

THE TRINH RULING FAMILY IN VIETNAM IN THE 16TH – 18TH CENTURIES

Vladimir ANTOSHCHENKO

Centre for Vietnamese Studies, Institute of Asia and Africa,
Moscow University, Russia

The Trinh clan from a community of Soc Son (modern name – Vinh Hung), district Vinh Phuc (the province Thanh Hoa) occupies an especially important place in the history of the Vietnamese state and society of Le Mat period (1533–1789). Representatives of this family, glorified from the times of Lam Son revolt (1417–1427), played a major role in the management of the “[Emperors] Le Restoration” movement (Le Trung Hung) in 16th century and reached an exclusive place in Dang Ngoai’s socio-political system after the Emperor (vua) Le returned to the capital of Thang Long. This paper is devoted to the analysis of a historical role of the Trinh ruling clan.

Results of research into the family chronicles (“gia pha”) of the Trinh clan from the community of Soc Son show, that the authors of the Le-Trinh epoch ignored the relationship between chua Trinh and descendants of the “subjects of merit” of the 15th century – Trinh Kha and Trinh Khac Phuc because two of them (Trinh Duy San and Trinh Duy Dai) were classified by official historiographers as “trouble-makers” (“nghich liet than”).

In accordance with the periodization adopted in Russian Vietnamology the year 1533 is determined as a beginning of the second stage of the historical evolution of developed feudalism in Vietnam, which continued until the end of the Le-Trinh government in Dangngoai.¹ This date coincides also with the period-division in the new collective monograph “History of the East in the Middle Ages. Part 2”. Its authors took the beginning of the Portuguese and Spanish penetration into the East in the end of the 15th – the beginning of the 16th centuries as the boundary between the Middle Ages and modern history.²

I. Vietnamese society of this time is characterized by:

¹ *Deopik D.V. History of Vietnam. Part I.* Moscow, 1994, p. 14 (in Russian).

² *History of the East. Vol. II: The East in the Middle Ages.* Moscow. 1995, p. 5 (in Russian).

1) *Nominal political unity of the state*; the externally united state of Dai Viet led by the legitimate Late Le dynasty from the end of the 16th – the beginning of the 17th centuries was actually divided into two independent principalities headed by the military rulers Trinh and Nguyen; the more advanced traditions of political authority and social organization were characteristic of its northern part (Dang Ngoai), and more considerable extent of social mobility and economic activity – of its southern part (Dang Trong);

2) *Easing of the bureaucratic centralization of the state*; after the attempt to transform Vietnam into a bureaucratic empire according to the Chinese model, which was undertaken by vua Le Thanh Tong (reigned 1470–96), there was a “rolling back”; a time of prompt depreciation of titles and defunctionalization of official posts in the 16th century was replaced by a period of synthesis of old organizational principles (such as collegiality and branch specialization) and formal attributes of authority with new conditions of governing in the ruler’s administration (leadership and territorial division) and real socio-hierarchical estimations, such as fidelity to the ruler (chua), economic power and military force;

3) *Expansion of social base of the chua regime*; being military in its origin and social character, chua Trinh in a greater measure executed functions of the secular and religious leader in relation to the subjects, pushing vua Le aside from this sphere; in these purposes the social distinctions between various feudal categories (civil officials and militaries) were erased, the privileges of the military clans from the Hong-ha river delta increased (in comparison with the military families and “subjects of merit” from Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces), new mobile strata (eunuchs) were actively used in state service, local authorities were officially recognized through the sale of nominal posts, status and privileges;

4) *Prevalence of private law in economic relations*; the official politics of non-interference in community affairs resulted in a wide circulation of private peasants’ and small feudal land-owners’ property, origin and fast development of “village rich men” (tho hao), and the essential transformation of communal institutions;

5) *Disappearance of an exclusive role in ideology and culture for a certain religious and philosophical system*; in 17th – 18th centuries along with the preservation of formal preference for neo-Confucianism, interest to Buddhism revived, the state financing of construction and repair of Buddhist temples was renewed, and as a result of European missionary activities a numerous Catholic community appeared, which sometimes influenced the vua and chua courts.

II. At the top of state power the specified socio-economic and political processes resulted in creation of the **institution of dualistic supreme government**: the Emperor (Vua) performs sacred functions, while the military ruler (chua) supervises the real situation in the country. Chronologically and typologically it corresponds to the Japanese system of “Tenno–Shogun” in the Tokugawa period (1603–1867). At the same time, there are certain essential distinctions between these systems.

The geomantic figure on the burial place of Trinh Kiem's mother, according to Phan Huy Chu's data, is interpreted as follows: "neither emperors, nor hegemons, but [their] authority shakes the Universe".³

The unique character of evolution of the military ruler (i.e. chua) power institution in Dang Ngoai was, that the sphere of the chua Trinh's competence constantly increased at the expense of the prerogatives of the Emperor (Vua) in the questions of secular and sacred leadership. This evolution was fraught with vua Le's attempts to return the status quo (the Emperor Le Anh Tong's and the Prince Le Duy Mat's flights from the palace in 1573 and 1737; the Emperor Le Kinh Tong's participation in Trinh Xuan's subversion in 1619), and also with physical elimination of the Vua (the 17th century is notoriously known as "the century of the under-aged Emperors"). As a result, by the end of the 18th century chua Trinh had usurped a lot of Vua Le's supreme rights in such fields, as presiding on the palace round of metropolitan Confucian examinations, performing the cult of the supreme spirits of the Sky and Earth (te Nam giao). In Japan the supreme authority of the Emperor has existed since 645 regardless of the secular forms of government. The Tokugawa shoguns did not require the Emperor's formal consent even in the case of the ruler's throne transfer, but, in contrast, in Dang Ngoai gold imperial edicts (kim sach) were entrusted to chua Trinh with any assignment up to the end of the 18th century. At last, one more difference: Vua Le and chua Trinh in Dang Ngoai were located in one capital while in Japan the Tenno resided in Kyoto, and shogun – in Edo (modern Tokyo). Chua Trinh Cuong (reigned 1709–1729), realizing the undesirability of such proximity, even decided to build a new capital for himself in the area of the community of Co Bi (district Gia Lam, province Kinh Bac). Wide-scaled construction was taking place for two years and a half, but destructive flood and the unexpected death of Trinh Cuong prevented its completion. The valuable wood, which during a long time had been stocked up in exchange for posts, under the order of chua Trinh Doanh (reigned 1729–1739) was used to construct sacred complexes in the districts of Ba Vi (the Mia temple) and Dong Trieu (the Quynh Lam temple).

Trinh rulers played the role of universal leaders, they "were in charge of all the questions" (tong noi ngoai), and their successors (the tu) were nominated as the assistants in state affairs and commanders-in-chief of the armed forces. In the sphere of relation with subjects, the Vua Le's participation in such questions, as the reception of the Chinese ambassadors, celebration of the winners of Confucian competitions, ceremonial receptions of the higher officials, issuing of some decrees was preserved. In religious field (addressing the spirits) firstly by the beginning of the 17th century chua Trinh had levelled up their ancestors' worship with the cult of the dead Emperors, and then during the 18th century other major nation-wide cults – "te Nam giao", worship of Confucius, Kuang-di

³ Phan Huy Chu. Selected Notes on the Previous Dynasties' Rules and Laws (Lich trieu hien chuong loi chi). Hanoi, 1960. Vol. I. Geographical Data (Du dia chi), p. 41 (in Vietnamese).

and legendary military men of the Three States epoch (in China) – were gradually put under the ruler's control. Some formal attributes and marks of imperial authority (yellow colour of attire, dragon image, etc.) were reserved for Vua Le up to the end.

As the analysis of the biographies of the civil officials, military leaders and eunuchs shows,⁴ the new parts of the chua administration were created in the governmental system of this period. Most radically, at the expense of complete replacement of old elements, updating of the army at the lowest and the average levels was carried out. In other cases the normative 15th century posts were either turned to ranks, or adapted for new conditions, thus being filled by other contents.

It is impossible also to agree with the opinion of some authors that 17th–18th century Dang Ngoai had two parallel administrations: one headed by the Vua and another – headed by chua, which made the governmental system more bulky. On the contrary, the list of staff of the Le–Trinh epoch was three times less numerous than in the second half of the 15th century and in the 18th century the number of vacancies was steadily decreasing – in mountain provinces the Departments of the manager (thua ty) and the Departments of censors (hien ty), and also county (phu) and district (huyen) managers' offices were completely abolished: all affairs under their supervision were transferred to the Department of governor (tran ty). In the valley provinces 17 % of county managers' posts (tri phu) and 26 % of district managers' (tri huyen) posts were abolished. The court Confucian offices and the eunuch institutions were common for the both courts (vua and chua), and the ministries (bo) and departments (phien), despite their identical names, were engaged in different questions (down to reform of the year 1751).

In 1607 Trinh Thi Ngoc Trinh, chua Trinh Tung's beloved daughter, Vua Le Kinh Tong's (reigned 1600–1619) Empress gave birth to the Prince Le Duy Chan, the future Vua Le Than Tong (reigned 1619–1643, 1649–1662). Ho Si Duong, official Trinh's historiographer wrote in this connection: "Henceforth [Vua] Le and [chua] Trinh were one family. They were close, then became even closer. The Le family – Emperors, the Trinh family – rulers. From generation to generation succeed to the [thrones]".⁵

Practically all Vua Le, on their coming of age, married chua Trinh's daughters, four of them received the rank of "Mother-Empress", and two rulers' wives brought up future Emperors in their palaces. According to the family chronicles' data, chua Trinh preferred to choose their wives among women of certain

⁴ *Antoshchenko V.I.* Evolution of the Social Signs System and Stratification of the Ruling Strata of Dangngoai (Northern Vietnam) in XVII–XVIII A.D. as Described in the Chronicles / Data Base in the EurAsian History in the Middle Ages. Vol. IV–V. Moscow, 1997, pp. 1–37 (in Russian).

⁵ The Real Records of Dai Viet Emperors and Rulers' Restoration Deeds (Dai Viet de vuaong trung hung cong nghiep thuc luc). A. 19. Vol. 3, p. 6b (in classical Chinese).

distinguished feudal clans (especially close blood relationships were established between Trinh ruling clan and the Dang family from a community of Luong Xa, district Chuong Duc, province Son Nam Thuong, which originated from the Tran Emperors).

III. **The chua Trinh's government** from the very beginning **had a military character**. Unlike imperial China and Dai Viet in vua Le Thanh Tong's epoch military service in this time was appreciated more than civil service, and the soldiers' land allotments (*quan dien*) and the officers' land grants (*che loc*) formed the economic basis of the ruling regime. In the 18th century civil officials without fail had to train in shooting from bows and rifles, many of them also commanded soldiers in battles. Trinh Kiem (reigned 1545–1569) before his death bequeathed to his descendants: "In the capital – help the [Le] Emperors, outside – suppress [enemies]. To make it the programme of the Trinh family from generation to generation".⁶ In a collection of the 17th century laws "*Le trieu chieu lenh thien chinh*" is written down, that the military officials, unlike their civil colleagues, could come to chua's court with an urgent report on any day.⁷

Under the slogan "to protect Le" ("pho Le") chua Trinh waged wars against the Mac dynasty in the 16th–17th centuries and against the Nguyen ruling clan – in the 17th century. As the commanders-in-chief Trinh Kiem, Trinh Tung and Trinh Trang frequently directly participated in military campaigns. In the most important campaigns (for example, the campaign against the Nguyen in 1627) vua Le also accompanied the Army in the Field. In the 18th century chua Trinh Doanh (reigned 1739–1767) also managed to command troops. The wars waged by chua Trinh in the second half of the 16th, 17th centuries and in the middle of the 18th century, had different characters. There were not, as it was thought until now, either ruinous wars in the 17th century, or peasants' revolts in the 18th century.

1) In fact the whole country, except for the extreme territories in the South, was a theatre of operations during seventy years in the 16th century. In spite of the seasonal character of the campaigns (that is they lasted several months, until the troops' provisions came to an end), they caused significant damage to the economy of the valley provinces in the northern delta, Thanh Hoa and Nghe An.

2) In the 17th century military operations in flat areas of Dang Ngoai (with the exception of the campaigns in 1600 and 1623 against the Mac in the delta and the campaign in 1655–1660 against the Nguyen in Nghe An) practically did not take place. The wars against the political opponents were waged henceforth on the distant northern and southern boundaries, lasted during a short period between the field works seasons (it allowed the Trinh to mobilize plenty of peasants) and practically did not influence negatively the social and economic situa-

⁶ Ibid. Vol. 1, p. 17b.

⁷ Collection of the Le Dynasty's Good Will Politics Rescripts (*Le trieu chieu lenh thien chinh*. Saigon. 1961, pp. 164–5 (in Vietnamese).

tion in Dang Ngoai. By the 1670s the purposes in the southern direction were not achieved, while in the North the hostile Mac in Cao Bang and the half-independent Vu in Tuyen Quang were finally appeased.

3) At the end of the 1730s the northern delta once again became the arena of fierce military clashes between the Trinh and their political opponents. As in the 16th century the reason for it was contradictions between the privileged military clans originating from Thanh-Nghe and the noble families of four provinces of the northern delta deprived of authority, prestige and riches. But this time the Trinh rulers, on the one hand, had to actively use tactics of reconciliation (temporary recognition of political opponents by distribution of official decrees on behalf of the Vua Le; such policies were used in the 16th century with the purpose of avoiding warfare from different directions), and, on the other hand, to rely not on the demoralized and disabled metropolitan Guards, and on the renovated armed forces of the northern delta, headed by eunuchs devoted to the Trinh, representatives of the clans closely linked with the ruling family and ruling commune clique. By the middle of the 1770s chua Trinh Sam finished suppressing the centres of resistance in the remote mountain areas of Hung Hoa and Tran Ninh and the conquest of the "old" Nguyen's territories in Dang Trong – Thuan Hoa and Quang Nam was carried out. Thus, by 1775 the chua Trinh completely executed the historical mission of the Dai Viet association under the Vua Le's authority.

IV. **The chua Trinh's social and economic politics** as a whole are characterized by dynamism and practicality. The system of basic tax (land-tax and person-tax) collection was improved, in districts and counties special collectors of the taxes executed these functions (they could be both the local officials and communal rich-men), the central authority controlled reception of taxes through six phien (each phien supervised one valley and one mountain province). With the purposes of unifying and simplifying the tax system in the 1660s at Pham Cong Tru's suggestion a uniform, standard "officials' copper cup" ("quan dong bat") and the principle of constant taxation of communes ("binh le") were introduced. All kinds of surtaxes and services (except for military one) are accounted to a fixed total sum "thue dieu", placed at disposal of local authorities, and special agents "trung phu" were engaged in collecting them. In the 18th century the local officials were supposed to use this sum to cover the everyday expenses of peasants, employed on public works. In the agrarian sphere the chua Trinh legally recognized private land property in communities regardless of state service. Beside that, private land owned by officials became a main source of their incomes; during the period of service these lands were exempted from state taxation.

The chua Trinhs consecutively carried out policies, directed towards stimulation of domestic trade. The taxation of communal markets and ferries was cancelled, the number of customs posts in foothill areas were reduced by more than half, the region of the Hong-ha river was frequently announced as a duty-free zone, first of all for rice trade. The foreign trade (with the Dutch and Chinese) was also oriented towards practical needs: in the 17th century – to wage wars

against the Nguyen and Mac; in the 18th century – to provide an internal market with the Chinese goods (first of all with medicines) and to prevent illegal exporting of copper, rice, silver and valuable wood.

Sale of posts, various status and privileges became major and constant sources of state treasury incomes. These policies covered practically all spheres of society – from communal status up to the examination system and diplomatic missions. Its progressive meaning was, that only the non-staff (“tap luu”) posts of the local apparatus were subject to sale, and the state with minimum expenses received at its disposal significant material and money resources, as well as the loyalty of the village ruling clique.⁸

The charges of the state for army maintenance and officers’ salaries were reduced to a great extent: the soldiers received land allotments in their native villages and small money allowances for all their period of service, and the majority of the civil officials were mostly “fed from businesses”. Extortions from collection of taxes, duties, recruiting, court judgements, drawing up lists and applications were recognized by the state. Local officials did not receive any salary at all, therefore their pension land grants were more than twice as large as their land grants during service (since the official “departed from businesses” and lost sources of incomes).

In the social sphere intensive deletion of distinctions between different categories of the officials is marked. Military examinations and the system of civil competitions under simplified programmes (“hoanh tu”, “si vong”) were introduced, simultaneously with the old system of Confucian competitions, other ways of promoting civil officials such as nomination of ungraduated candidates (“tien trieu”) according to special court lists were explored, the status of Confucian student and admission to provincial examinations could be bought at the cost of three quans. The degree of the court competitions laureate was obligatory only for diplomatic missions to China. Personal merits, experience of work, business qualities and property qualification became the basic criteria for selection of the applicants. From the beginning of the 18th century, the relative social uniformity of the ruling layer is made obvious by frequent transitions from the civil corps to the military and the other way round, alignment of criteria for service checks, achievement of title uniformity among the state officials (the noble title was no longer primary the social sign of the military).

Drawing eunuchs into the state service on a large scale is also one of the brightest characteristics of the Le-Trinh government in Dang Ngoai. It was considered to be a kind of the counterbalance to the influence of the military and civil officials at the top. In 17th – 18th centuries the social role of this group as the most loyal and devoted layer to the ruling regime was similar to the role of the military, grouped around the Vua Le in the first years of the Restoration (16th century). Eunuchs served in all four basic spheres of the state administra-

⁸ Antoshchenko V.I. State Posts Trade in the Late Le Vietnam // *Traditional Vietnam*. Vol. II. Moscow, 1996, pp. 83–130.

tion: the ruler's court, civil administration, army, system of supervision and control. They were nominated to the most prestigious and favourable posts in the Trinh administration, for example, as military governors of Thanh Hoa province (native land of the Vua Le and chua Trinh), chiefs of "Binh phien" (responsible for tax collection in the richest Son Nam province); drawing up army and land registers, financial estimates, tax of the customs duty, secret police and assignments to the Field army also fell under their control. All this created favourable conditions for unlimited growth of the eunuchs' influence and material opportunities (on the epigraphic data, in this period eunuchs more often than other categories of officials donated land and money to communal and Buddhist temples). The unification of the court servants' hierarchy, free penetration into new administrative and military structures testify to higher public prestige and greater degree of institutionalization of Vietnamese eunuchs in the Late Le epoch in comparison with Ming China.⁹

Thus, in this period the share of non-agricultural incomes of the treasury rose, attempts to organize a professional army and transfer state officials and soldiers to the monetary form of payment were undertaken not up to the end, it is possible to identify some other features of the late feudalism (which were so rear in the East) in chua Trinh's policies. At the same time, some former factors, which negatively influenced the socio-economic development of the country, such as revolts of the court Guards (the typical Eastern feudal troops), continued to appear.

⁹ Antoshchenko V.I. The Role of Eunuchs in the History of Ming China and the Late Le Vietnam // *Traditional Vietnam*. Vol. I. Moscow, 1993, pp. 71–178 (in Russian).