

NGUYEN LORDS AND THE NGUYEN ROYAL DYNASTY IN VIETNAM'S HISTORY FROM 16TH TO 19TH CENTURIES

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In commemoration of 450 years after Nguyen Lords Hoang went to the South to set up his realm (1558-2008), for the two days of October 18 and 19 in Thanh Hoa, the Workshop on "Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty in Vietnam's history from 16th to 19th centuries was held by Vietnam Association of History together with People's Committee of Thanh Hoa Province. The workshop was much interested in by over 600 participants with 92 scientific reports of historians and other scientists from research institutes, universities, cultural agencies across the country and some researchers from China, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Russia, the UK, etc.

Through discussions at preliminaries and in three subdivisions, it was agreed by the Workshop that the attitudes of criticizing, accusing the Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynaties before, though had their own reasons, need to be changed. The Workshop set great store by the Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynaty's contributions to the cause of expanding the territories, building the unified state and handing down to the later generations a great cultural heritage in the national cultural treasure.

We have the honour of introducing to the readers the Workshop Summary Report of Professor, People's Teacher Phan Huy Le, President of Vietnam Association of Historical Sciences

1. The Editorial Board received 90 reports and printed in the Summary Record, and close to the opening day, the workshop received two more in addition, so the total of report was 92. The reports came from scientists in the home land of Thanh Hoa, from institutes, scientific centres, universities in various provinces and cities throughout the country, mostly in Hanoi,

Hue and Ho Chi Minh City. Especially, we received eight reports from foreign scholars in: China, Taiwan Island, Japan, France, Russia, the UK, including some people who had defended doctoral thesis in 1982 with the subject on the time of Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty. It can be said that the workshop brought the leading specialists in Vietnamese history during the 16th and 19th centuries.

At the preliminary session to open the workshop in the morning of October 19, 2008, the participants numbered around 650, apart from the scientists, these also included the former General Secretary of the Party Le Kha Phieu, numerous leaders and managers of Thanh Hoa from the Central Government, senior cadres of the land of Thanh Hoa, representatives of the Nguyen Phuoc clan and the posterities of the Nguyen clan, as well as representatives of various news agencies, newspapers, television, radio broadcasting stations of the Central and Thanh Hoa and other provinces and cities. The composition and number of people participating in the workshop reflected that this is an issue which attracts the attention of not only the scientist circles but also of the entire society, wishing and demanding that scientists must elucidate and judge Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty in an objective, authentic and fair manner.

During the course of Vietnamese history, the 16th-19th centuries was a period close to the present time with a great number of direct connections and was also a period that lasted over there

centuries undergoing so many complex and formidable changes of the country. The split into Dang Trong (South) and Dang Ngoai (North), Trinh-Nguyen civil war in the 17th century, the cultural and economic development in the dramatic exchanges with the region and the world, the stormy insurrection of the Tay Son movement, then Tay Son – Nguyen war, the invasion of the French colonialism - all occurred in the context that the Western capitalism was vigorously expanding to the Orient, enlarging the world market and posing threat to the independence and sovereignty of Asian countries. The history of Vietnam in this product raised numerous issues that require thorough research and broad discussions. *The Workshop on Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty was not aimed at discussing all these issues, but only concentrating on some basic issues relating to the views and judgments of Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty during the course of development of Vietnam's history between 16th and 19th centuries as mentioned in the introductory report presented at the workshop.*

2. Through discussions at the three subdivisions, we *unanimously arrived at some points of awareness, which can be regarded as a consensus*, of which I would like to brief its main contents as follows:

2.1. All the participants were aware that *criticizing, accusing to the extent of nearly denying all the achievements of the former Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty were unfair and*

unobjective, particularly when these were brought into the general education textbooks to make compulsory to youths and society. Naturally, such attitude had its own reason in the context the Nguyen Dynasty was turned down by the revolution, then the feudal land and field ownership regime was abolished by land reform, and especially when the entire nation was waging the war for independence and reunification of the country. Against such backgrounds, every action that encroached upon independence and unification was criticized and denounced severely. That was the political attitude of the society, and on their part, historians of course had their own responsibilities for applying their historical methodology which was not yet objective and authentic.

2.2. The workshop was unanimous in that *it is necessary, or as may be said, a pressing need not only in awareness of science but also in psychology and social public opinion to re-judge the service as well as restrictions of Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty*. Some people posed the question that it was late for holding such a workshop? Actually, it can be regarded as too late for the need of the society, however, on scientific aspect, awareness is a process and a turning-point change entails some preparation for it. Before our workshop, since the 1990s of the 20th century, there had existed a good many new research works at home and abroad and some about 20 workshops on Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty. These were the very important

preparatory steps for forming scientific grounds, conditions which were fairly ripe for this national level workshop. At the previous workshops, different views abounded and a consensus was hard to reach, yet at this workshop, a tendency of moving close to one another became distinct and in the basic contents, there was a real convergence in awareness.

2.3. Regarding the judgment of Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty in the period between the 16th and 19th centuries, a high consensus was reached by the workshop, *confirming the following great contributions*:

2.3.1. Nguyen Lords deserved credit for expanding the territories southwards as far as to the Mekong River Delta and firmly establishing their sovereignty in the new lands.

2.3.2. Continuing the achievements of the Tay Son movement, abolishing the North - South splitting condition, laying foundation for restoring reunification, *Nguyen Anh and the Nguyen Dynasty completed the cause of national reunification across the large territory including the North and the South*.

2.3.3. Building and strengthening *the unified state over the territory corresponding to the modern Vietnam's territory*, including the mainland and littoral islands and islands over East Sea. The Nguyen was a concentrated monarchical Dynasty; it had its restrictions in terms of autocratic regime, some policies on internal, external relations yet made much progress in terms of managing the unified state, of administrative reform, building the

institution and mechanism for the operation of a very well-organized state.

2.3.4. The period of Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty *left a huge cultural legacy of material and immaterial heritages*. This legacy spread all over the country, from the North to the South, was resulted from the creative labour of our people, of the ethnic community of Vietnam, of the preeminent culturists typical for the intelligence and soul of the nation. This legacy was crystallized into some heritages that have been recognized by UNESCO as the world's cultural heritage, namely carrying global values, for example, the ancient capital city of Hue, royal ceremonial music and songs, ancient Hoi An Town. Due to the former criticizing and accusing attitudes against the Nguyen Dynasty, for some time, preservation and promotion of the values of this legacy was restricted.

3. Among the issues raised at the workshop, besides the above-agreed ones, *there remained also some others requiring further study and discussions:*

3.1. Regarding Nguyen Anh's action to entreat help and bring fifty thousand Siamese troops to Gia Dinh, sign the Versailles Treaty in 1787 with Ba Da Loc's aid, in reality, the fifty thousand Siamese troops were put to rout by the Tay Son army at Rach Gam-Xoai Mut battle in 1785 and the Versailles Treaty was not executed because of the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, and for Ba Da Loc's aid mobilized from France's colonies, those not large in quantity, this did assist Nguyen Anh in build portraits, training troops,

developing the navy, purchasing weapons... and was totally under Nguyen Anh's control. When considering foreign aid, it is important analyze and elucidate that whether the action to entreat foreign aid is controlled on the basis of maintaining sovereignty and bringing benefits to the country or not; if this leads to loss of sovereignty, of independence, then it is a crime to lose the country – an inexcusable crime. On that basis, notwithstanding the differences, the workshop was unanimous in that *the action to bring fifty Siamese troops to Binh Dinh was a "blurred point", a "flaw" in the life and cause of Nguyen Anh*.

3.2. *The issue of reforming the country* of the Nguyen Dynasty was under hot discussion different points still remained. It was all agreed that in the context of the 19th century, reforming the country was a pressing demand that affected the existence of extinction of the nation. On the world aspect, when the Western countries entered the era of capitalist development and industrialized civilization, the pre-capitalist and pre-industrial state of Vietnam and the Orient in general revealed their underdevelopment and backwardness compared with that of the time. If without reform to overcome the country's backward state, then it was hard to maintain the independent existence of the state, to form the potentials to cope successfully with the new challenges of the time. In the Nguyen Dynasty, numerous reform proposals were submitted to the emperors. Nevertheless, we must

differentiate those proposals to reform, for example, with some small changes in the mandarin employment, irrigational work management, reclaiming virgin lands, redressing education, etc. on the invariable foundation of the feudal economic structure with the reforms to open the door for trade exchanges, for industrial and commercial development, learning techniques from the West, improving defense level... to keep abreast of the time. The later reforms did not appear until Tu Duc's time with the confidential reports and preoccupations of the radical intellectuals such as Nguyen Truong To, Nguyen Lo Trach, Dang Huy Tru, Bui Vien, etc. The trend for reform as such was slow, as some time cared for by Emperor Tu Duc, yet not accepted and implemented as a policy of the royal court. This was the very great restriction of the Nguyen Dynasty, and the workshop also had preliminary discussions about the internal, external as well as the responsibilities of the Nguyen Dynasty and found that further studies needed to be continued.

3.3. The anti-French resistance war between 1858 and 1884 led by the Nguyen Dynasty ended in failure. The workshop agreed on the judgment that *causing the loss of the country was the heavy, unexcusable and inexcusable responsibility of the Nguyen Dynasty in the position of governing the national sovereignty*. However, the cause for the loss of the country needs to be thoroughly studied among the direct and underlying causes, subjective and objective causes, and especially it should

be placed in the context of the region and the world over, it needs to be compared with other states in the Southeast Asia and East Asia. The direct causes were rather clear, namely, the inconsistent policies sometimes warlike sometimes pacifist sometimes confused between warlikeness and pacifistness, numerous faults in strategies and tactics, particularly the failure to mobilize the power of national solidarity, the power of the whole people to fight against the enemy thus losing so many good opportunities...The workshop, nevertheless, saw that further studies of the entire course that led to the failure of the Nguyen Dynasty, in which the relation between reform of the country and safeguard of the national independence was of great importance.

In addition to the issues above, at the workshop, some people also touched upon whether the Confucian thought, foreign trade policies constituted a "closed-door policy" or not, the policies and solutions to Christianity, policies on relations with the neighbouring countries, the reason for the social instability during the Nguyen Dynasty... However, due to its time format, the workshop did not extent the scope of discussion yet only exchanges and made some suggestions for study.

4. Compared with the requirements as set out from the beginning, it can be concluded that the workshop was *a great success*. The greatest thing in its success lies in the consensus at a high degree that the former attitude of criticizing, accusing extensively the

Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty, though having its reasons, now needs to be changed. The prolongation of the former concept gave rise to the opposition in a good many researchers at home and abroad, as well as psychological and public discontentment. On that basis, a new concept of the time of Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty was established at the workshop, acknowledging and honouring the great service and contributions of Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty to the cause of expanding the territory southwards, reunifying the country and building the unified state over a large area corresponding to the Vietnam at the modern time and leaving a monumental cultural legacy, and integral part of the nation's cultural treasure. The workshop was also unanimous in pointing out the restrictions of the time of Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty. Notwithstanding existing issues, a new orientation of awareness was created at

the workshop for further researches and discussions.

The workshop results need to be publicized in the society, need to be acquired in activities of guiding through cultural heritage preservation and promotion, of compiling Vietnamese history, of revising general education textbooks. The scientific workshop of course only provided scientific advices and proposals, meanwhile, the implementation falls within the responsibility of the competent political system of today.

To be awake to history in an objective, fair manner is the responsibility of the historians and generations of today, displaying a straightforward and impartial attitude towards the past. This is also important scientific grounds for clearing away the previously repressed discontentment, complexes, from that to contribute to social stabilization, national solidarity in the present cause for making the nation prosper, building the country civilized, rich and powerful.