

SOME ISSUES ABOUT HÁN NÔM LITERARY COLLECTIONS IN THE NGUYỄN DYNASTY

*NGUYỄN THỊ HIỀN**

Hán Nôm literary collections in the Nguyễn dynasty are a valuable heritage that Vietnam still can keep up to now. Studies on Hán Nôm literary collections on the Nguyễn dynasty provides us with a review of the way our ancestors wrote as well as a better awareness of respecting, protecting and promoting the past beauty. This paper initially approaches the Hán Nôm literary collections in the Nguyễn dynasty to explore premises, formation and development, and revision of Hán Nôm literary collections in the Nguyễn dynasty.

Within this paper, we define Hán Nôm literary collections in the Nguyễn dynasty are good writing or collections with the title of “literary collections”, selection of literary works including many types of proeses in the medieval period, revised by one or more than one authors, printed or handwritten in Hán, Nôm characters during the Nguyễn dynasty.

1. Premises for the formation and development of Hán Nôm literary collections in the Nguyễn dynasty

The Nguyễn dynasty is the last feudal dynasty of Vietnam. During the ruling time, Nguyễn emperors rapidly developed all aspects of the society. Therefore, the premises which promoted the formation and development of the Nguyễn dynasty’s literary collections consisted of political, economic, cultural and educational factors.

a. Concerning politics

To establish a centralized autocratic monarchy, Nguyễn emperors focused on building a ruling mechanism and maintained the social discipline in compliance with Confucian ideology. From Gia Long emperor to Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, Tự Đức emperors,

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they all had policies to develop the country. Progressive policies helped to develop the country's culture and economy, which facilitated authors' writing and compiling literary collections.

In the early 19th century, the Nguyễn government began to restore the ruined country after a civil war lasting for centuries, at the same time issued some favorable policies to reinforce their longlasting ruling. After the coronation, Emperor Gia Long developed a powerful centralized feudal state. From Minh Mệnh's government, administration reform and centralization were fortified. At the same time, local government had limited power. Nguyễn emperors, learning from the Qing dynasty, promoted the construction of official regulation in order to develop the country, taking Confucianism as the main ideology. Therefore, in many literary collections, there were works taken from History of the Northern Dynasty (Bắc sử) or the Four Books (Tứ thư) and Five Classics (Ngũ kinh) from China as examples in the Confucian court examination.

b. Concerning economics

After defeating the Tây Sơn, the Nguyễn dynasty built their capital in Huế and started to execute socio-economic policies to develop and protect the throne for the Nguyễn.

The Nguyễn dynasty promoted the reclamation for agricultural purposes,

which considerably enlarged the farming land in our country. In addition, the Nguyễn also enforced favorable policies on dykes, made investment in agriculture, and prompted the people that rights came along with responsibilities (Nguyễn Phan Quang, 2002, p.55).

The Nguyễn began to apply reforms in science, like minting, constructing shipbuilding factories and manufacturing weapons. To stabilize the society and improve the people's living standards, Minh Mạng and Tự Đức in turn, issued policies on reducing and exempting taxes for the people. It can be said that the Nguyễn emperors tried to get an understanding, promoted as well as innovated policies to develop the country's economy.

Due the policies on developing the economy during the Nguyễn, printing at that time had favorable conditions. Large printing houses were built in Hà Nội, Nam Định... and this was the time when book printing bloomed (Mai Hồng, Nguyễn Hữu Mùi, 1986, p.45). Apart from woodblock printing, many printing houses during the Nguyễn took the achievements in printing presses from the West. A better printing condition widely promoted literary collections in Hán and Nôm characters to readers and could be preserved till nowadays.

Literary collections in the Nguyễn dynasty were mostly printed in such printing houses as Liễu Văn Đường,

Bác Văn Đường, Gia Liễu Đường, Đồng Văn Đường, Hi Văn Đường, Úc Văn Đường, Liễu Chàng, Trường Văn Đường... There were collections printed in 2 printing houses such as *Hà Nam Hương thí văn tuyển* (Collections of exam paper in Hà Nam) (printed in Gia Liễu Đường and Đồng Văn Đường); *Tân khoa Hương Hội văn tuyển* (Collections of good exam papers in provincial and metropolitan exams) (printed in Liễu Chàng, Trường Văn Đường) ... Most of collections were printed in Liễu Văn Đường and Gia Liễu Đường.

c. Concerning culture - education

Under the ruling of the Nguyễn, culture and arts were relatively developed and got lots of achievements, which left a great heritage including both tangible and intangible ones. The Nguyễn emperors promoted the values of traditional cultures, which played a role in fostering some author to develop their interests and satisfy their desire in their compiling of literary collections.

History in the Nguyễn had certain achievements with lots of massive historical volumes such as *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sử lệ* (History of cabinet system in the Nguyen dynasty), *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* (Geography of Unified Great Nam), *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* (Imperially Ordered Annotated Text Completely Reflecting the History of Viet)... Besides, Phan Huy Chú had a great

study *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí* (Annals of the Laws and Institutions of Successive Dynasties). Some valuable geography books were compiled in the Nguyễn. Typically, there was *Nhất thống địa dư chí* (A National Geographical Book) (compiled by Minister Lê Quang Định), *Duyên hải lục* (Coastal Records) (Compiled by first assessor of transport minister counsellor Nguyễn Đức Huyền and senior assessor Đoàn Viêt Nguyễn).

In the feudal period, competition - examinations were the only way leading to fame and social status. Through almost a thousand years of history of examinations, there were 184 exams, of which the Nguyễn held 39 ones. The content of the study and exam in the Nguyễn were still controlled by Tứ thư, Ngũ kinh (Four books and Five Classics) and different types of prose, poetry and poetic prose. That was the reason why in the Nguyễn period, there were some literary collections consisting of writing for exams, which were typical writing pieces used in competition exams.

Literature works in Nôm and Hán characters were considerably developed in the Nguyễn. Compositions, poems, stories in Nôm, and Vietnamese Opera and classic drama scripts were more diverse than those in previous dynasties.

Almost all Nguyễn emperors loved saints' words. Many Nguyễn emperors were knowledgeable and highly

educated. Minh Mệnh and Tự Đức themselves compiled historical and literary books. Khải Định was also a knowledgeable king and loved literature. He wrote poems when he travelled to the North to visit Văn Miếu. In many examinations, emperors themselves gave the exam questions. For example, in Khải Định nguyên niên (1916), the emperor himself wrote the questions for Cống sĩ (successful examinees at the provincial level exams) at Cầm Chính palace.

Although the Nguyễn dynasty abolished the reform by the Tây Sơn in the use of Nôm character and reused Hán characters as the official writing, there were still many literary collections in Nôm or both Hán and Nôm.

The success of the Nguyễn dynasty in the development of culture and literature was a valuable lesson and heritage for later generations to study, assess and evaluate, and at the same time an important premise for the development of Hán Nôm literary collections in the period.

2. The development of Hán Nôm literary collections in the Nguyễn

Theoretically, the Nguyễn dynasty started in 1802 and ended in 1945, but the period in which the Nguyễn took the real power to rule an independent country was only the first half of 19th century. The development of Hán Nôm literary collections in the Nguyễn could be divided into 2 periods:

Independent period and dependent period (when the Nguyễn emperors were under the control of the French) (Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, editor, 2014, p.191)

- Independent period (1802 – 1858):

This was the period when the Nguyễn emperors took the whole control of the country, in the throne of 4 emperors: Gia Long, Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, Tự Đức. This was also the period when the society developed the most under the Nguyễn government. In the most prosperous period under the ruling of those four Nguyễn emperors, there were many literary collections of national meaning compiled and selected. Some must be listed: *Lịch khoa (huong thí) văn tuyển* (*Collections of writing in exams at provincial levels*) with preface written in the year of Minh Mệnh 4 (1823) consisting of essays ranking the first, the second and the third in exams at provincial levels from 1807 to 1821 at test sites in Nghệ An, Thanh Hóa, Hải Dương, Sơn Nam, Sơn Tây, Kinh Bắc, Trục Lê, Thăng Long; *Hoàng Việt văn tuyển* (*Hoàng Việt literary collections*) selected by Tôn Am Bùi Huy Bích, edited and titled by Nguyễn Tập, Provincial education officer in Sơn Nam in 1825, consisting of writing in Trần and Lê dynasties such as poetic prose, journal, funeral oration, royal proclamation, imperial edict, traditional Sino-Vietnamese dissertation, petition, paean, prose,

reports, official documents....; *Lịch khoa đặng long văn tuyển/Lê triều lịch khoa đặng long văn tuyển* (Collections of exam questions and exam papers in the national exams in the Lê dynasty) printed in 1839, including exam questions and exam papers of successful candidates in the national exams in the Lê dynasty from 1683 o 1787; *Lịch khoa hội đình văn tuyển* (Collections of exam questions and exam papers in the exam held at the palace and the national exams) printed in 1839 containing exam questions and exam papers of successful candidates in the national exams and the palace exams from 1733 to 1838; *Tân khoa hương hội văn tuyển/Tân khoa hương thí văn tuyển* printed in 1851 collecting exam papers in provincial exams, national exams and palace exams in 1838, 1840, and 1841; *Bác học hoành từ khoa văn tuyển* printed in 1851 collecting all writing in the exam Bác học hoành từ (exams for scholars) in the year of Tự Đức 4 with the order by Tự Đức emperor and royal honour-conferring diploma from the king for those who fulfill the requirement etc.

- *Dependent period (1858 – 1945):*

In this period, there were literary collections like *Xuân kinh điện thí văn tuyển* printed in 1904 collecting writing pieces by successful candidates in the palace exam in 1904; *Lê triều hội văn tuyển/Lê đình hội văn/Lê triều hội tuyển/Lê triều hội văn* copied in 1895 consisting of proses in national

exams and palace exams in the period of emperor Lê Cảnh Hưng (1740-1786), etc.

- *In addition*, there were some collections compiled and printed in the Nguyễn, but the publishing years haven't been identified, such as: *Giáp Tuất khoa Nam Định trường văn tuyển* collecting all exam papers in the year of Giáp Tuất TỰ ĐỨC 27 (1874); *Lịch khoa hương thí văn tuyển* compiling 41 essays selected from 3 provincial exams in Gia Long period held in the years of Đinh Mão (1807), Quý Dậu (1813), Kỷ Mão (1819) at test sites in Thăng Long, Hải Dương, Sơn Nam, Sơn Tây, Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, Trục Lệ; *Lịch triều sử ký văn tuyển* by Lê Đình Diên compiling 332 essays with the topics taken from History of the Northern Dynasties, Analects, Mencius, The Doctrine of the Mean and The Great Learning as samples for exam writing styles; *Phương Đình tiên sinh trường văn tuyển* consting of 14 royal proclamation and 11 petitions by Nguyễn Văn Siêu; *Tam trường văn tuyển* collecting extracts of exam papers in provincial exams in Nghệ An, Thừa Thiên, Nam Định in the examinations in the year of Minh Mệnh 21 (1840); *Tứ thư văn tuyển* collecting 288 texts with the topics taken from Analects acting as samples of exam writing styles; *Xuân kinh hội thí văn tuyển* compling exam papers in the national exam in 1904; *Ngô gia văn tuyển* including works of different types such as poetic prose, poetry,

journal, funeral oration,... by 3 writers in Ngô gia văn phái (Ngô family literary school).

Among big literary collections, only *Hoàng Việt văn tuyển* by Bùi Huy Bích had modern Vietnamese version (national language). The Vietnamese version of *Hoàng Việt văn tuyển* consisted of 3 volumes translated by Nguyễn Đình Diệm, published by *Phủ quốc vụ khanh đặc trách văn hoá* in 1972.

3. Some views on book compiling in the Nguyễn dynasty

Writers in the Nguyễn dynasty inherited the achievements in book compiling in the previous dynasties and were influenced by the materials and methods of famous writers like Hoàng Đức Lương, Phan Phu Tiên, Dương Đức Nhan, Lê Quý Đôn... Some great writers in the Nguyễn like Bùi Huy Bích, Phạm Đình Hổ, Phạm Quý Thích, Nguyễn Văn Siêu, Cao Bá Quát, Cao Xuân Dục... expressed their points of view in writing, compiling, selecting and revising Hán Nôm books in their prefaces, afterword or particular works.

a. Nguyễn emperors' views on book compiling

At first, views on revising literary collections in the Nguyễn dynasty were shown in royal proclamations, royal honour-conferring diplomas, edicts by different Nguyễn emperors. Writing as well as revision, compilation and

selection of verse, prose, and historical documents written in Hán Nôm in the Nguyễn had lots of great achievements. The independent period of the Nguyễn dynasty lasted throughout the ruling for four emperors: Gia Long, Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, Tự Đức. Because of "being flooded in incidents" (Trần Hữu Duy, Nguyễn Phong Nam, editors, 1997, p.7) and codes, under the ruling of Gia Long emperor, there were not any clear points of view in compiling books as well as in writing. Some emperors, well-know for their knowledge, like Minh Mệnh, Thiệu Trị, Tự Đức left a massive writing career, which somewhat showed that Nguyễn emperors held an interest for poetry and compilation of books.

Minh Mệnh emperors' viewpoints in writing was "write what really happens to see the good and the bad in state affairs ... in order to motivate ourself...", "it is not to write poetry but to write what truly happens... " (compiled by Minh Mệnh, translated and anoted by Trần Văn Quyền, 2007, p.12). After Minh Mạng's period, in the period of Thiệu Trị's government, the country was considerably stable. With the point of view on book writing "to make the court prosperously last, the civil administration better", Thiệu Trị emperor wrote: "...Academics in *Đông các*^(*) took [those works] from

(*) Originally, "đông các" means academicians. Academicians worked in council-chamber (các); thus, it's called like that.

the year Tân Sửu to the year Kỷ Tỵ to compile into books. Count [types] petition, book, tự, journal, afterword,... (parallel sentences), poetic essay, essay, there were 229 works, allocated in 13 volumes, 2 for table content. With the help of all subjects, grateful remember, to make the court prosperously last, the civil administration better, ...” (Afterword. Ngự chế văn nhị tập (The king’s writing the second volume, Code A.118/1-3, Institute of Studies).

Following Tự Đức emperor’s order, Đàm Trai Phạm Hữu Nghi compiled the massive books *Đại Nam văn uyển thống biên* in 1847. This was a literary collections compiled with order consisting of a lot of content from literary works, ordinance... It can be clearly seen Tự Đức’s great work in compiling this “literary garden”.

Khải Định emperors ever had an edict that: “...to all councils with National historiographer’s office and envoys to make an inquiry of all literary types from Tự Đức nguyên niên on (1848), from royal proclamation, petition, reports, v.v... all should be compiled according to their type. The purpose is to collect all and do not miss anything, then select all works of quintessence to soon give them to the Kinh, to respond to my desire to study literature ...” (National historiographer’s office in the Nguyễn dynasty, translated by Nguyễn Văn Nguyên, 2010, pp. 422-423).

From the point of view on compiling books of the most prosperous reign in the Nguyễn dynasty, it can be seen that Nguyễn emperors paid attention to literature in general and literary collections in particular, and took it as a weapon for political purpose to make the country prosper.

b. Viewpoint of writers in the Nguyễn dynasty on book compilation

Knowledgeable emperors in the Nguyễn dynasty liked “hackneyed writing”, which encouraged writers to compile and revise books. Some great authors like Bùi Huy Bích, Phạm Đình Hổ, Nguyễn Văn Siêu, Cao Bá Quát, Cao Xuân Dục... expressed their viewpoints on compiling, selecting and revising literary collections through their prefaces, afterwords, and through the compilation and selection of works in literary works itself.

After many years of great effort to collect and compile, in 1868, the group of Dương Bá Cung, Nguyễn Năng Tĩnh, Ngô Thế Vinh completed and printed out the collection *Úc Trai di tập* consisting of 7 volumes. The viewpoint on compiling the collection *Úc Trai di tập* by Dương Bá Cung was “to take all collected works to classify into different types, and re-arrange into volumes, then look through historical records, stories, royal edicts to compile all in the first volume as a reference to evaluate characters, to wait for someone who loves Your writing (Nguyễn Trãi) just like me, then he

may make use of this volume... ” According to: Nguyễn Hữu Sơn, 1999, p.15).

Nguyễn Văn Siêu's view on compiling books was “take reasoning as principle”. Bùi Huy Bích compiled the collection *Hoàng Việt văn tuyển*” for the purpose that compiling as compact as possible to be used in his family (Tồn Am gia tàng), the collection missed lots of good writing, especially petition, reports, foreign affairs which were famous in the Trần dynasty or the Tây Sơn period when the author lived. However, the collection made a considerable contribution to preserve a series of works of different types written in Hán characters by the Vietnamese in the Middle Ages. According to: Lại Nguyên Ân, 2001, p.195).

In the preface of *Ước Trai văn tập*, Dương Danh Lập showed his opinion on compiling literary collections for exams to be passed to next generations, exam papers which fulfilled the requirements or good exam papers at exam compounds: “... I am a person who was born late, although I am lucky to achieve a high position at the early age, I respect you as my big brother. *When working as a mandarin in Tiền Hải district, my servant read your exam paper to me, suddenly I felt stimulated and appreciated that: for this exam question, if this was not a learnt man, no one could give; if this was not a learnt man, no one could*

answer, it was really meaningful writing in exams. Then, take them to make a collection for later generations to get an understanding...” Preface. Ước Trai văn tập (Ước Trai literary collection) (CodeA.124, Institute of Hán Nôm Studies).

Writers who compiled literary works were aware of the great role of civilization, which made them excellent literature activists in the Middle Ages. This clearly showed their awareness of respecting, protecting, and promoting the beauty of the past, or community life, protecting and promoting culture heritage in their ideology and viewpoints on compiling literary collections. At the same time, it can be seen that, the contributions of compilation writers did not only lie in supplying next generations with literary collections but also in providing them with viewpoints, compilation and revision methods.

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Literature in the Nguyễn dynasty had lots of values relating to literature, history..., which played an important role in Vietnam culture resources. Hán Nôm literary collections in the Nguyễn dynasty were valuable resources for Vietnamese literature and history studies. This was only a result of study on some aspects of Hán Nôm literary collection in the Nguyễn dynasty. Other aspects of Hán Nôm literary

collections in the Nguyễn dynasty will be further discussed in future papers □

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