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TALENT SELECTION IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM DURING THE KING GIA LONG AND KING MINH MANG PERIOD (1802-1840)

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Abstract

Southern Vietnam is the central region of the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1945), occupying an important position in national defense and foreign affairs. The region has huge economic potential and can create a breakthrough for Vietnam's economic development. However, due to the special geo-historical conditions, political upheaval was tremendously popular during the late feudal period. Besides, the economic factors of international trade and the development of commodity production were high above the

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national standard. As a result, the central government had to use a special method of selecting and using officials. The selected must be good in "handling the statecraft" (經邦濟世), who could understand and had a process of living and working in the South.

As two eminent political kings, Gia Long (嘉隆) and Minh Mạng (明命) applied flexible measures, not taking the aristocratic nature of candidates very seriously. Both kings completely removed the "hereditary" regime, not following the Confucian model as in other regions in building the local government apparatus. This policy helped the Nguyễn Dynasty build a dedicated, competent service bureau in the region. The policy is an exception in the history of recruiting mandarins under the Confucian perspective in Vietnam, and to a certain extent, it has successfully promoted local socio-economic development. This paper aims to argue that it is difficult to apply a unified but rigid policy in Vietnam on issues related to the locality and that Southern Vietnam always demands more special attention in state policies.

Keywords: selection and use, officials, Southern Vietnam, the Nguyễn dynasty.

1. Introduction

Human history shows the fact that political success or failure was largely due to the use of people. When the government recruits honest and talented officials, it needs a comprehensive and systematic policy system of recruitment, appointment, usage and reward - punishment mechanism. Gia Long (1802-1820) and Minh Mạng (1820-1840) – the first two kings of the Nguyễn Dynasty, successfully applied political ideology in recruiting and using talented people to build the country.

In 1802 after the establishment, the Nguyễn Dynasty, in order to rule the country on a vast unified area, deployed a special administrative mechanism. At this time, central Vietnam³ was divided into 4 military zones (Quảng Đức, Quảng Trị, Quảng Bình, Quảng Nam, directly governed by the court) and 8 local counties. The North (Tonkin) was divided into 11 counties. Cochinchina (the South) was divided into 5 prefectures⁴ governed by local mandarins. The chief administrative office in Tonkin was called Bắc Thành General Governor Office (北城總鎮) while in the South was Gia Định Thành⁵ General Governor Office (嘉定城總鎮). The head of Gia Định Thành was called General Governor of Gia Định (嘉定城總鎮官) (see further Choi 2010: 79-80). The authority of Gia Định

³ The area from Ninh Bình province to Bình Thuận province of Vietnam today.

⁴ Five prefectures in Gia Định include: Gia Định, Hà Tiên, Trấn Biên, Vĩnh Trấn, and Trường Đồn (all in Southern Vietnam).

⁵ Gia Định Thành (嘉定城, Gia Định Citadel) was a higher administrative unit than the prefectures. Gia Định Citadel had got totally 3 Governors: Nguyễn Văn Nhơn (1753-1822, on duty 1808-1812 & 1819-1820), Lê Văn Duyệt (1764-1832, on duty 1812-1816 & 1820-1832), Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức (1748-1819, on duty 1816-1819).

General Governor was enormous, replacing the court in handling all the affairs in all prefectures under his control and at the same time protecting the Kingdom of Chenla (currently Cambodia).

As a newly-reclaimed territory, the South has many different characteristics compared to other regions in the country. During the reign of the Nguyễn Lords (1698⁶ -1789) and the Tây Sơn (1789-1802), it seems that the Southern region existed as a rather separate land, the local identity was clearly different from the other areas of Vietnam (see Choi 2010, p.79). Politically, at that time the South often had political instability, such as Siamese invasions (in 1833, 1834, 1841, and 1845), instability in the Chenla court causing chaos in the region; the revolt of Lê Văn Khôi in Saigon in 1833, etc. In terms of culture and society, the Southern region is a convergence of many ethnic groups (Vietnamese, Chinese, Khmer, Cham, Ma, Stieng, etc.), some of them have been influenced by Indian culture (i.e. Khmer and Brahmanic Cham), and Islam (Islamic Cham). The Confucianized Vietnamese are moving closer to these non-Confucian groups in some way. Regarding religious activities in the region, Trịnh Hoài Đức (1765-1825) wrote: "[Gia Định people] worship Buddha, believe in the mediums, and respect female deities" (Trịnh 1999: 142). Economically, with the advantage of natural conditions, with the active reclamation policies of the Nguyễn lords (later the Nguyễn dynasties) and the active role of the local Chinese, the South quickly became a dynamic economic region with the flourishing of trade activities, playing an important role in Vietnam's sustainable development throughout the history. Trịnh Hoài Đức in *Gia Định thành thông chí* (嘉定城通志, Gazetteer of Gia Định Citadel) described as follows: "[...] goods for sale in the streets include brocade, paper, porcelain, jewels, books, medicine, tea, etc., all are transported by river and by sea, all items can be found..." (Trịnh 1999: 410). The legacy of the last civil war and the commercial economy of the southern region required special mechanisms for the recruitment and use of Mandarin in the region. The recruited must be really talented and "statecraft-handled" ones who must have been knowledgeable and had a process of living and working in the region so that they could replace the king to deal with all local problems.

Vietnam is a Confucian nation with a different character from the rest of the Confucian bloc. For thousands of years, Vietnamese Confucianism still maintains the core framework of Han

⁶ In 1698, Lord Nguyễn Phúc Chu (1675–1725, r. 1691-1725) sent Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh to inspect southern lands. He put the new land into Gia Định government (now the South) In 1832, Emperor Minh Mạng carried out reform throughout the country, Gia Định region was divided into 6 provinces directly under the central government (see further Many authors 2002).

Confucianism mixed with Song Confucianism, paying little attention to Yangming Studies (see Nguyen & Nguyen 2020: 79-112). The Vietnamese people selected and adept what was needed to serve the actual local work in the country. As a result, Vietnam's classical Confucianism is "weak" and "shallow" (McHale 2002: 409-10; O'Harrow 1979: 170). According to Oliver Wolters, the Vietnamese were "always disregarding the totality of the norms of civilized conduct in China, chose to take into account specific instances of such experience" (Wolters 1988: 6). Instead, the Vietnamese localized the Confucianist system by fragmenting it and cutting passages, removing their original contextual meaning, and amending some of the content to serve their domestic political and social activities. In reality, Confucianism (and Taoism) in Vietnam learned to "accommodate" themselves to Buddhism by accepting Buddhist influences on many core Confucian concepts (Duong 2004: 300; see further Nguyen 1998: 93; Woodside 2002: 127, 211; Trần 1973: 1975). On the contrary, Kelly Liam (2006) showed that Vietnamese Confucianism was closely related to Confucianism in southern China in the pre-modern periods. However, he did not explain why this connection did not help spread Yangming Studies to Vietnam (even though it spread widely to the nearby mountainous areas of Yunnan and Guangxi). Liam strongly emphasized the similarities between Vietnam and southern China but did not even mention even a single case of difference between the two regions. This article is not arguing about this concept, but specifically studying the importance of the non-Confucian factors that constitute the premodern Vietnamese tradition.

In the late feudal period in Vietnam, efforts to cultivate, spread, and revive Confucianism were deployed. Before the establishment of the Nguyễn Dynasty, the Tây Sơn had attempted to revive Confucianism and cultivate Confucian morality in the new southern lands; however, the unique diversity of southern cultures and the short-lived existence of the Tây Sơn Dynasty (1789-1802) yielded just few results. King Gia Long further reinforced Confucianist morality in the regions by issuing the *Hoàng Việt luật lệ* (皇越律例, Law and Regulation of Imperial Viet) (Buttinger 1972: 53; Nguyen 1998: 98). King Minh Mạng further strengthened the Confucian regulations by improving the structure and form of the village, establishing communal houses and standardizing domestic cults and rituals. In addition, the King ordered officials of the Ministry of Rites to formulate mandatory rules in the family, including parental responsibility towards children, filial piety of children towards parents, domestic cults, family rites, and other codes of conduct. As a result, Confucian education was tightened even more in the North and the Central, 3729 places which had a long tradition of

Confucianism, but in the South, Confucianism had to compromise with non-Confucian values to survive and grow.

In the general picture of Vietnamese Confucianism, Southern Vietnam tells another different story. Southern Vietnam retained more Southeast Asian cultural patterns (than any other regions of Vietnam) until the seventeenth century (Yu 1978: 92–6, cited in Reid 1988: 146). The popularity of local Khmer Theravada Buddhism and newly-established Vietnamese Khất sĩ Sect⁷ of Buddhism in the south are two examples. Under the efforts of the central court and illuminating roles of local mandarins, a few classical Confucian institutions were established in the South, for example, Trần Biên Confucius Temple was erected in Đồng Nai in 1715 and Vĩnh Long Confucius Temple in Vĩnh Long in 1866. However, Confucianism became partially ‘broken’, transformed, and absorbed into Mahayana Buddhism and other forms of religion (see Nguyen 2020: 17-50). FitzGerald (1972) and Brocheux (1995) stated that the historic multi-ethnicity was the main reason to transform all aspects of life in the South, including ideology, norms and the value system, communal and family life, rites of passage, rituals, and so on (see further Trần 1982). Cao Tỵ Thanh called it “the unlikely Confucianism” (Cao 1996) while Nguyen Ngoc Tho claimed it “vividly practical and closely associated with the breath of life” (Nguyen 2020: 17-50). This fact made Southern Vietnam an unwanted working place for all scholar-officials from the North and the Central who passed the Imperial Examinations with very high rank. Oglia Dror once emphasized that certain ‘Confucian’ ethics, e.g. filial piety, were strongly practiced in the South; however, “this was not an effort to propagate Confucianism as an ideological basis for society but rather a limited use of particular Confucian ideas that conveniently advanced widely accepted values among southerners” (Dror 2018: 228-9).

In the feudal history of Vietnam, the state paid great attention to people working in the state apparatus, especially the recruitment and employment of talents. The mandarin must be a ‘gentleman’ in the view of Confucianism. Although not making clear and strong statements about the policy of recruiting and using officials specifically for the Southern region, King Gia Long and King Minh Mạng had many different forms and methods to “prioritize” this region to achieve the further goal of nurturing the human resources needed to establish an appropriate and effective local government. Trịnh Hoài Đức, in *Gia Định thành thông chí*, described it as “tolerant and simple”, expressed in both the recruited subjects and

⁷ A hybrid Sect of Buddhism, formed in the early 20th century by the combination of Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism in the Mekong Delta.

the method of selection (Trình 1999: 246). Identifying all candidates was not based on "hereditary", but on their talent, honesty, responsibility and love for this new land, regardless of nationality, race, family origin, and descent.

The constant civil war between the Tây Sơn and the Nguyễn Gia Định in the central and southern regions during the last three decades of the eighteenth century caused great consequences: economic exhaustion, stagnant education, and thoughtless thoughts. These consequences directly became one of the basic reasons that influenced the selection and recruitment of official by the Nguyễn Dynasty in the early period. Given that the destruction of the civil war is a constant factor, this article focuses on the socio-economic factors that constitute the state policy of the early Nguyễn Dynasty. The author of this article does not intend to make a dichotomy between the northern and southern regions of Vietnam; however, the reality of history (e.g., territory expansion to the south since 1600), geography, economy, race, culture, and ideological background force us to put the research question in the comparative relationship between these two main regions.

So far, there have been many studies on this issue from a historical perspective, such as Philippe Langlet with *L'Ancienne historiographie d'état au Vietnam* (Ancient State Historiography in Vietnam) (1990), Cao Xuân Dục with cuốn *Quốc triều Hương khoa lục* (Records of Imperial Examinations in feudal Vietnam) (1993), Sơn Nam with *Đất Gia Định xưa* (The old-age Gia Định land) (1993), Nola Cooke with the article "Nineteenth Century Vietnam Confucianization in Historical Perspective: Evidence from Palace Examination 1463-1883" (1994), Cao Tự Thanh with *Nho giáo ở Gia Định* (Confucianism in Gia Định) (1996), Lê Thị Thanh Hòa with *Việc đào tạo và sử dụng quan lại của triều Nguyễn từ năm 1802-1884* (The training and usage of mandarins of the Nguyễn Dynasty from 1802-1884) (1998), Alexander Woodside with *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Nguyen and Ching Civil Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (1988), Li Tana with *Southern Vietnam Under the Nguyễn Dynasty: Documents on the Economic History of Cochinchina (Dang Trong), 1602-1777* (1999), Choi Byung Wook with *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng (1820-1841)* (2010), Phan Huy Lê (ed.) with the book *Vùng đất Nam Bộ quá trình hình thành và phát triển* (The Southern region of the process of formation and development) (2017), etc. The above authors have either examined the formation and development of the southern region from the perspectives of politics, history, culture, and society. They more or less mentioned the Nguyễn Dynasty's selection and use of

bureaucracy; however, as far as this issue is concerned, their research works were not systematic. In particular, they did not analyze and point out the differences between these policies to the southern region as well as did not explain why there was a difference. This article aims to make a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the selection and use of the mandarin officials of the Nguyễn Dynasty through the case studies of two early kings, Gia Long and Minh Mạng. In addition to the Nguyễn Dynasty's official and local history books and modern research works, the authors of this research also conducted various fieldwork trips to various localities in the South to make a survey on vernacular history, genealogy, and wills of the local people as well as other context-based issues in Southern Vietnam.

2. The forms of bureaucratic selection in Southern Vietnam

Feudal dynasties in Vietnam, including Nguyễn Dynasty, used many methods to select mandarins, of which the two most popular forms were *direct nomination* and *imperial examination*.

Direct nomination

Direct nomination is one of the main measures used to recruit talents from the mass, regardless of their origins or social status. This measure, on the one hand, satisfied the immediate need for personnel in certain positions, and on the other hand, helped to avoid the talent omission since many talents did not meet a certain qualification or regulation in the imperial examination. The Kings used to issue edicts to call for the talented men directly from the folk or allow certain officials to nominate talents who, for many reasons, could not afford to take the exam or failed the exam (Phan 1992: 580). To ensure that the recommendation was not for personal gain, the nominators must have taken his title and dignity to ensure that the nominee was talented and worthy of the position assigned (Nguyễn Dynasty cabinet 1993, vol. 1).

In 1802, after establishing the dynasty and managing the entire territory of the country on a large scale, the Nguyễn Dynasty desired to build a solid governmental system. To have the officials involved in the government apparatus, in the conditions where the election could not be performed, King Gia Long mainly used his core loyalists to work for him. At the same time he issued an order to call for talented people, regardless of whether they were former Lê Dynasty (1428-1789)'s officials or Confucian scholars who had long lived in seclusion, as long as they had not collaborated with the Tây Sơn (1789-1802). King Gia Long issued special orders for those who had been appointed as mandarins between 1787 and 1819 could return to work

(National History Bureau of the Nguyễn Dynasty⁸ 2007, vol. 2: 34).

In the South, after Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh established a government agency in Gia Định in 1698, local governors were mainly military generals. In fact, this is a military administrative body led by military leaders, responsible for local administrative tasks⁹. The civil war between the Nguyễn and the Tây Sơn in late eighteenth century made Gia Định a special military zone, where military talents, but not Confucian scholars, were appreciated. In 1802, after ascending the throne, King Gia Long, and later King Minh Mạng, issued many orders to regulate that the selection of mandarins in the South did not necessarily take place through imperial examinations or through the aristocratic hereditary system. Instead, the court could recruit people of different nationalities, especially lineages with martial traditions (even if they did not have a high education). In the view of Gia Long and Minh Mạng, “talent is a wealth of the state, so do not ignore him”, “(...) apart from imperial examinations, the government must invite talented persons among the mass for the goal of having good scholars/officials working in the court and talented officers working in rural areas. All serve the king and brighten the national cause” (NHBND 1993, vol 2: 311). For this reason, many officials recruited during the war with Tây Sơn were successively appointed to senior positions in the southern governmental agencies.

By the time of Minh Mạng (1820-1840), although imperial examinations were popular, the King still used the direct nomination form. During the 21 years at the throne, in addition to four orders to call for talents throughout the country (respectively, in 1820, 1822, 1827, and 1830), almost every year the King gave instructions to stimulate the nomination of talent for the Southern region. The King advised:

“Talented men are sources of wealth of the country, so in addition to the imperial examination, we must apply direct nomination. The ministers are responsible for nominating talented people to serve the king. [...] Therefore, I order the officials [...] and the governors of all localities to nominate one or two talents of good virtue and literature to be recruited and used by the court regardless of their social status” (NHBND 2007, vol. 1: 1091).

In 1820, when he ascended to the throne, Minh Mạng issued the Call for talents. The Edict said: “Talented people are the “tools” of the country, [...] so in addition to the formal selection, there should also be nominations. [...,] I want many good gentlemen to

⁸ Hereafter: NHBND.

⁹ Only Hà Tiên Prefecture was able to enforce the autocracy ruled by Mạc Cửu (鄭玖, 1655-1735) and his son, Mạc Thiên Tứ (鄭天賜, 1718-1780). 3733

work in the royal court, and don't miss any talented people working in the countryside... (NHBND 1972, vol. 1: 167). Similar to his father, Minh Mạng ordered high-ranking officials and local governors to nominate well-acquainted talents regardless of their social status.

In 1823, Minh Mạng asked officials in Gia Định to select local graduates in the South, and if they found that these graduates were capable of working as mandarins, they should be added to six offices of local administrative institutions. The king said:

“I often wonder about using people. On the whole, [...] mandarins from the South are not as many as the North. [...] Therefore, from now on, it is only necessary to detect diligent Southern people, regardless of whether they pass the exam or not, they are subject to selection and appointment” (NHBND 2007, vol. 4: 117).

Through Orders and Edicts to call for talents, we see that the concept of talents of the early Nguyễn rulers is quite flexible. They focused on "talent," not only confined to Confucian scholars but also talented people in other fields such as mathematics and military arts. For those two kings, talented people are not necessarily good at all aspects. “Using people is like using objects, there's no need to be good at all fields. Now, all from good literature learners and old classics, to people with a specific talent or good at a specific pragmatic profession, are allowed to go to local or regional offices to register. When the officials reported to the court, I would send the inspectors to check. If passed, all will be recorded and appointed” (NHBND 1972, vol. 1: 150).

With a wide selection policy, Gia Long and Minh Mạng gathered a team of competent mandarins, effectively serving the rule of the southern land. According to the records in *Đại Nam chính biên liệt truyện* (大南正編列傳 Official Compilation of Đại Nam's History), from 1802 to 1840, both kings recruited 70 people¹⁰ with different nationalities, ethnicities, backgrounds, families through the recommendation form. They might have been meritorious officials for the establishment of the Nguyễn dynasty; or the Confucianists who had worked for the former Lê Dynasty; or Chinese, Khmer, Cham, even some Chinese pirates (of the White Lotus Sect) (see further NHBND 2013).

Imperial examinations

¹⁰ Out of 70 people, 38 were recruited under Gia Long's reign and 32 under Minh Mạng's reign (see further NHBND 2013).

Examination is the most important form in discovering and recruiting talents to supplement resources for the state apparatus. In general, there are three types of talent recruitment examinations: Confucianism; military (martial) arts; professional competitions and sports competitions (Trần 1941: 78). Both kings used thoroughly these forms but the most important was still the examination. "As the court wanted many talents to help the country, it opened many examinations to select qualified students" (NHBND 1972, vol. 1: 187). It is worth noting that the examinations in the 1820s and 1830s were more complicated than those in the 1800s and 1810s and attracted more participants thanks to the stability of social development and the rise of Confucian education.

In 1807, in the condition that it was impossible to organize the Confucian examination in the South, King Gia Long king issued an edict to clarify the importance of the examination as follows:

“The state calls for talents, of course, through the examination regime. All the former dynasties conducted the examination regime to select officials. Now the whole country is unified, the recruiting of talented officials is a need. I have issued orders to specify imperial examinations [...]. The students should focus on studying to repay the grace of the literature profession” (NHBND 2007, vol. 1: 691).

In the reign of King Minh Mạng (1820-1840), the importance of selecting talents through examination continued to be affirmed:

“The selection of talented people is the national policy of the kings, so the state uses people mostly through examination selections. Our Founding King (King Gia Long) has opened all levels of imperial examinations with full rules. [...] now I decided to continue to open the Hương exam (in 1825)...” (the Nguyễn Dynasty Cabinet 1993, vol. 7: 203).

The South has a different ethnic and cultural context from the North, which, to a certain extent, carries non-Confucian values. One of the noticeable features, compared to other localities in the North, the South was initially the "non-Confucian" land, where Confucianism was not promoted, even fundamentally, almost not known (see Li 1999, 16; see further Woodside 1988, 220). Living in the Mekong River basin, the Southern residents enjoy the privilege of nature, not facing the harshness of natural disasters, but having rich products, fertile land, and convenient life. They use less power but benefit more. Trịnh Hoài Đức in *Gia Định thành thông chí* stated: “Vietnam’s Gia Định land is full of rice and fish, and no one is worried about hunger” (Trịnh 1999: 141, 160). So they did not want to try to study hard. Of course, those who took the imperial examination must have cultivated Confucian values and

knowledge.

Normal people in the North and the Central of Vietnam advocated that "learning is to be an official", they try to pass exams to have promotion in life or "get rid of poverty". Southern people are completely different; thanks to the favorable nature and favorable economic conditions, they did not choose the way of "learning to be a mandarin" as a purpose of life. Similar situations can still be seen in today's society but to a lesser extent (see Trần 2013). Choi Byung Wook also emphasized that the Southern people had many opportunities to get rich by business and service, they did not need to make efforts to work for the court (see Choi Byung Wook 2010, 181). In fact, the South Vietnamese are less interested in the imperial examination. This is reflected in the fact that the number of Southern people participating in the examination and the passing rate through the examination is too small compared to the North. In the first Hương examination under King Gia Long's reign held in 1807, there was no any Hương examination organized in the South (Cooke 1994: 307). In terms of qualifications, Southern scholars had many limitations. Under Minh Mạng's reign, "some students in Gia Định had undergone eight courses but did not meet the four-level literary standard" (NHBND 2007, vol. 3: 309). Minh Mạng once commented that "Gia Định people are loyal and righteous but have little learning..." (NHBND 2007, vol. 2: 124).

It is no coincidence that the Nguyễn kings were very interested in training the officials and building the spirit of the government through organizing study and examination activities in the South (Cao 1996 : 120). The reason is that after expanding the border southward and establishing the capital in Phú Xuân – Huế, the Dynasty encountered a dilemma: on the one hand, the court wanted to develop Confucianism, expand the bureaucratic network, and recruit more talented officials who passed the imperial examination, while on the other hand, residents in the South are "weak" and "lacking" in education and examinations background. Nola Cooke emphasized that due to the lack of a mechanism linking examinations to bureaucracy, the lack of lineages and families with a long academic tradition in the south¹¹ made it difficult for the Nguyễn Dynasty to establish an examination system in the region (Cooke 1994: 306).

On the one hand, the Nguyễn Dynasty continued to lure the talented people in the North to join the government apparatus, on the

¹¹ The tradition of imperial examinations in the north is obvious in many aspects: families, clan, and villages with a long academic tradition; private Confucian schools with famous teachers; various temples dedicated to Confucius and famous scholars, etc. (see further Cooke 1994: 277-81).

other hand, they wanted to use the people trained by their own court (especially those who came from the Central and the South) to work for the new government (Trần 2002 : 6) in order to create a stable political backend in Central and South Vietnam (Cao 1996 : 118). The priority policy is clearly reflected in the view of King Minh Mạng when he ordered Hoàng Kim Hoán, the Royal High Commissioner of the Board of Rites - a Southerner, to take charge of the National Academy (Quốc Tử Giám, 國子監)¹². John Whitmore noted that the Nguyễn dynasty with its southern background seemed to want to learn the pattern directly from China rather than indirectly through the northern scholars of previous centuries (see Whitmore 1998: 18).

From the awareness of the contradiction between the “weakness and lack” of academic education for Southern residents and the need to increase personnel for bureaucracy through the examination as mentioned above, Gia Long and Minh Mạng implicitly adopted different ways to develop education in the South, aiming to go beyond the goal of recruiting officials serving the state, including:

(1) Promote learning, opening Hương exam institution in Gia Định and applying flexible supplementary exam (phụ thí, 副試) policy

To encourage scholars to participate in study and examinations, the government provided clear reward and punishment policies. Accordingly, in the South, where there were few students taking in the previous exams (districts with fewer than 10 people, districts with less than 20 people, provinces with less than 30 people), but in this exam, there are students passing bachelor's or baccalaureate, teachers at that place (if they have taught for 1 year or more) are awarded twice the normal level. In case no one passes the exam but the number of students taking the exam is twice the previous exam, the penalty will be halved (NHBND 1966, vol. 13: 313). Explaining this, King Minh Mạng said: “Gia Định has many good people, but recently, they become be lazy in studying, so the number of highly talented people has not seen much. But I think that in this locality, the culture is newly cultivated, not deeply penetrated yet. The rules of teaching and examining must be prioritized” (NHBND 2007, vol. 3: 310).

Under the reign of Minh Mạng, the examination format reached a complete level, the regulations of exam schools were often

¹² The first Quốc Tử Giám (National Academy) in Vietnam was built in 1076, under the Lý Dynasty (1010-1225). This is the agency that manages the educational aspects of the Vietnamese feudal dynasties. Quốc Tử Giám is also considered to be the first university in Vietnam.

very strict, from the registration process to the organization, examination, and evaluation (see NHBND 1972, vol. 1: 69). However, for the South, the king applied certain "priority" in the exam rules, the way to give questions in the exam, the evaluation processes, and the recruitment of passing candidates, etc. "The government open the examination and recruit the scholars, the law is already fixed; however, in political arrangements, this work must be carried out easily with certain priority" (NHBND 2007, vol 4: 180). Specifically, in 1813, King Gia Long opened the Hương examination school in Gia Định¹³ to organize examinations for students from the South and simultaneously applied flexible "supplementary exam" policy to create favorable conditions for Southern students. Normally, a student who takes the Hương test must return to his hometown (his birthplace) for the first screening test. "In the first three months of the formal test, teachers and lecturers will organize an informal test for registered students. Then the results are transferred to the superior Office of Education in the province for a close inspection" (NHBND 2007, vol. 4, 118). However, for students of the South, the court implemented the "preferential" policy, which allowed them to take part in the examination in their living places. In 1821, Emperor Minh Mạng allowed "scholars from Phú Yên to the South to take part in the Hương examinations where they lived; while the scholars from Bình Định to the North have to return to their original places to take the exam" (NHBND 2007, vol. 3: 450). In 1834, the court maintained the rule: "Students studying in other provinces must return to their hometowns. Only those who are living from Biên Hòa to the South or who grow up in the capital (Thừa Thiên - Huế) and those who live in the mountains from Quảng Bình to the South are allowed to can sign up for the exam where they live" (NHBND 2007, vol. 4: 134).

(2) Adjusting the way to organize the exam and grade the students' work

In the South, if there was a fluctuation in the locality that affected students' study in that year, the court would flexibly apply the exam format. In the Hương exam in 1834, King Minh Mạng suggested: "Last year, six southern provinces had fluctuations, students did not focus on studying, so the standard for the exam of this year will be divided into old and new categories. The following exam will follow the new formula" (NHBND 2007, vol. 4: 120). The king may also postpone the examination. For example, King Minh Mạng said: "Last year the provinces in the South witnessed the

¹³ The Hương Exam School in Gia Định began operation in 1813 and was the place to organize examinations for the students of the provinces under the management of Gia Định Thành. During 45 years of existence (1813-1858), the School held 197 examinations.

uprising in Phiên An; in addition, the Siamese invaders again invaded. Local students all hated their enemies, they followed the righteous virtue to join the battles. They could not concentrate on their studies, so it is difficult for them to master new literary works. So this year Gia Định's exam school postponed a term. Highly talented students who want to sign up this year are allowed to take part in the capital exam school. Moreover, the road from Bình Thuận, Khánh Hòa to the South is quite far away, while the exam is about to come, so I decide to change the exam date" (NHBND 2007, vol. 4: 180).

Regarding the method of giving questions in the exam, marking the students' work, and choosing the number of qualified students, the Kings also apply "priority" policy for the South. In 1819, in the first level exam (the Hương exam), the exam questions were difficult, the students of Gia Định School demanded to leave, the school administrators Ngô Vi and Trần Văn Đại had to give other questions instead (NHBND 2007, vol. 1: 993). In 1834, the number of students from the South took part in the examination at the capital was big, the court allowed to number and record the colors in the exam book of each student to determine the number of people who could possibly pass. In this way, works of the students from Thừa Thiên province were put yellow, Quảng Bình green, Quảng Trị bright red, Quảng Nam black, Quảng Ngãi and Bình Định deep red, and those from Phú Yên to the South green. When grading the works, the judges may suggest selecting more or less qualified students in each place (NHBND 2007, vol. 4, 180). In the seventh year of Minh Mạng's reign (1826), the Hội exam results showed that there were 9 winners, all from the North. The King said: "[...] students of the North and South are all well-educated, their academic qualifications are fairly equal, why are 9 students who passed the exam from the north? I should choose one or two people from Thừa Thiên province down to the South to encourage southern scholarships" (NHBND 2007, vol. 2: 489).

In the 1835 Association Examinations, it was found that the Southern students taking the exam together with the Northern students would lead to an uneven number of selected students, so the court divided 3 sessions of the Hội exam, each session is divided into 2 turns, each turn was separately organized (students from the North and the South took the exam separately). The test questions were also different. When scoring students' work, the court determined the number of winners based on the thesis's qualifications and current human resource needs (NHBND 2007, vol. 4: 508-9). This is to create conditions for Southern students not to compete directly with students of other regions. Later, the court realized that it

was not convenient to organize the examination twice. They gathered students from all over the country to take the exam together, but they were divided into two separate areas. The judges could base on each region's situation to determine the number of students of each region who passed or failed.

The above facts show that the kings had a distinction in the selection of students passing in the South compared to other regions in the country. They might be a little weak in capacity but still selected as officials, while the requirements for recruitment and appointment of officials for successful people in the North were still very strict. Thanks to this "priority" policy of the Nguyễn Dynasty, the number of people who passed the examination from the South increased significantly. For 28 years (1813-1840), according to Choi Byung Wook (2010: 198), the Nguyễn dynasty took a total of 912 bachelors nationwide, including 94 scholars from the South (10.31%). According to Cao Xuân Dục (1993), during the lifetime of 1802-1945, the Nguyễn dynasty ratified a total of 5,220 bachelors in the country, of whom only 274¹⁴ were from the South. According to Philippe Langlet, the dynamism of scholarships in the Southern provinces is vividly shown by the number of people passing the exams in Gia Định. Under the reign of the first four Nguyễn kings, the average annual figure increased from 1% (under Gia Long's reign, compared to the entire country) to 3.7% (Minh Mạng's reign), 11.2% (Thiệu Trị's reign), and 5.9% (Tự Đức's reign). So, the contribution of these 6 provinces has increased by 2.5% in the list of successful students of Vietnam (Langlet 1995: 220).

3. The use of mandarins in the South

Knowing the value of talented people is one thing, knowing how to use them with the right talent is completely different. In the use of mandarins to participate in the government apparatus in the South, King Gia Long and King Minh Mạng paid great attention to the capacity and morality, with the idea of "dụng nhân như dụng gỗ (using a person as using a piece of wood)"¹⁵, one must know how to take advantage of the strengths of each person and implement a strict reward and punishment policy. In this part of the article, we highlight the three major measures that both Kings have taken against officials in the South.

¹⁴ Of these 274 bachelors, 11 were from other localities to take the exam in the South (see further Nguyễn Đình Đầu 2002, 128).

¹⁵ Such a slogan implies a flexible and effective way of using talent. Accordingly, good wood should be used to make good items (pillars, wardrobes, etc.), low-quality wood can be used to make tables and chairs, and poor quality wood can be used as firewood.

The priority policy of “the locals to rule local communities”

In general, when using officials, all Vietnamese feudal dynasties, including the Nguyễn Dynasty, adopted "hồi tị"¹⁶ policy to prevent the official from delaying his wings and abusing his power to bully the people and to ensure the justice of their works. The "hồi tị" policy means that officials are appointed to work outside their hometown (see Phạm 1994). These rules aim to create a complete integrity bureaucracy that is not controlled by relatives, clan, and village-based groups. The book *Đại Nam chính biên liệt truyện* shows that "hồi tị" was strictly applied in the North by the Nguyễn Dynasty, and was not implemented in southern Vietnam until King Minh Mạng' Reform in 1832. From 1802 to 1832, the appointment of senior officials of the Southern agencies mainly relied on local people.

In order to rule the newly unified territory, especially for lands far from the capital, King Gia Long applied the indirect rule. In addition to the central region under the direct control of the Huế Court, the North (Bắc Thành) and the South (Gia Định Thành) were managed by the Governors who worked on the behalf of the King¹⁷. It is worth noting that while the homeland of all four governors of Bắc Thành was not from the North but from the Central and the South¹⁸, the governors, deputy governors and associate governors of Gia Định Thành were all from the South (except for a few very specific cases). In 24 years (1808-1832) of Gia Định Thành, there were 3 governors, 4 deputy governors, and 2 associate governors. Nguyễn Văn Nhơn, the first governor was from An Giang province. Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức and Lê Văn Duyệt were from Định Tường province. The two associate governors, Trịnh Hoài Đức and Ngô Nhân Tịnh, respectively came from Biên Hòa and Phiên An in the South¹⁹.

We conducted a verification of the identity of 392 people who held important positions in the government in the South under the reign of King Gia Long recorded in the *Đại Nam chính biên liệt truyện*, showing that there were 200/392 (51.01 %) people are from

¹⁶ "Hồi tị (回避, step-away)" originates from the administrative reform of King Lê Thánh Tông (1442-1497). In the Lê Dynasty (1428-1789), the Lê Code stated: "The mandarins must not marry or let their children marry the people in the area under their charge; not to buy land, gardens, fields, and houses where they work; not to use people from their hometown as staff and maids...".

¹⁷ The head of Gia Định Region was called Gia Định Thành General Governor, and the head of Bắc Thành was called Bắc Thành General Governor.

¹⁸ They are Nguyễn Văn Thành (Phiên An, the South), Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức (Định Tường, the South), Lê Chất (Binh Định, the Central) and Trương Văn Minh (Thanh Hóa, the Central) (NHBND 2013)

¹⁹ Of the 4 deputy governors of Gia Định, we were only able to identify the homeland of two people: Trương Tiến Bảo from Vĩnh Long (the South); Trần Văn Năng is from Khánh Hòa (the Central) (NHBND 2013)

the southern region²⁰. Vũ Văn Quân pointed out that among 300 people who used to be mandarins in Gia Định, there were more than 200 people who had worked as officials for many years in this region. It is easy to see that these officials were mostly from the South Central and Southern regions; people who originated in the Red River Delta were few and held minor posts (Vũ et al. 2011: 415). Similarly, Nola Cooke in the article also confirmed this point when conducting biographical analysis and the promotion path of many officials in the Nguyễn Dynasty's Government.

It is worth mentioning why the Nguyễn during the first 30 years (1802-1832) still had to make an effort to find talented people from the South to put them into the local government system, while the number of people who passed through the exams in the North were still very large but still not used²¹. We believe that the economic factors of international trade and the development of commodity production were the specific social foundation of the South, which also required local officials who really understood the land and were able to manage it. Furthermore, most of Southern Vietnamese population at that time “was less heavily infiltrated and controlled by the educated-Confucian Chinese educated class than it had been in the north” (FitzGerald 1972: 31); therefore, it is inappropriate to arrange officials to conduct rule based on Confucian moral principles. Instead, the early Nguyễn lords, and later the Nguyễn Dynasty, tried to mobilize Mahayana Buddhist ideology where Confucian influence was not yet cultivated and promoted (see further Li 1998: 37-46, 101-12; McHale 2004: 71). As a result, the Nguyễn Dynasty was unable to bring officials from the north and central regions into local government agencies. In fact, in 1821, King Minh Mạng sent two confidants from other regions to serve as education officials in Gia Định but failed within two years (see NHBND 1972, vol. 2: 380). Other evidence shows that after conducting the national reform in 1832, King Minh Mạng arranged bureaucrats for the North and the Central to replace the mandarins in the government apparatus in the South; however, this was not supported by Gia Định people. As a result, the people of Gia Định under the leadership of Lê Văn Khôi rebelled against the rulers for 3 years, from 1833 to 1835²². This evidence suggests us to explain the

²⁰ Details about the high-ranking officials of Gia Long period: 18 from the North, 142 Central, 200 South, and 32 unknown (NHBND 2013)

²¹ According to Cao Xuân Dục's statistics, more than 300 people from the North and the Central had Bachelor's degrees under the Nguyễn Dynasty but were not appointed and used by the court (Cao 1993).

²² Lê Văn Khôi (? -1834) was adopted son of Lê Văn Duyệt. There are still many different views on the cause of the Gia Định uprising in 1833; however, through reference materials, we believe that one of the main reasons is that the people of Gia Định were oppressed and lost their rights, so they fought against the temporary non-local officials (See Trần 1919; Nguyễn 1967: 147).

close relationship between geopolitical and geo-economic factors of the Southern region and the use of local officials.

In 1832, Emperor Minh Mạng carried out administrative reforms nationwide, reorganizing the counties under Gia Định Thành into 6 provinces²³, the entire region was now called Cochinchina (Nam Kỳ), governed by the Governor-General (Thống đốc)²⁴. Since Lê Văn Khôi Uprising (1835), the court gradually installed literary scholars from the northern and central regions to the head of important administrative positions (rather than military officials) (see Nguyễn 1996: 87). The “hồi tị” policy at this time was strictly applied nationwide. The priority policy for the South was totally abolished.

Incentive reward measures

In addition to the general salary policy, in order to have a basis for rewarding and sanctioning mandarins, the Nguyễn Dynasty formulated a "regular inspection" policy. Accordingly, every three years, three ministries (Revenue (Households), Defense, and Justice) review the activities of all senior officials, rank them, and determine the categories of rewards and penalties (NHBND 2007: 974). To ensure objectivity, the court also conducted non-periodic examinations or conducted ad hoc inspections called "ambassadorial regimes" to monitor localities in incidents such as war, lost season, etc. (The Nguyễn Dynasty Cabinet 1993, vol. 5: 340). This action helped the court control the performance of the duties of the local officials, preserve the discipline and help to improve the court's reputation. However, for officials in the South, there was no need to wait until the regular inspection to receive a reward. The court could make commendation as soon as the official made a great credit. Besides, the reward for officials in the South was very favorable compared to other regions, even when the official had died.

After taking the throne (1802), Gia Long issued a decree to reward the generals who had helped the king to restore the dynasty. The King said “Viewing merits to reward, that is the rule of the country. You fought against the enemy, I clearly saw your hard work. Now I recapture the capital, it is the time to reward you 1,000 taels of gold, 10,000 taels of silver, and 30,000 coins. Other people with merits wait for rewards later” (NHBND 2007, vol. 1: 492). Later, King Gia Long ordered the counties and prefectures to submit a list of the meritorious junior officials. The royal court rewarded them

²³ Including Biên Hòa, Phiên An (renamed Gia Định in 1833), Định Tường, Vĩnh Long, An Giang, and Hà Tiên.

²⁴ Each Governor-General governed two provinces, and his headquarters were located in the larger province. In each province, there is a governor (Nguyễn Minh Tường 1996).

according to their rank (NHBND 2007, vol. 1: 492). For the soldiers in Gia Định who had followed Gia Long's previous battle to come home, the king also rewarded them with a total 30,000 coins and 30,000 units of rice (categorized by ranks) (NHBND 2007, vol. 1: 633).

During this period, political uncertainty persisted in the southern region. In order to encourage the spirit of generals and soldiers, the court gave a wide range of awards to military officers and soldiers who defended the southern territories. Before the generals had to deal with the rebellion of Lê Văn Khôi rebel in 1833 in the hot weather, Minh Mạng ordered the use of Western materials to sew cool shirts. The generals, chiefs of staff, and team leaders were all granted. At the same time, the king decided that whoever caught or slashed senior rebels would be rewarded with 500 taels of silver, and those who captured or slashed junior rebels would receive 10 to 100 taels of silver depending on the rank. Anyone who captured or splashed Lê Văn Khôi would be rewarded with 1,000 taels of silver (NHBND 2007, vol. 3: 589).

In 1833, the Siamese army invaded Chenla and then attacked many provinces in Southern Vietnam. King Minh Mạng sent Trương Minh Giảng, Governor-General of An Giang and Hà Tiên, and Nguyễn Xuân, Governor-General of Long Hồ and Định Tường to fight. To encourage the spirit of the generals and soldiers on the battlefield, the King rewarded them with money depending on the different ranks. After the victory, the court promoted Trương Minh Giảng to the title of Bình Thành Lord, continued to serve as the Governor, and was responsible for protecting the Kingdom of Chenla. Nguyễn Xuân was also praised and promoted (see NHBND 1966, vol. 16: 24).

Gia Long and Minh Mạng were usually very fair in rewarding officials. Under Gia Long's reign, Lê Văn Duyệt, General Governor of Gia Định, was very trusted. In the reign of Minh Mạng, although the king had many disagreements, he still appreciated Duyệt's talent and merits. In 1823, Lê Văn Duyệt commanded the Vietnamese and mobilized more Khmer militia in Vĩnh Thanh, Định Tường, Hà Tiên, and Uy Viễn to join forces in digging Vĩnh Tế canal at the Vietnamese – Cambodian border. When the canal was about to be completed, it was very hot in the middle of summer, so, the king decided to postpone the work. Soldiers were allowed to return home and were given clothes, silver, and silk. Particularly Lê Văn Duyệt was promoted one more rank and was awarded a pearl belt to show the special treatment (see NHBND 2007, vol. 2: 280-1).

For officials with meritorious services, after death, they would still be rewarded. For example, Trương Tấn Bửu, Deputy

Governor-General of Gia Định, who was credited with the construction of Châu Đốc Citadel, oversaw the excavation of Vĩnh Tế Canal, and undertook the task of protecting the Kingdom of Chenla, was worshiped at the Temple of Meritorious Officials after his death, and his descendants were granted private lands (NHBND 2007, vol. 2: 389). Nguyễn Văn Trương, the associate governor of Gia Định, who had helped to restore the Nguyễn Dynasty, was granted a sandalwood coffin and 1,000 coins [...] by King Gia Long. On the burial day, the king personally came to see him off on a dragon boat. After that, Nguyễn Văn Trương was also honored in the list of high-ranking meritorious officials, and his descendants were granted lands" (NHBND 2007, vol. 2: 386). After the death of Governor of Biên Hòa province, Lê Văn Từ, the King awarded him a large roll of silk brocade and 150 coins (NHBND 2007, vol. 2: 389). When the governor of Uy Viễn county, Nguyễn Văn Tồn, passed away, the king ordered:

“Nguyễn Văn Tồn is a non-Vietnamese official but loyal to the Dynasty. He has worked hard for many years and performed many achievements, so he deserves to be rewarded. I order to grant him two large rolls of silk brocade, 20 pieces of royal silk, and 200 coins [...]” (NHBND 2007, vol. 2: 41).

Gia Định's associate governor, the great scholar Trịnh Hoài Đức, asked to resign because of his age, but the king tried to keep him working. Then, the king rewarded him 2,000 coins and many precious wood and bricks to build his own house. After his death, Trịnh Hoài Đức was awarded four rolls of silk brocade, 2,500 coins, and 500 units of rice, and so on. The king allowed the courtiers to suspend the court meeting in three days, ordered the ceremonial officials to hold official ceremonies for him (NHBND 2007, vol. 2, 402).

The above case studies show that, depending on different merits, both kings punctually ordered appropriate awards to enhance the sense of responsibility and loyalty of mandarins to the court and to the country.

Appropriate sanctions and penalties

In parallel with the generous commendation, both kings also heavily punished officials who committed crimes, including those with great merits. King Minh Mạng once said: “[...] I treat all people with justice [...]. Offenders, regardless of family members or high-ranking officials, are equally punished. That we have done clearly, and everyone knows it” (NHBND 2007, vol. 3: 337). The kings repeatedly pointed out that the corruption of some officials was the main cause of the riots of the people (NHBND 2007, vol. 2: 65-

6). Therefore, acts such as bribery, corruption, harassing the people, forcing people to contribute to the privacy, etc. of officials from the court to the locality were severely punished according to the principle “killing one person to make thousands frightened” (sát nhất nhân, vạn nhân cụ, 殺一人, 萬人懼,).

The Southern region in this period had a developed economy, international trade and exchange were simultaneously prosperous. The mandarins working in this rich region were easily tempted. In addition, the salaries provided by the imperial court were not high, making it difficult for officials to keep integrity. In fact, under the rules of Gia Long and Minh Mạng, local officials' corruption, public possession, and harassment of the people were quite common. Gia Long and Minh Mạng believed that this was a major threat to the survival of the country, hence issuing strict rules to deal with it. In the judgments issued by both kings (as recorded by *Đại Nam thực lục*), there were a number of officials accused of corruption in the South. The following are some typical case studies:

Under the reign of Gia Long, Lư Phước Tường was appointed to be the protector of Chenla. However, Lư often harassed and exploited the wealth of the local people. Considering that such a crime was hard to forgive, in 1819, Gia Long ordered the execution of Lư Phước Tường and his followers, confiscating all properties to return to the people (NHBND 2007, vol. 1: 943). In 1820, Gia Định Deputy Governor-General Hoàng Công Lý became greedy, exploiting wealth, causing local people to resent. Knowing the news, King Minh Mạng was extremely indignant, ordering to arrest and execute him. The King issued an edict to deter other officials in Gia Định (NHBND 2007, vol. 2: 104-5, 134).

In 1833 Chief guards Hoàng Văn Tường and Lê Quang Chúng took bribes when they were sent to work by the king. Being discovered, both were executed (NHBND 2007, vol. 3: 463). In 1834, Trịnh Đường, Chief Inspector of Hà Tiên, embezzled up to 1,000 coins. King Minh Mạng knew the case, immediately removed him from the post and executed him (NHBND 2007, vol. 4: 102-3). Bạch Xuân Nguyên - a junior governor, who is addicted to gambling, embezzling money from people in Gia Định, causing many people to hate. The king ordered to punish him to correct the unrest in the Gia Định region. The king attributed the incident to the improper recruitment of people. He did not clearly see the nature of Bạch from the beginning, so he could not prevent it in advance [...] (NHBND 2007, vol. 3: 648-9).

In order to strictly enforce the discipline of the country, to prevent the phenomenon of usurpation and abuse of

power, both kings applied the principle of "Implementing clear and strict positions and responsibilities" throughout the country. Accordingly, the two kings set specific regulations on responsibilities, obligations, and rights for each official. In 1836, King Minh Mạng discovered that Tổng Hữu Tài, a local official in Định Tường Province, had arbitrarily formulated a new land management rule to corrupt people's money. The King immediately arrested and executed him (NHBND 2007, vol. 4: 943).

These events show that Gia Long and Minh Mạng advocated strict punishment of evils: corruption, accepting remittances, and harassing the people. In terms of the law, the measures that both kings applied were comprehensive and profound. For high-ranking officials who committed crimes, the two kings punished even more strictly to preserve the discipline of the country, set an example for the officials and comfort the people.

4. Case studies of officials being selected (recruited) under different ways

With the "priority" policy in recruiting and using officials in the South, as above, the Nguyễn Dynasty initially built a competent official force who were able to meet the requirements of building an administrative system, as well as solve the problem of reclaiming, economic development, protecting territorial sovereignty in the southern regions. Although many of them were not provided with professional knowledge in the fields of economics, politics, administration, education, etc., when faced with the reality, they had been able to handle the tasks. In this section, we choose to introduce some typical officials of the Southern region who have made outstanding contributions to this land and are respected and worshiped by the people to this day.

The first is Nguyễn Văn Nhơn (阮文仁, 1753-1822), born in Tân Thành District of An Giang Province (now Sa Đéc city) - the first Governor-General of Gia Định Region. In addition to military talent, he also contributed to education, cultivating and using talents, etc. One of his typical contributions is to submit a document to verify 14 issues to King Gia Long to apply for reforms in many important domains related to people's livelihoods such as tax, education, nominations, customs, etc. The issues he proposed were all carried out by the King. After Nguyễn Văn Nhơn's death, the king lamented him and allowed all officials to suspend the court meetings in three days, personally came to give offering wine and gave a sentence: "He dedicated himself wholeheartedly to the king, making his heart shine forever in heaven and earth (Vọng các quyết phò Vua, mãi rạng lòng son trong trời đất)". Nguyễn Văn Nhơn was allowed to be worshiped in the 3747 Royal Temple and Meritorious Officials

Temple (Phan & Nguyễn 2017: 13-4). The people of the South greatly admire his personality, talent, and merits. They brought his tablet to worship at Tân Đông Communal Temple in present-day Tiền Giang Province and regarded him as the Protector God the villagers. Until now, villagers still pay respect and sacrifice to him. Currently, his tomb is located in Sa Đéc City, Đồng Tháp Province. There is a canal called Sa Nhon in the area, and people kept the taboo of his name, so they changed it to Sa Nhiên Canal.

The second is Lê Văn Duyệt (黎文悅, 1764-1832). He was born in Hòa Khánh village, Tiền Giang province of Southern Vietnam. He is the meritorious official of the Nguyễn Dynasty, working for the two kings of Gia Long and Minh Mạng. Lê Văn Duyệt did not undergo the examination but was appointed to be the Governor-General of Gia Định Region in 2 times (1812-1816 and 1820-1832). He made great contributions to the region. Before his governorship, much of the southern region had been wild and thieves had raged in many places. Lê Văn Duyệt took care of people's lives, recruiting them to reclaim land and build villages. On the other hand, he punished the misappropriation of public funds and robbery, creating stability throughout the region. At this time, the regional economy had been in great progress, and the people's lives were affluent. Merchant ships in many countries, such as China, Malaysia, Singapore, Myanmar, Europe, and America, come to Bến Nghé Port in Gia Định to trade and exchange goods. In 1822, Crawford, the head of the Diplomatic Corps of the Governor-General of India, visited Bến Nghé and Gia Định. He had a talk with Lê Văn Duyệt, then described that this man was less educated but had a more open view than many of the high-ranking mandarins and scholars who were proficient in the Confucian classics. He lived in integrity, wishing to expand Gia Định more prosperously than all other countries in the region (see Hoàng 1999: 81). In 1825, Michel Chaigneau commented during his visit to Saigon: "He (Lê Văn Duyệt) is very talented both on the battlefield and in the field of management. People are afraid of him but love him sincerely because he is fair" (Silvestre 1915, 18). Lê Văn Duyệt not only protected well the Kingdom of Chenla and effectively prevented the Siamese aggression but also proposed to the court to dig Vĩnh Tế Canal, a project in southern Vietnam that has had significant economic and national defense so far (see NHBND 2012: 612).

For the people of the South, the image of Lê Văn Duyệt entered their minds like a god. The people wholeheartedly call his tomb and temple, "Lăng Ông (Mausoleum of Him, the Great Governor-

General)²⁵”, with all devotion. This place has become the center of religious and cultural activities the Saigonese and people of the South. This place has become the center of religious and cultural activities of Saigon and Southern people. As we observed in three continuous years (2015-2017), every year on New Year’s Eve, or the anniversary day of his death (July 30th of the lunar calendar), thousands of people from the region, including many Chinese, come to make sacrifices. Researcher Trần Bạch Đằng also commented: “Lê Văn Duyệt has great merits, as evidenced by the fact that people have admired and respected him [...]. We all know that in the south, there is a common oath among the masses: "I swear in front of the Governor's mausoleum that if I cheat others, I will be broken like the chicken that I bring to worship him" [...]. We realize that the respect for Lê Văn Duyệt is mainly related to his merits for the land and the people” (Trần et al. 2019, vol. 1: 261). It is worth noting that the local Chinese community have offered a golden diaphragm to the temple, which describes him “His Majesty, the Prince Consort (駙馬爺爺)”. According to the oral legend of many Chinese people living in Cholon, General Lê Văn Duyệt was "married to a princess of the Ming Dynasty of China". This is, of course, not real; however, it shows the fact that he has 'penetrated' into the communal folk literature!

The third is Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức²⁶ (阮黃德, 1748-1819), born in Định Tường province (now Long An province). He was a meritorious official of the Nguyễn Dynasty under King Gia Long's reign. He served as an official without taking the exam, was given the surname of the king (Nguyễn), and held many important positions such as Front General²⁷ of the Military Force (1802), Governor-General of Bắc Thành (the entire region of Northern Vietnam) (1810-1815), Governor-General of Gia Định Thành (the entire region of Southern Vietnam) (1816-1819). He was a loyal, mean man, good at both military arts and literature. He was called the "Tiger General" by the people because it is said that he could use his hands to catch the tiger. He had great merits in reclaiming wasteland and setting up villages in the South (NHBND 1993: 257).

After his death, Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức was regarded as the patron god by the people of the region. His tomb was built in 1817 (before his death) and is located in the old village of Tường Khánh (now Tân An city in Long An). V.T.H, an official of Long An Provincial

²⁵ The Mausoleum is currently located on Đinh Tiên Hoàng Street, Bình Thạnh District, Hồ Chí Minh City.

²⁶ His real name is Huỳnh Tường Đức (黃奉德).

²⁷ Under the Nguyễn Dynasty, there were four highest generals of Military Force, including Left, Right, Front, and Back Generals.

Museum, said: "The locals regard him as a meritorious general and a symbol of loyalty. Every year, the local people solemnly celebrate the annual anniversary of his death with his family on the 3rd, 7th, 9th, and 9th of the lunar calendar. This tradition has lasted for nearly 200 years, starting in 1820 since his first death anniversary" (fieldwork notes 2019).

In addition, the Nguyễn Dynasty also recruited some officials of Chinese and Khmer descent to serve in the government system in the South. The typical Chinese official is Trịnh Hoài Đức (鄭懷德, 1765-1825), the Associate Governor of Gia Định Thành. His ancestors were Chinese immigrants to Vietnam and then settled in Trấn Biên District (now Biên Hòa City, Đồng Nai Province in Southern Vietnam). In 1808 he was appointed as the Associate Governor of Gia Định Thành citadel. Later, he was summoned to the capital to receive the position of the Director of Board of Rites (禮部尚書). He is a famous Vietnamese poet, writer, and historian. Trịnh Hoài Đức and his fellows, Ngô Nhơn Tịnh and Lê Quang Định, were praised as "Three great poets of Gia Định" ("Gia Định tam gia"). In particular, his book, *Gia Định thành thông chí*, is still considered to be one of the most important historical documents for Vietnamese historical and geographic researchers. He died in 1825, his tomb was built in Biên Hòa, Đồng Nai province in Southern Vietnam. In 1938, the École française d'Extrême-Orient ranked his tomb as a conservation monument and now a national historical site. He was worshiped by the people in the area.

Among Southern scholars who passed the exams and participated in the government apparatus in the South, Phan Thanh Giản (潘清簡, 1796–1867), born in Bảo An District of Vĩnh Long Province (now Ba Tri district, Bến Tre province in Southern Vietnam), is a person who made great contributions to the southern region and has been respected and loved by the people. He was of Chinese descent and received a bachelor's degree in 1825 and a doctorate in 1826²⁸, served as an official under 3 kings' reign (Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, Tự Đức). He made many contributions to the cultural and educational development of the South and was sent by the court as an ambassador to China, Indonesia, Singapore, and many other countries. After his death, he was worshipped at Vĩnh Long Confucian Temple (Hoàng 2001, 213). Phan Thanh Giản Temple is now located in the Ba Tri district of Bến Tre Province. For a long time, people in this area regarded him as the patron god.

²⁸ He was the first South Vietnamese to pass the highest level of imperial examination.

Another famous official worth mentioning is Trương Minh Giảng (張明講, 1792-1841), who was born in a family of Chinese descent in Hạnh Thông village, Bình Dương District of Gia Định Citadel (now Ho Chi Minh City). He obtained a bachelor's degree in 1819 and was appointed to many positions, and was later promoted to the Minister of the Revenue. Trương Minh Giảng was good at both military arts and literature, and was the director of the National History Bureau. Trương Minh Giảng had great merits in eliminating the uprising of Lê Văn Khôi (1833), repelling the Siamese army, and bringing peace to the Gia Định people. He also made great contributions to the people of An Giang and Hà Tiên, where he served as Governor-General, in instructing people to use buffalo and cattle as a force in farming, planting strawberries and weaving fabrics. He promoted solidarity among the Cham, Chinese, and Khmer peoples, and implemented a flexible foreign policy with the Kingdom of Siam and the Kingdom of Chenla. Trương Minh Giảng ranked first among the 20 meritorious officials, whose name was engraved on the stone and stone of Võ Miếu (武廟, Military Temple) in Huế capital (NHBND 2007, vol. 4: 351).

The most famous Khmer mandarin of the Nguyễn Dynasty was Nguyễn Văn Tồn (阮文存, 1763–1820) – the governor of Uy Viễn County, who made a great contribution in collecting Khmer to help King Gia Long to fight the Siamese army. He was appointed as Marshal-Governor of local county and obtained the title Dung Ngọc Hầu (Marquis Dung Ngọc) from the Nguyễn Dynasty. Today, his tomb and temple are located in Trà Ôn district of Vĩnh Long province. People in the area respect him, considering him a guardian deity. “Every year, on the first days of the year, the Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer communities in the region gather about his temple to organize his anniversary and other festive activities”, said Mr. N.V.B (62 years old, member of the Executive Board). As we observed, the local Khmer almost practice Theravada Buddhism; however, they love paying tribute to General Nguyễn Văn Tồn during the festival, and bring back home the pride of having a famous ancestor (fieldwork notes 2017).

5. Conclusion

Assessing the policy of selecting and using mandarins of Gia Long and Minh Mạng, we found that the two early kings of the Nguyễn Dynasty had different forms and measures in selecting and using mandarins in the South compared to the North, the Central, and the previous tradition. Subjects recruited in the South were wide, not aristocratic, regardless of nationality, ethnicity,

family origin, lineage, as long as they were talented, honest and responsible, affectionate, and deep feelings for the new lands. The way of selecting mandarins in the South was also quite flexible in both forms of examination and nomination. Both kings completely removed the "hereditary" regime from using officials in the government system in the South. This policy is the direct result of both historical and socio-economical conditions in the region during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

In general, the officials in the South performed very well in local management, contributing to promoting the commodity economy and developing trade, making the Southern region the most prosperous region in the whole country at that time. This success has proved that the specific policies of King Gia Long and King Minh Mạng are right, while also demonstrating the fact that any equilibrium policy in the case of Vietnam is unlikely to lead to success.

In essence, most of the mandarins in the South of this period were not separate from the common life, yet they fell into the rigid and farmed routines of the Confucian scholar-officials. They were still close to daily life, understood the community, and knew what they need to do. They have the ability to "dance on the horse with a sword and write poems on the ground (thượng mã đề thương, hạ mã đề thi / 上馬提槍, 下馬題詩)", thus demonstrating the dynamics of the local mandarins in the early Nguyễn Dynasty period.

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