

## Official recruitment and training in King Quang Trung's time and implications for today

**Nguyễn Thị Mỹ Hạnh**

Dr. Hanoi National University of Education

Email: myhanhvn@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** *The article delved into thinkings and policies of talent recruitments in the dynasty of King Quang Trung who was virtuous, talented, and made significant contributions to the country defence and development in the second half of the 18th Century. The article triggers nowadays' readers many precious lessons through the "human strategy", the strategy and policy of "human deployment" that King Quang Trung utilized during his short reign (1788-1792). King Quang Trung's thinking and policies of talent recruitments and training that time convey not only political meanings, but also full values of such strategies through all times.*

**Key words:** Official recruitment, Talent Training, Quang Trung

A well-known official named Lê - Thân Nhân Trung and his statement about the talents to the internal power of the country has been living forever: "The talents are of the nation's resource. The resource is strong, the nation will be strong and prosperous. The resource is weak, the nation will be weak and inferior. Hence, good leaders always consider that it is essential to select and train talents, and plant for such resources. Such talents are so crucial to the country, so they shall be treasured." The statement which was sculptured on

the stone at the Temple of Literature has been a reminder of a tradition of the ancestors for treasuring the talents. Since the talents are of the nation's resource, so the country's ups and downs always pertain to the resource. King Quang Trung, as his continual of this awareness, was an example of the thinking and actions for recruiting and training talents during his reign, aiming to produce strengths to his time. The King's thinkings and policies for recruiting and training talents are as follows:

### *1. Recruiting the talents through democratic and open approaches*

During his reign as an Emperor (1788-1792), King Quang Trung issued 4 key Decisions: Decision for Talents Appealing, Decision for Appealing Officials of the Former Dynasty, Decision for Education and Training, and Decision for Exam Organization. Such Decisions aimed for selecting and training talents for the country.

King Quang Trung was well-aware of roles and mandates of the talents to the country. He thought that the country's big mission needed such talents to contribute their qualifications and enthusiasm. In this light, King Quang Trung showed his sincere attitudes at recruiting the talents, yearned for getting their cooperation spirits so as to build up a new solid dynasty: "... While everything was in a mess, gentlemen competed to deal with national issues; in early phase of development now, there is so much confusion. Official neighbouring relationships have still been at failure, and the borderland has been at great concerns. The people have not been revitalized; policies have not been successfully applied, etc. I feel so much worried with workloads everyday. I just think that a single tree cannot bear a big house, an individual intelligence cannot create a peaceful country. In the nation, with tens of households in each area, there must have several loyal persons, let alone in this big location, there must

have outstanding individuals who are able to help me at early phase of development", "the decision is made, any one of academic ability, intelligence, or talents is all permitted to propose for the makings. Useful proposals can be approved, not-yet-useful ones are archived, and there is not any prohibition. Officials are allowed to nominate good people who can be assigned at specific positions in accordance with their capability. Any one who has been unknown for special talents are permitted to self-nominate..." (Referred to "Chiếu lên ngôi" by Quang Trung, edited by Nguyễn Lộc, 1993: 78).

The policy of talent recruitment, obviously, was democratic and open. From small to big officials, from well-known to unknown talents, or from people of academic excellence to ones of skillful abilities, any of them was able to propose for potential assignments. Nomination can be done not only by officials but also by the individual who was qualified to contribute to development of the dynasty and the country. Through these ideas, it is clear that the recruitment policy of the Tây Sơn Dynasty was so democratic and open that such policy was not available at many other dynasties in the nation.

Even officials of the previous dynasties of Lê and Trịnh, King Quang Trung still sincerely employed and brought good mechanisms. It was vividly stated in his Decision for Accession: "Second, ones

of the previous dynasties who were seriously convicted are granted amnesty except too seriously convicts. Officials of the previous dynasties who either escaped from military registration or denied for receiving assignments are all up to their discretion and decision” (refer to “Chiếu lên ngôi” (Decision for Accession) by Quang Trung, edited by Nguyễn Lộc, 1993: 65; Nguyễn Lương Bích, 1989: 195).

It was impossible to forget loads of burdens that Kinh Quang Trung - Nguyễn Huệ got through when encountering against frustration of the Bắc Hà illelectuals during and after the Tây Sơn revolution. Lý Trần Quán buried himself to follow death of Trịnh, whereas Trần Phương Bình killed himself by cutting stomach, or Nguyễn Huy Trạc took a poison to show his loyalty to the Lê dynasty. Others like Trần Danh Án, Bùi Dương Lịch, Phạm Thái, and even Nguyễn Du, etc. held swords to call for fighting against the Tây Sơn. Furthermore, a conservative stance of former officials of the Lê - Trịnh could not be forgot, because they were such people of limited vision for loyalty and tried to maintain the rotting throne, hence, fought against the Tây Sơn. In front of the issue, however, King Quang Trung was still patient at talent recruitment, continued issuing the Decision for Talent Appealing towards officials of former dynasties with a hope that his sincerity could sensitize people’s willingness: “I myself came to Bắc

Thành<sup>(\*)</sup> three times and showed my tolerance. In the past, ones lived in Yu, then the country Yu lost, but when they came to Qin, they significantly helped for that nation’s development<sup>(\*\*)</sup>, they just were flattering people in Sui but became loyal ones in Tang<sup>(\*\*\*)</sup>. Hence, I do definitely not blame you all for any wins or loses. You, however, at first came back to surrender, then took care for our common work, but finally kicked off everything. On the date of your reaching towards to town, I did ignore for your faults. The decision was also issued, aiming to give you a chance for life, but it seems you have still been hesitant, or even evaded; it must mean that you await reinforcements to alter the current situation. It is not a wise action for smart people at all. I should have showed my power to judge you all as criminals<sup>(\*\*\*\*)</sup>... But I reconsidered and saw you as patients of serious diseases, so if I had not given you one more chance, I would have created faults to all livings... I still love talents, cannot

<sup>(\*)</sup> Bắc thành: refers to the Thăng Long City. Quang Trung leading the soliders headed to Thăng Long three times in 1786, 1788, 1789.

<sup>(\*\*)</sup> Refers to Baili Xi (Chunqiu period) who was an official in the Yu Country. The Yu nation was lost, the Qin nation picked him and assigned as the state minister. Baili Xi helped the Qin nation to create big works.

<sup>(\*\*\*)</sup> Refers to Pei Ju who was a former official of the Sui. King Sui Yang loved to hear sycophantic words, hence Pei Ju played a sycophantic official. When Sui was lost, Pei Ju became an official of the Tang, Tang Taizong was a good king, then Pei Ju got back to be a loyal inferior who effectively helped for Tang Taizong.

<sup>(\*\*\*\*)</sup> Refused to obey.

forget for a while. Therefore, an amnesty is given to all of you who are imprisoned or wanted... On this occasion, you should make good contributions! Try your best! Try your best..." (Refer to "Decision for Appealing Officials of the Former Dynasty", in Edited by Nguyễn Lộc, 1993: 74-75; Nguyễn Lương Bích, 1989: 195-196).

Right after, King Quang Trung showed his tolerance by issuing a Decision for Amnesty and Confiscated Property" for Officials of the Lê Dynasty: "...All officials of the former dynasty, due to your escapes from obedience, were judged free from any guilty. For agricultural property that was confiscated and not yet returned, on this occasion, any individual who complies with regulations and is listed by a supervisor is allowed to receive your former property so that your livelihood can be guaranteed. For criminals of serious cases, let us maintain their imprisonment for future judgement. Otherwise, all are free from prison" (Nguyễn Lương Bích 1989: 196).

In the deepest awareness of King Quang Trung, obviously, when the talents have not been in one place and there have still been a lot of concerns for a new dynasty, required education might not be useful. Since then, he was not ashamed at appealing talents without much consideration or hesitation when he could see positive attitudes of former officials. As a result, many well-known talents such as Ngô Thì Nhậm, Phan Huy Ích, Vũ Huy Tấn, Ninh Tồn, Bùi Dương Lịch,

etc. gathered under leadership of King Quang Trung. Such people made highest contributions to development of the dynasty and the nation. King Quang Trung managed to win heads and hearts of talented individuals.

Beside nomination or self-nomination of talents, King Quang Trung, with an aim to find good officials for his cabinet, promoted the recruitment through the examination; his idea was that this approach helped build up qualified personnel to avoid a phenomenon of "official of 3 money units" commenced at late Lê Cảnh Hưng phase, of which any candidate who would like to participate in the higher test must pay 3 money units. As a continuation of the previous dynasties, King Quang Trung organized the tests for Physics and Literature at Phú Xuân City; any individual regardless of regions were allowed to register the test, as long as they were qualified, they would be selected.

Regarding the Literature test, the King decided to organize once every three years, it was called Minh Kinh test. The first test (\*) held in 1789. Even though after his power taking, King Quang Trung controlled the land from Phú Xuân outwards, from Quảng Nam inwards belonged to control of King Thái Đức Nguyễn Nhạc; but through tests in Phú Xuân, King Quang Trung selected many people of the inward land

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(\*) It was also the final Literature test.

and assigned them in important roles in his dynasty. Such people included Phan Văn Biên (in Phú Yên) who was excellent in history, mathematics, assigned as an Educator once he passed the test; Đinh Sĩ An (in Bình Khê), and Ngô Diên Diệu, Phan Đình Vân, Huỳnh Chiêu that were famous for literature, people called them “four excellents of Tây Sơn”; after the test, they were assigned work at the Cabinet with an Academic title; Phạm Văn Trung (in Phù Mỹ), Trần Trọng Vỹ (Hoài Ân), Đặng Sĩ Nguyên, Đặng Mộng Kỳ, Lý Xuân Tá (in Quảng Nam), etc. were all assigned for key roles in accordance with their qualifications after the test. For example, Trần Trọng Vỹ was good at poems and became a junior official for Tây Sơn; but after the Minh Kinh test, he was immediately assigned to a senior official, Lý Xuân Tá also held an important role in Phú Yên (Quách Tân, Quách Giao, 2000: 149).

Not only the southern land, many people in Thuận Hóa and Bắc Hà under the Tây Sơn dynasty also passed the test. One of the most famous individuals was Đặng Cao Phong who was selected to the Cabinet, got promotion after and won the King's trust.

Regarding the Physical test, there were quite many people of the inland participating in. Two outstanding faces were Phạm Cần Chính và Lê Sĩ Hoàng, of whom Sĩ Hoàng made many records, together with Quang Diệu, both were

called “Two of Tây Sơn” (Quách Tân, Quách Giao, 2000: 150).

## 2. *Development of national school systems to all villages with an aim to build social background for recruitment*

Besides such exams, King Quang Trung also particularly paid attention to extend and develop the national schooling system. He issued a decision to found an Institute, its role was to translate texts of high moral and art values into the national language from the Chinese one, so that such translated texts could be published and available in nationwide<sup>(\*)</sup>. Meanwhile, King Quang Trung appointed La Sơn phu tử Nguyễn Thiếp to be a Head of the Institute<sup>(\*\*)</sup>. At the decision of the appointment, there was a statement that “At his high age and qualifications, all scholars have seen him as Mountain Thái Sơn, Star Bắc Đẩu; now the nation is peaceful, I would like to commence education and training. He took education as a benchmark to show the goods and bads, I am delighted and would like to place the Institute in Vinh Kinh at Mountain Nam Hoa, award him as Director of the Institute in charge for monitoring teaching and learning activities. Teaching and learning shall follow

(\*) Early of the fifth year of Quang Trung dynasty (1792), the Institute completed translation for the sets of Sĩ Shu and Xiaoxue. The King issued another decision to continue translation for other sets titled Shi Jing, Shu Jing, Yi Jing...

(\*\*) In partnership with Nguyễn Thiếp, there were many officials of the Lê Dynasty that were excellent at the Nôm Literature, such as Nguyễn Công, Nguyễn Thiện, Phan Tố Định, Bùi Dương Lịch...

Chư Tử's methodology so that talents could be well educated. From now on, any student who achieves excellent results annually, their names can be listed and nominated to the King if their moral and qualifications are all good. You shall well deliver moral lessons to students so as to deserve my compliments for your high age and qualifications" (Đinh Văn Niêm, 2011: 190).

The decision of appointment shows that King Quang Trung particularly appreciated moral and willingness of the talents, especially the ones who were well-educated and in charge for educating others as Nguyễn Thiếp. To the King, excellent teachers could produce good students, bad ones would definitely produce non-educated people. Teachers of high moral and dignity could produce good, tolerant people who have ideal for life.

King Quang Trung extended and developed education to all villages, aiming to build social background for recruitment and national boost. The King required that each village must establish a school and select educated teachers who would teach young students. This obviously was an advanced policy of the Tây Sơn Dynasty. The King cared for education not only from its growth but also its root, which means education shall be from villages to avoid leaving any single talents. In the current circumstance, when a local education department is available, it is crucial and advanced to

found a national management agency like the one in the Tây Sơn time; this policy shows the King's close eyes on necessary demands.

For officials of three money units (to purchase the degree), the King insisted on returning them to normal people: "The exam will be organized this year, high-school graduates who could pass the exam at the high distinction will be sent to the National University, at the ordinary will be sent to the local one. People who passed the exam in the previous dynasty and have not been appointed will be assigned to be instructors. Others shall re-sit the exam, if they can pass at the high distinction, they will be recruited, otherwise, they must come to local schools. Officials of three money units must return home and pay taxes as normal people", "the issued decision is for people who should found a common school and select well-educated teachers for your own students" (Refer to "Decision for Education", in Trần Phương Hồ, 1977: 404-405). According to King Quang Trung, not only teachers shall be talented and moral, but also students must be good. Only when being qualified and moral could the candidate become an official to devote their talented ability to the dynasty. Careful selection of teachers and students place a solid platform for high qualified recruitment.

In particular, as advised by La Sơn phu tử Nguyễn Thiếp, King Quang Trung

accepted practical training methods of Chu tử, instead of the kind of spooned education approaches to learn by heart lessons: “Chu tử’s methodology shall be followed. One shall start at a primary level, then continue at higher levels, then more specific subjects, such as tú thư, ngũ kinh... Learning can be extended, then simplified so that one could practice after studying; after all, a talent can be produced...” (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1993: 184-187).

With a direction of practical study, King Quang Trung hoped to train a new intellectual generation that was not identical with out-of-date approaches, so that graduates could immediately work and contribute to the common growth.

### *3. Training of moral and qualification to officials, promotion of democratic spirits within the national management system*

King Quang Trung tried to train moral and qualifications of the officials through serious disciplines of awards and sanctions. Even La Sơn phu tử Nguyễn Thiếp who was three times sent the letters and given generous presents to Mountain Bù Phong, Thiên Nhãn (adjoined by Hương Sơn District, Hà Tĩnh and Thanh Chương District, Nghệ An)<sup>(\*)</sup> by the King, with an aim to invite him to accept an assignment was criticized as well. On 11 April 1792, King Quang issued a document to La Sơn phu tử that “Notes at textbooks of the primary level were meager last year

<sup>(\*)</sup> A place of an arable farm of Nguyễn Thiếp.

and have not been qualified enough. Regarding translation of the Tú Thư, it was promised to be submitted by this Spring, but there has not any submission till now, which means the deadline was missed. It is required that the notes for phonetics and meanings shall be bound as a set, hence, phonetic explanation shall be detailed instead of being meager as before” (H.B.Q, 2010, <http://baonghcan.vn...>). That must be a person of excellent Chinese and Vietnamese languages, and a frank, sincere characteristic, King Quang Trung was able to give such feedback to Nguyễn Thiếp - the person he trusted and employed. Thanks to the comments, the Tú Thư (a famous work of China) was translated and bound in 32 sets and sent to Phú Xuân just after one month. Right after receiving such documents, King Quang Trung issued a decision for award after reviewing. In reality, on time merit - criticism was existed long time in the Vietnamese feudalism history<sup>(\*)</sup> and it was a good motivation to officials so that they could non-stop try working on and on to enhances their qualifications and moral to successfully fulfill any assignments.

Not only strict and fair in educating officials, King Quang Trung tried to

<sup>(\*)</sup> According to *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (1983), translation, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, episode 1, pg. 278: In Vietnam, at the dynasty of King Lý Thái Tông (1051), the test for evaluating martial officials commenced. Accordingly, officials at different levels must get through the test to see their performance...

promote a “democratic” spirit in the national management system. Other successive kings of the Tây Sơn dynasty also tried to comprehend his thought. Decision of straight words<sup>(\*)</sup> to collect ideas of officials and people everywhere so as to adjust the dynasty’s operation and heads of the nation was an evidence for the spirit: “Now our nation is large with many people, it has been a grant of the former King (refer to King Quang Trung) who dared to pioneere. However, the land is large, but deserted areas are quite many; there are many people but many complaints as well, I feel so scared like falling down to the deep. Our tasks of growth and development were difficult, but maintenance of the city has been much harder. Together with senior officials, I tried to tentatively prepare but could not know what and how to do in right ways” (Refer to “Decision for straight words”, in Nguyễn Lộc edited, 1993: 84-85).

From his sincere concerns for officials and people when the country was in difficulty, the King frankly self-criticized and pointed reasons for such hard case: “It is a born complacent that causes lazy manners and has existed quite long” (Refer to “Decision for straight words”, in Nguyễn Lộc edited,

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<sup>(\*)</sup> Ngô Thời Nhậm was on behalf of Nguyễn Quang Toàn (other document said that he spoke in accordance with King Quang Trung’s testament) and wrote this decision. The decision was issued when Bùi Đắc Tuyên - senior official was killed due to his abuse of power, resulting in immoral conducts and badly affecting prestigious of the Tây Sơn dynasty.

1993: 84-85). The King yearned for frank and straight words from the people so that “I can achieve good dignity” and “right paths could be found, with officials, but not yet” (Refer to “Decision for straight words”, in Nguyễn Lộc edited, 1993: 84-85). At the same time, the King raised a sealed-envelope proposal so as to maximize constructive feedback sent by the people: “Dear people, please seal your envelopes and speak out your minds without any hesitation. If you are in the city, please submit the envelope to the dynasty, otherwise to your local official in charge. I am willing to take right advice and proposal to execute official work, aiming to change bad practices and make positive difference” (Refer to “Decision for straight words”, in Nguyễn Lộc edited, 1993: 84-85).

The Decision for straight words was an application of the thought of people as a foundation of the Tây Sơn dynasty; it was also a platform for many important decisions pertaining to external and internal relations, which got agreement of the national people.

To the Tây Sơn dynasty, official recruitment and training was not only trust, tolerance and appropriate assignments but also educating their qualifications and moral, on-time awards and sanctions or criticism for any official’s contribution or shortcoming.

Obviously, talent recruitment of King Quang Trung was not a kind of one way approach but it was applied flexibly

depending on the time or specific individuals. Without Intelligence, King Quang Trung could not understand people, without Virtue, he could not select people, and without Boldness, he could not employ and deploy people successfully. It can be seen important characteristics of the King of Intelligence, Virtue, and Boldness - necessary characteristics of any leader at any time.

Human strategy, policy and strategy of “human deployment” applied by King Quang Trung in particular and by the Tây Sơn Dynasty in general (through educational reform, institutional system, recruitment, and training policy building for all intellectual classes in society that time) not only conveys political meanings of the past but also becomes valuable to all time and brings us many precious lessons. Nowadays, when the whole world has been in the knowledge economy, and each nation is attracted to a tough competition for technological sciences, then basically, it is a competition for hooking and employing talented people. Therefore, a policy for talent detection, recruitment, and education shall be a top priority, which should be an applicable measure in the nation development of the intergrated context □

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