture or a civilization. From the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese ceramics with style of each dynasty appeared, becoming the mirror reflecting each of those historical stages. Over the time, Vietnamese ceramic antiquities have increasingly asserted the value of historical materials which they contain.

However, so far, very few researchers have re-systematized Hán Nôm scripts on Vietnamese ceramics in these periods. Besides, the antiquities drain happens quite often, meaning Hán Nôm scripts on antiquities also disappear accordingly. It is significant to link and initially propose the most general characteristics of Hán Nôm scripts on ceramics as well as specific characteristics of each ware type, thereby highlighting the value of Hán Nôm scripts on Vietnamese ceramics from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

For that reason, the author has chosen “*Study of Hán Nôm script on*

*Vietnamese ceramics from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century*” as the thesis topic.

Besides the introduction, conclusion, references and overview of the status of the study in chapter 1, the main content of the thesis is presented in 3 chapters (from chapter 2 to chapter 4).

*Chapter 2: Form features of Hán Nôm scripts on Vietnamese ceramics during the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century*

*On writing forms:* There were two main writing forms of Hán Nôm scripts on Vietnamese ceramics during the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one was simplified form based on modern Chinese and one was traditional form based on ancient Chinese. In terms of features of forming character shapes, artisans in ceramic villages used 4 forms primarily.

The first form was using brush to write indigo characters on a ceramic body, before or after glazing; or using seal stained with indigo to stamp on the product. This form was called “flat writing” - the expression of “flat texts” on products.

The second form was using a sharp pen or something hard enough to engrave characters on a ceramic body, this could be left uncovered or glazed before being fired. The author calls this form “debossed writing” - the

expression of “debossed texts” on products.

The third form was filling, molding embossed characters on ceramic products, this could be done manually or by molds. This form was called “embossed writing” - the expression of “embossed text” on products.

The forth form was carving and erecting characters and there was separate section to create a pattern on products and highlight scripts on such products. This form was called “building word” - the expression of “erected letter” on products.

*Ragarding writing styles:* Hán Nôm scripts on Vietnamese ceramics during this period were expressed in five main styles: seal script, clerical script, regular script, cursive script and semi-cursive script.

*Regarding script types:* Most scripts appearing on ceramics during this period were Chinese characters, the common feature was no full stop mark to punctuate like on paper. On some worshipping products, there was appearance of punctuation and writing higher than normal to express reverence. During this period, a few ceramic products had Nôm scripts in Chinese sentences when expressing names of land, people who had merit or invented products, typically products from Bát Tràng, Phù Lãng villages during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>

centuries. Nôm scripts were not seen independently as single character for marking. When appearing independently on ceramics, Nôm scripts expressed full meaning of a landscape verse or poem. Nôm scripts on ceramics during this period mainly focused on two main product lines which were the court’s custom-made ceramics and Bát Tràng ceramics.

The study of Hán Nôm script styles on Vietnamese ceramics during the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century not only helps to classify, identify and generalize the most distinctive factors of script styles, but also helps to determine more specific age as well as origin of antiquities through characteristics of each script form. The determination of age through characteristics of Hán Nôm scripts is highly reliable. For example, clerical scripts on antiquities express age back to half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, or building characters represented antiquities in the Later Lê dynasty wardlord period (Lê Trung hưng)... The characteristic of script styles is also a factor helping to determine the age of ceramic ware. Vietnamese potters in this period generally expressed many writing forms rather than many writing styles. Each writing style was popular in each specific period, hence it is possible to determine quite accurately the age through writing style. For example, For

example, embossed seal script type with more than one character was popular in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially on Bát Tràng ceramics.

*Chapter 3: Content features of Hán Nôm scripts on ceramics during the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century*

- Scripts showing date: According to the author, date can be understood as the year or king's reign when the product was produced. Scripts showing date on Vietnamese ceramics during this period was relatively abundant, including scripts showing date by king's title, by Chinese zodiac and the combination of both. Scripts showing date by king's title were also called reign title. When appearing on ceramics, such scripts showed production year or year reproducing antiquities with similar reign title. Date by Chinese zodiac on ceramics was often identical to the year being sent to a foreign country as King's envoy in Nguyễn dynasty, with two forms of two and four characters. The combination of date by king's reign title and by Chinese zodiac often appeared on porcelains.

- Scripts showing hall mark, name mark, trade mark: Hall mark was where product was used, stored and ordered to make. Scripts showing hall mark on ceramics during the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century were mostly written at the

bottom of products. Script showing name mark on ceramics during this period were relatively abundant. It was used to show name of giver, writer or person who ordered to make, title of the object explaining the painting on such product. This script was often written at the bottom of the item and rarely written on the item itself. Trade mark script on porcelains was somewhat clearer than on ceramics.

- Scripts for epigraphs: An epigraph is a script used to write poems praising the scenery, people's affection. According to the author's statistics, there are currently 11 Nôm poems on custom-made ceramics and 7 Nôm poems on Bát Tràng, Phù Lãng ceramics. Chinese poems and writings are more diverse and abundant, from forms to content and presentation. They are poems on scenery, people, attraction, historical site, landscape, four seasons, four flowers, four classes with four interests.

In general, the content of Hán Nôm scripts on Vietnamese ceramics during the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century was mainly to express love of mother country, portray life, human's perception... Through such contents, details on taboo issues can also be seen. For example, the West court in Trịnh's palace was called Đoài court so it was written on ceramics in Trịnh's palace as "Nội phủ thị Đoài" ("West Royal

Palace”). Such writing was to avoid mentioning the name of Tây Đô vương Trịnh Tạc, the word Tây was replaced by the word Đoàn by Trịnh Lords. Through the content of script, the pervasiveness of Buddhism could also be seen in people’s lives and the philosophies; conception of Buddhism were also reflected through ceramics. Conceptions on longevity, prosperity, status were expressed quite boldly on ceramics and porcelains. Amongst single scripts, more than 80% was the word “longevity”.

*Chapter 4: Some issues about artists, works and spirit poetry on Vietnamese ceramics during the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century*

The study of the author of ceramics has provided information about people, product, villages, ancestors, trading and diplomatic history of Vietnam during this period. Moreover, it also shows the specific characteristics of each line of ceramics, glaze and characteristics of each ceramic artisan...

According to the thesis author, the most typical ceramic artist was Đặng Huyền Thông. His products had their own identities. For example, he did not use simplified and traditional writing, the color of glaze was mainly grey-blue, products were mostly for worshipping, his signature were fully written... Besides, there were a number of other ceramic artists from other

villages and pottery kilns, especially artisans from Bát Tràng ceramic village. The artisans’ signing on many ceramics proved that ceramics during this period had achieved high level of art and production; ceramics during that time were widely circulated domestically and internationally.

Hán Nôm poetic works on ceramics and porcelains were often the transcripts of familiar works. However, it is noticeable that there was the difference (variation) compared to original works, especially Nôm scripts. Spirit poetry was the form of poetry appearing since Song dynasty. It can be understood as a way to extract each component, each stroke of the character to combine into the content of a poem which the author wants to convey. These include two typical spirit poems on Vietnamese ceramics during the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century which were on two custom-made tea plates of royal court in Nguyễn dynasty.

The thesis was successfully defended at Thesis Examination Council of Vietnam National University, at University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi in June 2014 □

*Introduced by*  
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