

Vietnamese Trade of the Fifteenth Century Lê Government: Recovering through Ancient Records*

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Abstract

In comparison to the trend of researches on resistance against foreign invasions, dynastic political life or “rural, agriculture and peasant”, the amount of researches on economic issues ironically accounts for only a modest proportion in Vietnamese official historiography.

In the Vietnamese medieval history, Đại Việt’s society and economy between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries witnessed the shifts from aristocratic monarchy regime to a centralized bureaucratic one or from dynamic, tolerant and open Buddhist ideas to Confucian ideology. Especially, the Early Lê Dynasty (Lê Sơ, 初黎朝, 1428-1527) was considered as the dynasty attaching to the greatest importance for

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agriculture, and marking a highly Confucianism-oriented regime. And, the reign of King Lê Thánh Tông, despite the fact that it created a period of time of flourishing and prosperous development of Đại Việt [*Hồng Đức Thịnh Thế* - 洪德晟世], was for the time being considered the agricultural society and physiocrat economy.

Is the Lê dynasty an agricultural polity of disdaining trade sectors? Is the King Lê Thánh Tông with his extremely serious mind on rural and peasants? What is the relationship between agricultural policy and reality of trade activities? There are so far conflicting views on the above issues by both international and Vietnamese scholarship. The purpose of the article is to reappraise the Vietnamese trade of the Lê dynasty. The economic and social nature seek to light and view with the general development path of the medieval history of Vietnam.

Keywords: Lê Government, Đại Việt - Vietnam, 15th century, trade,
Lê Thánh Tông

I . Introduction

“To write history without putting any water in it is to leave out a large part of the story. Human experience has not been so dry as that (Donald Worster 1985, IX).”

Donald Worster’s idea has well reflected in Vietnamese historiography. Accordingly, Vietnamese scholarship easily satisfies with views from mainland or delta based on a chronicle and official view politically. Through annals, readers in fact inherit

information from political and cultural daily-life of ancestors, especially royal family, aristocrats, generals, celebrities. Other social classes or another history that contributed “to make national history overall” in another past, only accounted for a limited proportion as the mass in official annals.

After the long time of being dominated, prior to the independent period, there were a lot of exchanges of foreign envoys under the Lý (李朝) and Trần (陳朝) dynasties of Đại Việt.¹⁾ In *Dư Địa Chí* (輿地誌, Geography, completed in 1435), Nguyễn Trãi (1380-1442) highlighted “Under the Lý period, foreign trade boats gathered in the sea area. In An Quảng, the dynasty established two districts (州) Vân Đồn, Vạn Ninh... Foreign merchants came to trade...” (Nguyễn Trãi Toàn Tập 2001, 466). Historical and archeological documents showed that right after wars, trade exchanges between Vietnam and China continued even under the time of Mongol-Yuan invasion.²⁾ The Vietnamese society in Lý-Trần periods, as well as societies of ancient kingdoms of Funan, Champa, Srivijaya... found an external energy source for their outstanding developments. With the manifestation of

1) Đại Việt (Great Viet, 大越) was most used for eight centuries (from 11th to early 19th centuries), except other names (Đàng Trong- Cochinchina, Đàng Ngoài - Tonkin, Đại Ngu - 大虞).

2) In Vạn Ninh and archeological sites of Cống Tây, Vân Đồn in present-day Quảng Ninh province, archeologists and historians have discovered many ceramic items from China, including high-grade Yuan [元] ceramics produced by Long Tuyền [龍泉] pottery-kilns and dated late 13th - early 14th centuries. At the end of Trần dynasty and the beginning of the Early Lê dynasty, there were close relations between Đại Việt and regional countries. According to *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*, in comparison to Lý and Early Lê dynasties, there were a lot of Chinese envoys to Trần dynasty (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư I 1993, 235).

acculturation, Đại Việt society played an important role of connecting two worlds: Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, becoming a specific development phenomenon as a “dualism entity” in the area.³⁾

After two decades of resistance against the Ming domination, the Lê came to power with the establishment of a new dynasty (ruling from 1428 to 1527, called the Early Lê dynasty). On the way to integrate into the Chinese Confucianism, typically under the reign of Lê Thánh Tông (黎聖宗, r. 1460-1497), researchers believe that their official deals paid a special attachment to agriculture while the rest of the economic activities were not favored by the Confucian thoughts. For both Vietnamese and international scholarship, the Early Lê trade remains virtually unchanged in the points of view of the above causing an unattractive theme in the past decades.

Besides an exclusive *History* written by individual historians,

3) About the Vietnamese traditional culture, the author of *Lịch Triều Hiến Chương Loại Chí* [歷朝憲章類誌, Administrative Regulations of the Successive Dynasties by Subject-matter], Confucian scholar Phan Huy Chú wrote: "Since the nation building under the Đinh - Lê, in opposition to China, the administration gradually became clear. Under the Lý - Trần dynasties, internal political life and culture were expanded and flourished... Confucian scholars came gradually to dominate the domain of learning, literature blossomed as forest, many books; it would be much more if it has not been passed a warring time... This continued to greatly develop in the Lê time" (*Lịch Triều Hiến Chương Loại Chí* II, 379). In fact, through various contacts in the region, in order to preserve the traditional cultural values, in *Dư Địa Chí*, Nguyễn Trãi warned: "Our people should not imitate the languages and costumes of the Wu [Ngô, Chinese?], Chiêm [Champa, 占城], Laos, Siam, and Chenla since they destroy our customs" (Nguyễn Trãi Toàn Tập 2001, 481). With influences of dimensional cultures from the outside, Đại Việt culture evidently reached a high level of harmony with regional culture in a tolerated and open society, they therefore tried the best to reorient the true mainstream of the national culture.

five great sets of the official history of Vietnam are brought into the public, including *the History of Vietnam* (2 tomes) by the Institute of History in the 1970s; *the History of Vietnam* (4 tomes) by the Hanoi University in 1976; *History of Vietnam* (4 tomes) by the Hanoi University of Social Sciences and Humanities and Hanoi National University of Education in the 1990s; 4 tomes of *the History of Vietnam* by the Hanoi University of Social Sciences and Humanities in 2005; 15 tomes of *the History of Vietnam* by the Institute of History during 2007-2014. In all five sets of work, their well-known authors confirm that the Lê dynasty (Lê Thánh Tông's reign in particular) is the peak of the Confucian orientation. Consequently, the role of agriculture earned a special intention.

Researches conducted by Thành Thế Vỹ, Đỗ Bang... do not focus on this period on the one hand, they have no difference as compared to the above orthodoxy on the other hand (Thành Thế Vỹ 1961; Đỗ Bang 1996). Hoàng Anh Tuấn focused his study on the VOC's relations to Tonkin in the seventeenth century. In symposiums and workshops on the fifteenth century of Vietnam, he had raised our opinions but without criticism on it (Hoàng Anh Tuấn 2007; 2008).

For international scholarship, in 1978, John K. Whitmore in his work on the political history of the Lê government provides, with no comments, an issue on the trade of Lê Thánh Tông's period, and shared his point of view with Vietnamese scholars at that time. In his new essay on the Vân Đồn's disappearance, J.K. Whitmore has changed but merely relied on foreign scholars'

findings without trying to find it in Vietnamese historical annals (Whitmore 2008, 167-180).

Li Tana pays intentions on the Cochinchinese history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 2006, Li confirmed the roles and influences played by the Vietnamese commercial ports, as well as active involvements of the Vietnamese in the regional network from the Chinese domination to the eighteenth century (Li Tana 1998; 2006). In fact, Li Tana has no new comment on external economy of the Early Lê period. Momoki Shiro based on Chinese ancient bibliographies has focused on diplomatic relations before the Early Lê period based on Chinese ancient bibliographies. He has emphasized on frequent relations of Đại Việt with East Asian countries. Nevertheless, this fact is under the dominated thought strongly managed by the Lê government in the Confucian model of state's strict control of trade (Momoki Shiro 1998). Therefore, very little progress has been made so far by both scholarship in and outside Vietnam to reassess the nature of trade during the Early Lê.

II. Commercial Conditions of the Early Lê Period

1. Potentials of Natural Resources

Under the Ming domination (1407-1427), the dynasty [明朝] implemented many cruel methods to loot natural resources, which

were valuable trading goods. In *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* [大越史記全書] it was clearly written that:

In 1415 (Ất Mùi year, or the 13th year of the Vĩnh Lạc [永樂] reign of the Ming), Autumn, in August, Ming dynasty searched and confiscated gold and silver mines, recruited laborers to sift gold and silver, to seize white elephants and to grope for pearls. People were afflicted by heavy taxes and exploitation and were banned from buying and selling salt, while salt fields were controlled by the mandarin. There were heads and deputies of each salt field to look after it in turns. Provinces and districts had mandarins in charge of vice-heads as Ty Thuế Khóa and Sở Hà Bạc [tax offices and treasuries].⁴⁾

The Ming established schools for hunting pearl, flavoring, white fox, white deer, white elephant, nine-tail tortoises, perches, gibbons, pythons, snakes for tribute (*Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* II, 241).

In term of all gathered, their exploitation policies for undermining Vietnamese economic resources which were written down in the ancient records;

At the Ming time, they claim, require every things without knowing what is fed up with them. All local peppers, spices, white deer, white

4) *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* also revealed salt taking method of Ming dynasty: First of all, they asked an officer and his deputy to urge people to cook salt, people had to bring all the salt they made a month to the store. Mandarins in charge of logistics looked for traders who paid money for permits. Big permits were for 10 kilos of salt, small permits were for 1 kilo. Only after that salt would be sold. Without those permits, people would be punished at the same level as cooking alcohol illegally. People were allowed to have 3 bowls of salt and 1 bottle of fish sauce (*Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* II, 236-237).

elephants, nine-tail turtles, macaws, gibbons and pythons... they force people to look for paying tribute to them in Yên Kinh [燕京] (Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục I 1998, 764).

Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục [欽定越史通鑑綱目] noted that they [the Ming] exploited any places of gold, ordered officers to control them, and forced indigenes to serve as exploiters. They also ordered indigenes to go to forest and to sea, hunting for rhinos, elephants, and pearls (Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục I, 755). For their long time rule and occupation, on 17 March 1407, Ming Emperor Vĩnh Lạc instructed General Trương Phụ [張輔] “to gather all talents in the whole country, and send them back to the Capital [Beijing, 北京] if Ming troops occupy Đại Việt” (Minh Thực Lục I, 250). On 27 July 1407, the Emperor again directed his commanders to recruit and make love to talents in various fields such as Confucian scholars, peasants, letters, and skillful soldiers and so on. In their schemes, these served as contributors to the Ming Capital’s wealth (Minh Thực Lục 1, 274). In general, products, productions that noted in detailed data of *Ming Shi Lu* were exploited and sent back to China by the Ming colonial government.

Just after four months being enthroned, on 10 August 1428, King Lê Thái Tổ (黎太祖, r. 1428-1433) paid his attentions to natural resources, “ordered to have clear enumeration of specialties in each locality such as bronze, iron, mulberry, flax, silk, wax trees, canari sap, beeswax, oil, pepper, and rattan (Đại Việt Sử Ký

Toàn Thư II 1993, 296).” On 25 November 1428, the King “ordered to examine fields, lands, gold and silver mines, and mountainous specialties in districts and old taxes (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 297).” On 22 December 1428, he continued to “order heads of provinces, districts, and localities to examine private and government-owned fields and lands in their localities, together with kinds of fish, fruit, salt, fish sauce and private fish aquariums in estuaries, kinds of gold, silver, lead, tin, and money (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 298).”

2. Domestic Trade

In *the Regulations on Opening New Markets* issued in 1477, Lê Thánh Tông decreed:

The number of people in provinces, communes and localities are increasing, if they want to open new markets for convenience, heads of provinces, communes and localities need to consider reality, if it is really convenient for people, they need to write reports and allow people to open new markets, regardless of having old markets or not (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 469).”

Then, on 10 March 1484, the King had a decree on banning business restriction. It was clearly written that:

There is a strict law on banning business restriction, but some authorities have not changed the old practice, harming people, harming

political situations. From now on, Phụng Thiên Prefecture [奉天府] and Thừa, Hiến services [承司, 憲司] in localities have to review the previous order for prohibition and reminder.

Households which have to buy offerings at weddings, if buying things in markets, should pay right prices for any goods, they are forbidden to use power to force people to sell things at lower prices, those who violate the law would be punished in accordance with the previous order (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 489).

Article 90 in *Quốc Triều Hình Luật* [國朝刑律, The National Penal Law, or *Luật Hồng Đức - 洪德律, Hồng Đức Code*] also had it that:

If supervisors in the Capital markets extort money from traders in markets, they will be punished with 50 lashes, *biếm một tur*,⁵⁾ taken heavy taxes of market with a punishment as *biếm hai tur*, lose the job of supervisors, compensate people twice; rewards for reporters of those cases are in accordance with regulations. If they ask for higher market taxes, they will be punished with 80 lashes and taken around the village with scandal spread around for 3 days. Those who ask for too high market taxes will be punished at one level higher than regulated (Quốc Triều Hình Luật 1991, 87).

In order to have unanimous units of measurement, to protect the state's power and role in the management of economic activities,

5) *Biếm* [貶]-*tur*, a kind of punishment (except ngũ hình -五刑, five punishments), includes 5 *tr* (1st level to 5th level: *một* (one), *hai* (two), *ba* (three), *bốn* (four), *năm* (five)). *Biếm* was another treated as a form of lowering the sentenced penalty, or beaten with a rod (or stick).

Article 91 in *Quốc Triều Hình Luật* clearly regulated:

In markets in cities and the country, traders who do not use the right scales, rulers, containers regulated by the state and use their own ones will be punished by not being allowed to trade or by hard labour (*Quốc Triều Hình Luật* 1991, 87-88).

A document composed by Lê Thánh Tông named *Hồng Đức Thiện Chính Thư* [洪德善政書, Book of Good Government of the Hồng Đức Period] also has detailed regulations about market activities and regulations to open markets. In this regulation, a formal “concept” of market was that:

In people’s life, if there are people, there are markets, markets are to exchange goods, trade development is to satisfy people’s demands. In communes where there are already markets, it is not allowed to forbid them to open new ones to illogically hinder trade. Villages which trade later, and have markets later, are not allowed to have same fairs with markets nearby or have fairs before markets nearby to get goods from traders. If they want to open new markets, it is necessary to consider old ones and have the later fairs than the old ones. If markets are opened without plans, there are competitions without regulations, prohibitions are made for some people’s own benefits, punishments will be made based on the level of violations to stop the prohibitions (*Hồng Đức Thiện Chính Thư* 1959, 145).

Besides being aware of people’s life, roles of handicraft and commerce were clearly taken into significant consideration.

In April 1484, for the first time, the court had an order to ban rich people abusing their power to appropriate gold and silver mines. On 1 May 1486, Lê Thánh Tông decreed:

It is valuable for money to flow everywhere, it is valuable for money to be stored for a long time without being damaged. From now on, offices in every locality, when collecting fines, regardless of private or public ones, need to choose real bronze coins to keep in public stores, although the edge of the coins can be a little broken, the coins are still made of real bronze and can be stored for a long time. In terms of money to pay salary and for people to spend in trade, if they are real bronze coins and can be strung, people have to receive, people are not allowed to refuse them or select them too carefully (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 500).

After the death of Lê Thánh Tông, the new king, Lê Hiến Tông (黎憲宗, ruled, 1497-1504) just two days after being enthroned, had a decree repeating two important instructions made by his father: i) banning the use of power to oppress people in trade and control prices in the market; ii) banning mandarins and people from selecting new or old coins in exchange.⁶⁾

Together with the above policies, the government also kept

6) In the 8th day, the new King decreed “royal relatives, princesses, high-ranking mandarins who come to buy things from the countryside folk in the market, do not have the old habits, seek profits, buy at a reduced price or even take it at random without any payment. Since then, the masses of buying goods and keepers of coins into common depot, if coins when throwing into the ground cry or can be strung, in spite of a little broken chip, all must be gathered it in and used, not be choosy or without any spending (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 523).”

money stored at Hải Trì lake, strictly refused people from counterfeiting money or using coins to cast objects or to make imitated objects or limited traders and workers from opening shops inside the citadel. The government also interdicted people from communicating secretly with envoys, trading goods especially forbidden goods cross the borders. If traders who were Man Liêu peoples (ethnic groups) were extorted for presents, relevant mandarins would be punished and have to compensate twice for the victims. The state prohibited selling of border lands, maidservants, elephants and horses to foreigners. If people violate this law, they would be executed. Boats going to estuaries must be examined, except private boats of high-ranking mandarins from level two (out of 9-grade bureaucratic ranking system). The dynasty strictly banned the use of the King's objects to make strings for boats. If people violate this law, they would be exiled or sentenced to death (Quốc Triều Hình Luật 1991, articles 21-25, 71, 72, 76, 77, 79, and 81).

The state government also banned mandarins and people from using gold, gems and glass to make hats and spittoons as well as trading military hats in markets to avoid confusions between soldiers and people. The Lê government also set taxes for salt, mulberry, and allowed some locals to build trading boats for transporting paddy and rice, and at the same time determined gold and silver taxes in order to reduce gold taxes and adjust gold and silver prices (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư III 1993, 63).

3. Commercial Ports

Among the contributions to the Vietnamese trade development, the crowded activities of commercial ports were included. A formidable case was Vân Đồn (雲屯) which was still the biggest and most important commercial port in Đại Việt in the 15th-16th centuries. In Vietnamese foreign trade history, Vân Đồn was the seaport that was established earlier, operated continually and had an important role through seven centuries (Nguyễn Văn Kim 2014). In the North East area of Đại Việt, in Hải Đông Prefecture (海東府) (including 4 delta districts (縣), and 2 mountain districts (州)) “there was a large area of mountains and sea and a little area of fields, people all traded for profits, few people did farming, tax was different from other *trấn* - 鎮 - town” (Phan Huy Chú I, 163).⁷⁾ Writing about Hải Đông [海東] area, the author of *Lịch Triều Hiến Chương Loại Chí* revealed that “there was Hồng Đàm plain at sea which was crowded with trading boats. There are two controlling stations Suất Ty and An Lương as main stops for goods taxes (Phan Huy Chú I, 162).”

Vân Đồn was the connection point in terms of foreign trade, and was a politically sensitive area, the Lê government therefore attached special importance to security protection and supervised economic activities at Vân Đồn commercial port. *Quốc Triều Hình*

7) About climate conditions in An Bang, Lê Thánh Tông also wrote: “Ngư diêm như thổ dân xu lợi - Hòa đạo vô điền thuế bạc chinh” meaning “There were as many fish and much salt as soil, people rushed to get benefits - there were no lands for rice fields so taxes were light” (Cá, muối nhiều như đất, dân xô nhau kiếm lợi - Lúa mạ, không có ruộng cấy, nên thuế cũng đánh nhẹ) (Phan Huy Chú I, 163).

Luật regulated:

Those in Vân Đồn taking Chinese goods to the citadel without permission from *An phủ ty* [安府司], getting to Triều Đông port without being checked at *Đề bạc ty* [題帕司], trading the goods secretly, or those coming back without permit from *Đề bạc ty*; getting to *Thông mậu trường* [通貿長] without being checked at *An phủ ty*, going straight back to the farm, will be punished *biếm* (貶) *một tư* and will pay a fine of 100 *quan* [官, the basic units of Vietnamese currency], reporters of these cases will be rewarded one third [of the fine]. If they trade goods secretly in villages, they will be punished *biếm ba tư*” (Quốc Triều Hình Luật 1991, 211).

In *Hình Luật Chí* (刑律志, Criminal Law Section) of the book *Lịch Triều Hiến Chương Loại Chí*, Phan Huy Chú wrote:

Mandarins without permission to go to farms in Vân Đồn or borders will be put in prison or exiled... People from farms at borders or at seaside taking only foreigners to the citadel will be punished *biếm năm tư*, if they have no positions, they will be sentenced to prison, or have to serve as soldiers, and pay a fine of 100 *quan*... Those at the seaside allowing trading boats to call at to load goods illegally will be punished *biếm ba tư*, pay a fine that worths twice the values of the confiscated goods, one part of the fine will be given to reporters. The head of the farm will be demoted... When there is a foreign trading boat calling at Vân Đồn for trade, if mandarin *Sát Hải Sứ* [察海使] goes to check the boat alone, he will be punished *biếm một tư*. If that boat wants to stay, the head of the farm has to ask *An Phủ Ty* for permission, if he himself

allows it to stay, he will be punished *biém hai tư*, pay a fine of 200 *quan*; one third of which is used to reward reporters. If people allow foreigners to stay without residence registration, but foreigners do not have enough time limit, they will be punished *biém một tư*, have to pay a fine of 50 *quan*, reporters are rewarded as mentioned above (Phan Huy Chú II, 271-272).⁸⁾

III. Foreign Trade

1. Legal Foreign Trade

Foreign relations were also expanded by usually allowing traders and envoys to do trade and tribute. After sending troops to the South for pacifying Champa by Lê Thánh Tông in 1471, “because the King had defeated Champa and the reputation had spread everywhere, colonized countries in the west in turns hurried to offer tribute (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 451).” Although trade relations were rarely mentioned in the official history, the event of 1437 was clearly noted:

8) In a general view, although Vân Đồn was located far from the capital of Thăng Long, it was oriented towards the sea and had become one of the regular destinations in the region, a focus point of domestic and regional trading flow. Nguyễn Văn Kim has highlighted that the real strength of Vân Đồn was flourished by four elements: First, Vân Đồn rose to prominence due to its strategic location in the transportation line; Second, it offered a safe entrepôt in the East Asian trade routes; Third, it had abundant sources of goods for regional trade; Forth, it was a resource-rich sea and islands region (Nguyễn Văn Kim 2014).

Siam sent Trai Cương Lật as envoy to offer tribute. The King gave him the bestowing letter and reduced trading taxes by 50% compared to the previous year getting one proportion out of twenty, and gave a big reward. In addition, he gave the King of that country 20 sheets of colored silk, 30 sets of porcelain bowls, he gave the Queen 5 sheets of colored silk, 3 sets of porcelain bowls, each set has 35 pieces (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 346).

In trade exchange relations, besides costumes, pearls, silk and fragrant materials... ceramics and porcelain reached high demands as luxurious goods. In *Dư Địa Chí*, Nguyễn Trãi wrote that: Bát Tràng village, which made bowls and cups, and Huê Cầu village, which specialized in dyeing, were two villages that usually provided tribute to Ming dynasty: “Bát Tràng is in Gia Lâm province, Huê Cầu is in Văn Giang province.⁹⁾ Those two villages usually provide tribute to China, including 70 sets of bowls and plates and 200 sheets of black cloth (Nguyễn Trãi Toàn Tập 2001, 464).”¹⁰⁾

9) Gia Lâm district is belonging to Hanoi; Văn Giang district is belonging to present-day Hưng Yên province.

10) Ceramics discovered at wrecked boat in Cù Lao Chàm, researchers have believed that 240,000 objects (excluding debris) in the boat were mainly products of the system of ceramics kilns of Chu Đậu-Mỹ Xá (Nam Sách, Hải Dương province) in the fifteenth century. Those ceramics and porcelain objects were not only at perfect level of techniques, design and art values, those archeological discoveries have also changed views of many researchers about Chu Đậu ceramics as well as the typical contributions of the fifteenth century Vietnamese ceramics and porcelain, one of the most prosperous periods of development in Vietnamese ceramics history (Phạm Quốc Quân 2000, 20-23; Hồ Xuân Tịnh 2003, 28-29).

The Exhibition in Kyushu on 19 June 2013 by Kyushu Museum “The Great Story of Vietnam” showed a lot of Vietnamese ceramics, including Chu Đậu and Hạp Lễ ceramics... In addition, they were preserved at Tokyo, Osaka, Indonesia... Ceramics

As a result, “during 38 years in power, Lê Thánh Tông reigned a peaceful and prosperous period in the history. Đại Việt in Lê period became independent, united, powerful and prosperous in Southeast Asia (Phan Huy Lê 1999, 597),” including economic flourishing. After the golden time of the Lê Thánh Tông’s reign, it witnessed the gradual fall of the central government. As political situations were in chaos, parties fought for power and had plots to get the throne. According to *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*:

At that time, the citadel failed, lands were abandoned, people came into the citadel to fight for gold, silver and valuable properties, eucalyptus, musk, silk and raw silk were everywhere; countless piles of barks, peppers and fragrant materials of all kinds up to 1-2 *tắc*¹¹⁾ high were thrown in the streets. Strong people fought for gold and silver, some people got three or four hundred *taels*, weaker ones also got over two hundred *taels*. Palaces and stores were therefore completely empty (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư III 1993, 77).

It was a Thăng Long in war, destruction and ruin... but the destruction and ruin also showed Thăng Long in which it was rich with valuable properties. *That source of tangible properties definitely was not enabled to rely on revenues from agricultural*

discovered at Cù Lao Chàm contribute naturally to Vietnamese economic history in the fifteenth century as well as Vietnamese social and spiritual life. “Cù Lao Chàm also contributes to standard collection for assessing its type and date, and to a great source of materials for research on Vietnamese ceramics under the Early Lê (Nguyễn Đình Chiển, Phạm Quốc Quân 2008, 22).”

11) Tắc-錫 (around 10 cm).

activities, or from a physiocrat society.

Due to huge profits of trading exchanges, even if quiet closed controls by the government, trafficking activities still took place. The poetry of Nguyễn Trãi about the reality of “Phiên [foreigners] people burglariously anchor boats” was an another fact of informal exchanges.¹²⁾

In March 1439, King Lê Thái Tông regulated money value, the measurement of cloth and a writing paper sheet. According to the regulations, “in terms of money, 60 *dong* [钱, around 3.78g/*dong*] make an unit of money, in terms of silk, each block is at least 30 meters long and 1.5 meters wide (*in old measurement*), in terms of flax cloth, each block is at least 20 meters long and 1.3 meters wide, each block of banana tree fiber cloth is 24 meters long, each block of rough cotton cloth 22 meters long, and paper is in 100-sheet block” (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 348).

As the view of the above, after having enthroned, King Lê Thánh Tông (r. 1460-1497) warned that “people should not abandon the foundation [farming] for the top [trade], or planning to do business (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 393).” Researchers believe that the decree represents the agricultural-based and trade-disdained thought of Lê Thánh Tông. With this, it seems that Lê Thánh Tông aimed to stop a rather popular trend at that time, as peasants in many places abandoned

12) In 1434, An Bang [安邦] General Manager [總管] Nguyễn Tông Từ and Co-General Manager Lê Dao, when taking goods check of a trade boat from Java had dishonest acts, embezzled goods valued 900 quan [官] of money (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II, 441).

fields for trade and became wealthy quickly. That social trend would certainly go to harm and change the value system that Confucian political institution wanted to establish and strengthen. In 1429 before Lê Thái Tổ had pressed that “those who fought the invaders are poor, those who just play are rich. Those who fought the invaders do not have any land, but those who are useless to the country have abundant amount of land... It is the reason why nobody is devoted to the country, people only think of becoming rich (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 299).”

2. Illegal Foreign Trade

In order to build a law-controlled state, Lê Thánh Tông always concerned about the possibilities that the law was not strictly obeyed and the national mainstays were not strong enough for many reasons, including economic ones. With the incident case that Thượng Thư Hình Bộ [刑部尚書, Minister of the Ministry of Justice] Trần Phong asked the King for permission to let Lê Bô, an offender who was punished by being stigmatized on his forehead, pay money, the King noted that “if so, rich people with a lot of money from bribery are exempted from punishment, only poor people are punished (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 435).”

At the year of 1471, *Hoàng Triều Quan Chế* (皇朝官制, Royal regulations of mandarinates) was promulgated. *Quốc Triều Hình Luật* then was brought into the public in 1483 by Lê Thánh Tông. In fact, similar to *Hoàng Triều Quan Chế*, in *Quốc Triều Hình*

Luật, there are many articles, such as articles 21 to 24 in *Regulations on punishments*, about detailed regulations about payment for crimes or different responsibilities (Quốc Triều Hình Luật, 1991, 42-43).¹³⁾ Historical records show that although the law in the Lê dynasty was famously strict, money would still change or save destinies.

Mixing information sources among trade, diplomacy or tribute exchanges issued a challenge to researchers. Lê royal annals wrote clearly that after Lê Thái Tổ passed away, the Ming dynasty sent Quách Tế, Chu Bật... to show condolence. With a lot of offering gifts (contained on 80 tables), envoys also brought many goods from the North (*Phuong Bắc*) and forced Lê dynasty to buy at high prices (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 322). Those activities of “Celestial Court” envoys took evidently place when Đại Việt was having deep mourning. It can be concluded that this event was not rare in history.

With practical benefits of method of “diplomacy-economy” in mind in December 1435, the Ming dynasty sent Chu Bật and Tạ Kinh as envoys to inform the enthronement of new emperor and

13) Also in that book, researchers share the viewpoints of “the harmony” between external and internal factors. Lê King not only received the model and principles of Chinese history writing (for the ruling purpose), but also had many reforms in changing and making regulations which were suitable for social reality. In the law implementation, the Lê dynasty had a flexible application to avoid “conflicts with original traditions.” In the course of setting up the political institution in the bureaucratic monarchical model, it seems that the “nationalization” process made Confucian system more favorable of the government management reflecting social and political conflict, or conflicts in benefits and social awareness (Yu 1990; Institute of Sino-Nom Studies-Institute of Harvard-Yenching America 2006, 312-313).

the bestowment of his grandmother. Nevertheless, the economic purpose of Chinese envoy was obvious. Vietnamese annals commented that:

Bật's gang was very greedy and scurrilous, they were in fact greedy for money but pretended to be clean-fingered, whenever they were given presents, gold or silver, they refused but looked at the followers hesitantly. The court understood and then took their followers to another room for feasts, and when invited alcohol, Bật's gang was secretly given gold. Bật gang was extremely happy about this. Bật's gang also brought many Northern goods to force the court to buy at high prices. When they returned home, nearly a thousand laborers were needed to carry tribute and their luggage (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 334).

In turn, on the occasions of envoy trips from Vietnam to China, besides their general duties assigned by the court, some delegations and envoys took this rare chance to “do business” and plan their own benefits. Momoki Shiro(1998) calculated during 100 years of Lê dynasty (1428-1527), 64 delegations of envoys (including irregular ones) to Ming court were sent. The tributary envoy took golds and silvers (34 times), horses (4 times), ivory and rhino horns (7 times), and valuable wood (3 times) with them, however the value and quantity of goods that the delegation brought for exchange were not written down. Those delegations of envoys really did their own business.

Consequently, during 1433-34, they were punished by Lê Thái Tông for illegal trade. *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* wrote down this

event:

At that time, the chief envoys Lê Vĩ and Nguyễn Truyền bought a lot of northern goods, up to 30 loads. The court hated them for trading, intended to make them ashamed, then ordered to take all of the goods to display on the ground before giving them back. Then it became conventional (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 323).

Under the reign of Lê Thánh Tông, there were still such incidents as those of Nguyễn Tông Trự and Thái Quân Thực, who were sent as envoys to the Ming dynasty, but “Tông Trự took a lot of money and silk to the north and bought Northern [Chinese] goods to bring back, the King hated Trự for violating regulations, divided all his luggage among mandarins (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II, 327).”¹⁴⁾

Since the King Lê Thái Tông’s reign, many high-ranking mandarins ordered soldiers to build their own houses. Among them, according to Ngôn Quan [言官, Censor] Phan Thiên Tước’s crime report, *Tiền Quân Tổng Quản* [前軍總管] Lê Thụ “got married during national mourning time, built huge houses, sent people abroad to trade illegally with foreigners (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 323).” As a result, without consulting anyone, the King ordered to investigate Lê Thụ case, and greedy mandarin Lê Thụ had 15 *taels* of gold and 100 *taels* of silver which were

14) This is a notable way of law implementation by the Lê government. There were concessions for high-ranking mandarins who were Lê leadership, usually judged more tolerantly.

traded illegally confiscated.

The phenomena of distracting from public work, bribery, taking advantage of power to buy things at cheap prices, appropriating goods or concerning about the own benefits became worries and threats to the court. In July 1435, Lê Thái Tông had to decree to mandarins of all kinds and levels that:

Those looking after people just concerned their own benefits, did not take care of people, or absolved the rich, punish the poor, bought wood to build houses, judged cases unfairly, built gangs, thought about bribery, worked lazily, interested in feasts and parties. Mandarins at borders sometimes did not concentrate on their work of patrol and examination, let strangers escape, they were just concerned about trading for their own profits (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 330).

The inevitable result was that the King had to arrest and question heads of departments of transport, patrol... in localities with the total number of 53 people.

In December 1448, it was rumoured that an emperor of the Ming dynasty sent two special envoys and military to the Vietnam's North-East borders in preparation for a "border inspection". The King Lê Nhân Tông (黎仁宗, r. 1443-1459) sent mandarin Trình Dục for investigation. Without careful observation, Trình Dục's mistaken report led the Lê court to mobilize a large number of mandarins, soldiers and resources to protect the borders. "The whole East area¹⁵⁾ was therefore agitated. When they got to the borders, they stayed there for weeks and months to investigate

information but none suspicion was found. Then they spent money buying loads of northern goods to bring back, telling lies that Ming's special envoys had other business so they did not come. Supervisor Hà Lật colluded with them and did not say a word. The court therefore did not ask about that offence (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 358).” If it was based on *Quốc Triều Hình Luật* just the offence “if mandarins who are sent to investigate things do not report the truth, they will be dismissed or punished with hard labor; if because of close relations or hatred they deliberately do things against the truth, their offence will be punished more heavily based on real situations; if they receive bribes, they will be punished at two higher levels (Quốc Triều Hình Luật 1991, 71).” It seems that under the Early Lê dynasty, there was some power or authority, in certain cases, which would get out of law control. The King would not always use the law to show his power or keep the law strictly obeyed.

Under Lê Thánh Tông's reign, the illegal foreign trade also developed in usual cases. *Quốc Triều Hình Luật* regulated:

Those who illegally get out to other countries will be executed (those following foreign boats to go abroad will be punished in the same way), those looking after border gates (or estuaries), will be exiled to a near locality if they do not know the situation, if they know but still allow people to get through borders, they will be convicted of the same

15) The East area (miền Đông) is dedicated a vast coastal region in the direction of the East Thăng Long Capital at the time. It includes mostly Northeast territorial waters of the present-day Quảng Ninh, Hải Phòng provinces.

offence, the head will be punished *biếm hai tư* (Quốc Triều Hình Luật 1991, 57).

For valuable goods, the Lê government had very strict regulations:

Anyone who sells ironwood, crude gold, cinnamon bark, pearls, ivory to foreign traders will be punished *biếm ba tư*. Mandarins in communes and wards who know the situation but keep silent will be demoted to one level lower positions; mandarins in districts and provinces deliberately keep this secret will be convicted of the same offence, if they do not know this, they will be dismissed or punished (Quốc Triều Hình Luật 1991, 59).

To have monopoly in trade and protect its economic sovereignty, the court also regulated:

If farms on the seaside allow trading boats to unload goods will be punished *biếm ba tư*, and will have to be fined three times the value of the goods, one part of the fine will be used to reward the discoverer. The head of the farm will be demoted (Quốc Triều Hình Luật 1991, 210).

Given these illegal activities, the Lê government paid its attentions to protect natural resources in Đông Hải [East Sea]. In August 1464, Lê Thánh Tông had the decree that, “whoever violates the law such as groping for pearls and casting bronze coins will be punished based on two categories: culprits and

accessories (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 401).” In 1470, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* also cited the facts proposed by officers Nguyễn Đình Mỹ, Quách Đình Bảo about: Champa incessantly took troupes to invade the frontier and stole pearls (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 441).

In *Hồng Đức Thiệu Chính Thư*, Lê Thánh Tông also had clear regulations on cases of ships that suffered from storms:

Those who take the chance of a burning houses, and boats subject to storms, to steal their properties, will be beaten 100 times and put in prison three years; those who beat injured people will be executed; followers will be punished at one lower level. Those taking the chance of storms to destroy boats will be punished the same. Those stealing people’s properties will be punished by *giảo* (garrote); those beat injured people will be executed (Hồng Đức Thiệu Chính Thư 1959, 83).

Although the document did not mention the nationality of boats, it considered this as general legal regulations, they are really the progressive viewpoints and humanity of the Lê government.¹⁶⁾

In all regulations on economic relations, there were no exceptions in terms of the law subjects if they traded illegally or planned their own benefits. Foreigners could trade and exchange goods with registration. Under the Lê dynasty furthermore, together with legal foreign economic activities, there must have

16) A common convention in international diplomatic relations in mid-ancient times, strange (foreign) trading boats, met with an accident, including boats, cargo, and even crew, would be victims of robberies or become “booty” for central authority or local greedy mandarins.

been illegal activities which made the central authority continually vigilant and have clearly written regulations in laws.

IV. Discussing Remarks and Conclusions

Based on different views with similar historical records, Vietnamese folklorists, cultural researchers even historians have come facilely to deny the maritime tradition and sea-oriented thought of the Vietnamese. As we mentioned above, with superficial and unconnected information written in royal annals, they found in it without any description on trade and foreign commercial development of the Vietnamese especially under the Lê government.

Generally, Vietnamese scholarship seeks so far to answer the reasons of the limited trade history in the medieval Vietnam. It is able to be reasoned: i) thoughts of the Vietnamese people in small-scale agricultural production as well as influences from Confucian morals and regulations; ii) lack of professional merchants with the state government's encouragement and subsidy; iii) without favorable conditions and social and economic space (e.g. free towns of medieval Europe) considering as a superior driving force for domestic social and economic transformations; iv) without deeper sense and philosophy on profession, ideal and morals of the trade or "commerce culture", including external economy as an essence of the national commonwealth; v) due to constant pressures from China and unstable security from the

South, Vietnamese monarchical dynasties must implement excessive measures in order to national sovereignty, security in domestic and international economics and so on.

The above mentioned highlights remarked by feudal historians and generations of modern historians point out in full foreign trade picture of the medieval Vietnamese history. According to them, the Early Lê dynasty, particularly under the Lê Thánh Tông's reign was considered the peak of the Confucian bureaucracy. Ironically, these views coincided with a large number of present-day Vietnamese researchers. Surely, in their perception, there are no trade especially maritime trade, that is recognizable.

In the fifteenth-century Lê dynasty, under the constant political and security pressure from the North and South, the Lê central government had to implement strict methods to protect sovereignty, external economic security, and domestic economy. The bureaucratic institution's intention of monopoly in trade also restricted the natural development of some areas in external economy in the time when the East Sea (internationally called South China Sea) trade came to reach highly prosperous development. In other words, the external relations economy in the fifteenth century Vietnam was not able to create a strong motive force leading to basic changes in the socio-economic life for conducting qualitative changes to help Vietnam integrate deeply into East Asia.

Politically and ideologically, during the eleventh - fifteenth centuries it witnessed Đại Việt's shifts from aristocratic monarchy regime to centralized bureaucratic one, or from dynamic, tolerant

and open Buddhism to Confucianism. Overall, the Vietnamese society moved from old social “paradigm”¹⁷⁾ to the new one, in which it seems that the trade conception changed remarkably: From respecting all economic sectors (Lý and Trần periods) to respecting agriculture and disdaining trade (Early Lê period). Attentively yet, “restricting and forbidding markets”, “agriculture promoted but trade not encouraged” of the monarchical institution were merely the illustration of the upper-stratum and political wills of the oligarchy.

Looking back to the Vietnamese history it is that after the national recovery in the tenth century, Vietnamese historical books wrote about the expansion of maritime trade activities through seaports from the Vietnamese Northern to Central regions. There are also connections between foreign trade activities and exchange systems by river routes and borders. Those seaports and trading and exchange systems operated continually through Lý and Trần periods. Although importance was attached to agriculture, the Lê government still appreciated roles of handicraft and trade, including foreign trade. Attraction and power of monetary economy still secretly flew and partly eliminated barriers and restrictions of the Lê bureaucratic monarchical institution and then in afterward dynasties. Additionally, after having sat down under cruel

17) “Paradigm” first introduced by Thomas Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (in 1962, published by the University of Chicago Press). The Lý-Trần periods was considered as a tolerant, open and harmony society and economy; meantime Lê time as highly-respected model of society: Confucian scholars, peasants, handicraftsmen, merchants (four social classes) as distinct separation of each other, strongly moving forward the Chinese model.

domination of the Ming government, in the circumstance “home products are empty, consummation is deficient (Lịch Triều Hiến Chương Loại Chí, vol. II, 113),” deeper understandings of losses of war, extreme pain of people, Lê Thái Tổ and the Lê government had to proclaim many decrees, and implement policy for tolerating people, preventing natural resources, making national economy prevail (e.g. tax, hard labor exemptions...) (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II, 293). There were a great effort and good policy of a new dynasty. It takes a long time for overcoming crimes and losses of war in order to recover the Đại Việt’s society and economy. In fact, the central government sought to strengthen and establish international diplomatic relations on the one hand and to bring into play roles of industrial and commercial sectors in order to ensure demands, balanced and stable life for a nation in the prosperous and powerful development period on the other hand.¹⁸⁾ Noticeably, mobilizing the war against Champa had originally from political motives, but it was not enabled to win victory if having not both material and human resources. The mobilization of war was calculated in many targets, including compensation of shortfall in

18) Reading *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*, we found an important particular: In 1476, there was a drought. In the pray for rain “From winter to summer, there have been few rains and it has been sunny all the time, people have a lot of difficulties. Handicraftsmen and merchants have nowhere to rely on, peasants, silkworms-bred men have nothing to expect. It is only because I am not virtuous, everybody has to suffer great disasters (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư II 1993, 358).” The powerful King expressed his sincere and he himself identified clearly *the positions of handicraftsmen and merchants* (in comparison with peasant class). Through it is cited in a sacredly religious document, and just on a “random”, disaster event, the King himself rated first handicraftsmen and merchants, then “good-natured” peasants.

natural resources, control of big commercial ports of South-Đại Việt (e.g. Thanh - Nghệ regions¹⁹)... Its conditions were also not able to rely on the newly restored agriculture. It also was unable to justify the agricultural economic preeminence of Đại Việt in comparison with Champa, but it seems to be that was a success of combination of Đại Việt's trade and agriculture against Champa one.

The fifteenth century was marked as the perfectly centralized monarchical institution. Seemingly, in contrast to the Confucian superstructure with strict regulations, traditional economic elements and urgent social demands created a colorful picture with different trends. In fact, the central government rather than attempted to control trade policy and sought to monopoly on national economics. The policy affected negatively to economic relations and exchanges. However, the virtual and ultimate aim of the dynasty was to confirm the real power of strong regime and to punish severely whom who contravene the law. In those changes and common development, it is clear that political and international economic environment also had strong impacts on the prosperity (or recession) of foreign trade as well as the economic and political status of the nation in comparison with other regional political polities. Unquestionably, the national commonwealth and international competition are never relied upon agricultural economy.

Based on trade potentials in the previous periods, the Vietnamese

19) Thanh = Thanh Hóa, Nghệ = Nghệ An, two provinces in the North Central region of the present-day Vietnam.

active participation in the “Age of Commerce” (Reid 1993) in the seventeenth century created the development of domestic economies and built a considerable status for Đại Việt in the regional relations, as well as her contributions to a splendid developmental period for Asian trade.

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요약

15세기 베트남 레(Lê) 정부의 교역: 옛 기록을 통한 복구

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베트남의 공식 역사기록학에서, 외국의 침략에 대한 저항, 왕조의 정치적 생활 또는 “농촌, 농업, 농민” 연구의 경향에 비해, 아이러니하게도 경제 문제에 관한 연구들은 단지 적은 분량에 불과하다.

베트남 중세 역사에서 11-15세기 사이 다이 비엣(Đại Việt)의 사회와 경제는 귀족 군주정으로부터 중앙집중적 관료정으로 변하였고 또는 역동적, 관대한, 열린 불교 사상으로부터 유교 사상으로 변한 것을 목격하였다.

특히, 초기 레(Lê) 왕조(1428-1527)는 농업의 중요성에 집착하였고 지극히 유교적 성향의 왕조였다고 간주되었다. 그리고 레 타인 퐁(Lê Thánh Tông) 통치기는, 다이 비엣의 번성하고 부유한 발전의 시기[*Hồng Đức Thịnh Thế* - 洪德晟世]를 만들었다는 사실에도 불구하고, 그간 농업사회와 중농경제로 간주되었다.

레(Lê) 조는 교역부문을 경시한 농업 정치체인가? 레 타인 퐁(Lê Thánh Tông) 왕은 농촌과 농민에 지극한 마음을 가진 사람인가? 농업정책과 실제 교역행위와의 관계는 무엇인가? 이상의 문제에 대해 여전히 베트남 내외 학계에 서로 다른 견해가 있다. 이 논문의 목적은 베트남 레(Lê) 조의 교역을 재고찰하는 것이다. 경제적, 사회적 본질은 베트남 중세 역사의 일반적 발전 경로를 조명하고 볼 것이다.

주제어: 레(Lê) 정부, 다이 비엣(Đại Việt), 15세기, 교역, 레 타인 퐁(Lê Thánh Tông)