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The Role of Confucianism in Sociopolitics of the Nguyen Dynasty in the First Half of the 19th Century

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Abstract--The research focuses on how the Nguyen dynasty it became the first to have the largest territory in the history of Vietnam in its nearly 60 years of establishing and reigning over the unified country in the first half of the 19th century. It is seen that in terms of organizing the state apparatus, Gia Long and Minh Mang retained the system of agencies of the previous dynasties and continued reforms to ensure socio-political stability in their governance at that time. The study also clarifies the social role of Confucianism in the Nguyen dynasty, i.e. in the first half of the 19th century, which, in our opinion, is theoretically and practically significant, with the hope of further unraveling the role of Confucianism in that period.

Keywords---confucianism, Nguyen dynasty, social role, socio-politics, state.

Introduction

The Nguyen dynasty chose a centralized absolute monarchy as its ruling model. The higher that concentration of power, the longer the existence of the dynasty. In order to achieve that high concentration, Nguyen kings all realized the great role of the Rectification of Names. Accordingly, this doctrine requires every human being in society to perform their duty in a way that is worthy of their place. Thus, a worthy subject must be loyal to his ruler, and the ruler must be benevolent, rule over his subjects with propriety, love his people and work hard. With that, the Nguyen dynasty officially reigned over the whole of Vietnam from 1802; with the kings in the first half of the 19th century being Gia Long (1802-1819), Minh Mang (1820-1840), Thieu Tri (1841-1847) and Tu Duc (1848-1883).

Research methodology

The methods of research mainly used in this article are: historical and logical method; analysis and synthesis; systematic approach, comparison, a combination

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of theory and practice, etc. in order to clarify the social role of Confucianism in the socio-politics of the Nguyen dynasty.

Literature review

[Taylor \(2013\)](#), *History of Vietnamese Thought*. Through analyzing the feudal dynasties of Vietnam, the author points out their social and cultural characteristics; for example, in the Primal Le dynasty, some clever policies such as "not exploiting the people" and Confucian ethics were applied to maintain social order. Next, the author presents the economic policy of the Nguyen dynasty, where agriculture is still attached great importance. In terms of culture, the Nguyen dynasty highly valued Confucianism and considered it the supreme philosophy ([Taylor, 2013](#)).

[Pham \(2013\)](#), in the Yearbook of the International Workshop: *Responsibilities of Confucianism in the history of Vietnam and South Korea* has an article about "The issue of responsibility of Vietnamese Confucianism". In his opinion, in terms of a philosophical system, Confucianism is a moral and sociopolitical philosophy that has an important role in the country's development, and, like it or not, is responsible before the entire nation for the successes and failures of Vietnam in history. On the other hand, in Confucian ideology, cultivating one's moral character is extremely important; in other words, it is considered the foundation for ethical and socio-political doctrines ([Pham, 2013](#)).

The book *The economic picture of Vietnam in the 17th and 18th centuries* by [Nguyen \(2015\)](#), presents the economic structure of Vietnam in that period. The author wants to outline a general picture and "gather the overviews of different economic sectors at that time... the snapshots of changes are divided into two major topics according to Confucian thought ([Nguyen, 2015](#)).

Research Findings and Discussion

Overview of the socio-political situation in the Nguyen dynasty

Through the establishment and reign over a unified country in the first half of the 19th century, the Nguyen dynasty became the first in the history of Vietnam to have the largest territory. Regarding the organization of the state apparatus, Gia Long and Minh Mang still retained the old system of agencies of the previous dynasties; accordingly, the king holds absolute power. On the other hand, to strengthen the king's authority, Gia Long set the rule of "four Nos": no prime minister, no queen, no principal graduate in examinations, and no royal title for those who are not royalties ([Yung, 2010](#); [Suen et al., 2007](#); [Kung & Ma, 2014](#)).

Regarding *society*, in the time of the Nguyen dynasty, there was a fairly clear distinction between the ruling class and the subject class. The ruling class consists of the king and royalties, along with court officials and civil servants in the government system, and the landlords. Meanwhile, the subject class consists of farmers, craftsmen, merchants and poor urban dwellers. Due to the complicated social situation and the ban on Christianity of the Nguyen dynasty,

the French colonists took advantage of that to initiate the war of aggression against our country in 1858.

In terms of *Law*, the completion of *The Royal Court's Penal Code (Quoc trieu hinh luat)* under the reign of King Le Thanh Tong (1460-1497) proved that Dai Viet 's legislation had reached a high level. The code was later renamed *The Penal Code of the Le dynasty (Le trieu hinh luat)*, or more commonly known as the Hong Duc Code. This code consists of 722 articles, which are divided into 16 chapters specifying offenses, penalties, proceedings, litigations, relationships in the society, etc. *Hong Duc Code* "has an important role in the history of Vietnamese legislation. It inherited all the laws and legal documents that were promulgated and enforced by the previous dynasties, as well as was revised and adjusted them to better meet the development needs of the state as well as the reigning feudal dynasty at that time".

Starting from the early days of the Nguyen dynasty, "Gia Long ordered his officials to review Hong Duc Code and draft the 15 most important laws for promulgation... In 1815, " The Royal Court's Laws and Customs" (*Hoang trieu luat le*), aka "Gia Long Code" was enacted. Gia Long Code consists of 398 articles, which are divided into 7 chapters; in addition, there are also 30 auxiliary articles. Although it is said to learn from both Hong Duc Code and the law of the Qing dynasty, "... it mainly copies the law of the Qing dynasty... Later, especially under the reign of Minh Mang, the limitations of Gia Long Code were more or less dealt with; yet it remained the official code implemented almost throughout the existence of the Nguyen dynasty ([Corfield, 2008](#)).

The dominance of Confucianism in the Nguyen dynasty, in essence, is bringing the doctrine back to its dominant position in the ruling strategy. How Confucianism came to be dominant is not different from what happened in the Primal Le dynasty, i.e. Buddhism and Taoism were not allowed to involve themselves in politics. Confucian dominance means appreciating the respect for the ruler's power, building and implementing a legal system on the basis of making Confucian ethical standards into law. Ethics-related offenses are clearly stated in *Hoang trieu luat le*, or *Gia Long Code*.

The Nguyen dynasty also compiled large and valuable history books, such as *Chronology of Vietnamese History (Kham dinh Viet su thong giam cuong muc)*, *Veritable Records of the Great South (Dai Nam thuc luc) - Prequel Records and Principal Records*, *Collected Statutes and Regulations of the Great South (Kham dinh Dai Nam hoi dien su le)*, *Summary of The Royal Court's Regulations (Quoc trieu dieu le luoc bien)*, etc. Many major geographic books about Vietnamese geography were also compiled, such as *Geography of the united Vietnam (Hoang viet thong nhat du dia chi)*, *Phuong Dinh Geography Book (Phuong Dinh du dia chi)*, *Geography of the united Great South (Dai Nam nhat thong chi)*, etc. Works on local geography also became popular, such as *Geography of Nghe An (Nghe An ky)*, *Climate of the Northern Region (Kinh Bac phong tho ky)*, *Geography of Son Tay (Son Tay chi)*, *Geography of Ninh Binh (Ninh Binh chi)*, etc. In general, from the way of compiling history books to the presentation of main contents in the books mentioned above, all came from the orthodox point of view of Confucianism; therefore, in order to protect the interests of the reigning regime, many historical

events were misrepresented (Anyiwo et al., 2020; Tri et al., 2021; Irwanti & Ratnadi, 2021).

In terms of spirituality, the Nguyen dynasty paid attention to organizing ceremonies to worship Heaven, Earth and Gods. As Gia Long affirmed that he ascended to the throne due to the Mandate of Heaven, from his time onwards, ceremonies of sacrifice to Heaven took place regularly. For example, in the year of the Cat (1807), on the day of the Cat, "a ceremony for sacrifices to Heaven and Earth took place at the Nam Giao Esplanade... On the day of the ceremony, the king, wearing a hat embroidered with nine dragons, a yellow robe, a jade belt and a golden overcoat, ascended to the esplanade to start the ceremony. Court officials attending the ceremony all wore court uniforms" (National History of the Nguyen Dynasty, 1963). In the year of the Dragon (1808), on the day of the Dog, "the Temple of Literature was finished to worship Confucius. Local temples of literature were also order to place the statue of Confucius in the temple for worshipping" (National History of the Nguyen Dynasty, 1963). Ceremonies of sacrifices to Heaven and gods are proof that the "Mandate of Heaven" doctrine had dominated the worldview of the head of the dynasty.

By the time of Minh Mang, these ceremonies were held regularly, especially when there were natural disasters and epidemics. It is written in the Veritable Records of the Great South - Principal Records that: "In the year of the Dog (1826), the king was worried about the prosperity of his people. One day, he himself held a ceremony in front of Trung Hoa Palace and prayed for rain. The next day, it really rained. From the palace, the king bowed his head to thank Heaven, and ordered his officials to prepare offerings for shrines to show his gratitude." (National History of the Nguyen Dynasty, 1964). Ceremonies of sacrifices to Heaven and gods in the Nguyen dynasty are regularly seen, which reflects the appreciation of the early Nguyen kings for the Confucian doctrine of "Mandate of Heaven". Not only that, but the kings also followed the rules of the Qing dynasty in conducting the ceremonies (Tri & Dung, 2021; Zu, 2021; Suryasa, 2019).

Thus, the dominance of Confucianism is associated with the anti-Buddhism and Taoism policies. The Regulations on Village and Commune's Customs consider forms of praying, going into trance, spells and magic, etc. of these religions as superstitions. Meanwhile, praying and organizing ceremonies of sacrifice to Heaven are considered legitimate.

The social role of confucianism in socio-politics

In order to strengthen its rule, the Nguyen dynasty organized and perfected its state apparatus following the model of centralized absolute monarchy, where the king holds the highest power (Nguyen, & Van Dijk, 2012; Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Such a choice of state model places special importance to the role of Confucianism and Confucian education as the most suitable doctrine. In other words, the dominance of Confucianism and along with it the development of Confucian education became inevitable to the ideology of the Nguyen dynasty. That's why "the Nguyen dynasty limited Buddhism, forbade all Christian activities, criticized Taoism, actively promoted Confucianism and favored its dominance" (Nguyen Dynasty's Cabinet, 1993). This is also what the Ho dynasty

and the Primal Le dynasty did. However, from the end of Gia Long's reign to the reign of Minh Mang, the state also paid attention to repairing pagodas and casting bells; in particular, in the year of the Pig, the royal court ordered to repair Thien Mu Pagoda and cast a Buddha statue; in the year of the Horse (1822), rebuilt Thien Ton Pagoda (in Quang Tri); in 1823, built Long Phuc Pagoda (in Quang Tri), repaired Kinh Thien Pagoda (in Quang Binh) and many others. According to *Veritable Records of the Great South - Principal Records*, "in the year of the Horse (1834), June, summer, Minh Mang issued 10 stipulations to be applied in the capital and provinces, including 7 about the *true doctrine* (i.e. Confucianism, the italic words are our emphasis - author), which said:

"Learning is to know how to be human. So, every person in the world need to learn, but must learn in the right way. I want you people to study hard and build your moral character well. The doctrine of Emperor Yao and Emperor Shun only focuses on filial piety, while Confucianism takes benevolence and righteousness as its core. Those are what you should learn. As for superstitious doctrines, don't let yourself be fooled or tempted by them. Christianity is even more absurd: it allows men and women to rub shoulders with each other, encourages uncivilized acts and promotes bad deeds, which deserves the death penalty... Those who are students and have learned the Classics must understand this by themselves. As for soldiers, farmers, artisans and craftsmen, you all have to be literated, to imitate the good words and good deeds of others, to uphold moral values, to respect your elders, etc. I am saying all this to you, because I want you to be good. So you must carefully and respectfully listen to my words" (National History of the Nguyen Dynasty, 1965, pp.9-10).

The orientation of people's thinking towards the recognition of the centralized absolute monarchy led by the Nguyen dynasty is based on the favor for Confucianism but does not absolutize Confucianism and Confucian education. This is a new point of the Nguyen dynasty compared to the Primal Le dynasty. It seems that the Nguyen dynasty drew a lesson from the way of governing the country of the Later Le dynasty: when Confucianism reached its peak under the reign of Le Thanh Tong, it also began to show signs of decline due to social turmoils, which caused many Confucian scholars to no longer completely believe in it and even lament about being a disciple of the doctrine (Butkiewicz & Yanikkaya, 2005; Munson & Macri, 2009). Tolerance, or in other words, the acceptance of differences in the minds of scholars during the time of the Revival Le dynasty, tended to rise. Many of them turned to Buddhism and Taoism to find the necessary addition to the interpretation of life. Even Minh Mang himself, on a visit to Thien Mu Pagoda, told his servant: "Buddhism uses doctrine of gods to teach people, while Confucianism is about everyday virtues; however, they both guide people to do good things. As we are born into this world, we should do good and avoid bad deeds. Buddhism teaches people by the doctrine of cause and effect and the law of karma, which should not be seen as superstition. It encourages us to do good deeds, that is something that even the sages cannot deny" (National History of the Nguyen Dynasty, 1966).

Later kings such as Thieu Tri and Tu Duc had some orders to restrict the repair and construction of pagodas; however, it was not due to ideological reasons, but because these works cost a lot and affected other state affairs. So, the change in

the view of early Nguyen kings on the existence and companionship of the three teachings proved that they had a more tolerant view to encourage people to be good and do good. This is completely beneficial for the Nguyen dynasty to maintain its power and political institution. The process of establishing the dynasty and maintaining the power of the early Nguyen kings can be summarized as follows:

First, is the role of Nguyen Anh (Gia Long), who devoted his whole youth to the establishment of the Nguyen dynasty. He rose to power after the fall of the Tay Son dynasty - the one praised by people for its victories against the Siamese and Manchurian invaders as well as for its credit in reuniting the Inner and Outer Lands. However, maintaining the government is much harder than taking over it. Nguyen Anh encountered a lot of difficulties on his early days of coming to power, first of all in gaining the trust of people and scholars, especially Northern ones. No matter what, the takeover of the Nguyen dynasty should be seen as inevitable. Moreover, Nguyen Anh chose to remain the traditional state model, in which Confucianism acts as the ideological foundation, which is in line with the social context of Vietnam at that time. The problem lies with how to perfect and maintain that model.

Second, later Nguyen kings paid attention and attached importance to the role of Confucianism in enhancing their power, first of all in arranging and reforming the administrative apparatus in order to increase the dependence on the royal court and create conditions for hierarchical control. This is a very difficult task which requires Nguyen kings to harmoniously resolve a wide range of social, cultural and ideological relationships. Through the presentation of the view of early Nguyen kings on the relationship between the three teachings, it can be seen that they were ingenious in identifying positive elements of Buddhism and Taoism for political purposes, while ensuring that Confucianism always comes first. In that process, the Nguyen dynasty inherited the experience of state organization in history and took advantage of the favorable condition which is the country being unified and further expanded.

First of all, Minh Mang saw that it is the most necessary to continue to affirm and further promote the position of Confucianism and Confucian education. However, by the 19th century, Confucianism has lasted for thousands of years and has been divided into different schools of thought, followed by the differences in content and method between each school due to practical requirements. Confucianism and Confucian education under the reign of Minh Mang attached great importance to practical studies, i.e. reducing the study of theory and reasoning as much as possible and link political and moral thought with the resolution of urgent issues posed by the practical social life. By the time of King Minh Mang (1820-1841), Nam Ha scholars such as Trinh Hoai Duc, Le Quang Dinh, Dang Duc Sieu, etc. were all Confucian scholars influenced by practicalism, i.e. Yangmingism (doctrine of Wang Yangming). Although focusing on practicality, the core issues which are the starting points of Confucianism were always highly appreciated by King Minh Mang. In other words, practicality is the basis for Minh Mang to build a strong feudal state, while the deeply humanistic political and ethical thought of Confucianism is the support for him to maintain his power. It is no coincidence that Minh Mang praised Confucius' theory of Rectification of

Names. He argued:

"Confucius' words make every sense. He said "Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, and the son a son". From Mencius onwards, this argument has never changed" (National History of the Nguyen Dynasty, 1966, p. 154).

The rectification of names stated by Confucius is an integral part of the rule of virtue. Although he called on man to perform his duty as destined, but in essence, Confucius required a subject to be absolutely and even unconditionally loyal to his ruler. On the basis of that loyalty, Confucianism adheres to the principle of respecting monarchical power, i.e. the king holds the highest power. That's why Minh Mang ordered to build the Temple of Literature in Hue Citadel and other provinces to worship Confucius and the sages of Confucianism. Confucianism's dominance was promoted under his reign to build a highly centralized monarchy.

Drawing on the experience from the way of governing the country in the time of Le Thanh Tong, when the rule of virtue was the top priority, Minh Mang also focused on another important factor in ruling, which is the law. In the early days of the Primal Le dynasty, King Le Thai To once affirmed that "law is inexpendable in ruling the country". Similarly, King Gia Long also affirmed: "The penal code is to keep people from committing offenses and avoid bad deeds. Law is the common asset of the world, so it must be clear and transparent for court officials and citizens to understand and follow" (National History of the Nguyen Dynasty, 1963).

By the time of Minh Mang, the rule of law in governing the country was strengthened. In particular, he ordered to amend several articles of "Gia Long Code" to fit the actual situation as follows: "Penalties are for those who commit bad deeds, laws adhere to what the previous generations suggest, and customs should fit the current practice; they should be adjusted flexibly instead of staying the same forever. I hold a great career in my hand; through reviewing old institutions, I am concerned that even though the laws help with the governance, but if they lack something or are inappropriate, how would the people be affected? So, you should review the old laws and carefully discuss what should be changed, removed or added, and I will consider whether to proceed with such." (National History of the Nguyen Dynasty, 1963).

If Minh Mang had merits in perfecting the state apparatus with the management and administration based on the combination of rule of virtue and rule of law, then by the time of Tu Duc, maintaining that apparatus became the absolute order. In "The teachings for court officials and local governors", he wrote:

"I think it is not easy to protect the country and inherit the career of my predecessors. In my heart, I just want to be a virtuous king who loves his people and works hard. So you should hold on to your will and stay virtuous, keep your integrity, stay up late and get up early, and work diligently to help me overcome my shortcomings and put your talents into play to make people prosperous. That is what I really want, and is also a blessing to the world. But our country is so large and has so many people, thus it is impossible to know every little thing. So officials from the central to the local level must be responsible for what they do. If one is proved to have gone against justice and

failed to observe the laws, and only does things for his own interest, he will be strictly punished, so that the court discipline is taken seriously" (Institute of Philosophy, 1972, p.295)

In short, every dynasty wants to rule as long as "forever"; however, that entirely depends on the institution of each feudal state and how it is maintained. Dynasties that promote the role of Confucianism to argue for their legitimate existence, and at the same time put efforts in ensuring the prosperity of the country win the heart of the people and thus are long-lasting. Laws and political techniques are merely means of complementing the rule of virtue and a way to regulate human behavior on a mandatory basis; therefore, the worldview and methodology of a social philosophical doctrine that is rich in Eastern characteristics like Confucianism seems to not "apply" the terms of penalty of legalism, but makes into law the ethical standards from its own system of moral categories (Vuong et al., 2019; Yang, 2016; Hidah & Sedana, 2021).

Conclusion

Through three centuries of feudal crisis, country division and civil wars between feudal clans, Confucianism still retains its leading position in implementing social role. Particularly, in the context of diarchy, the worldview of Confucianism still continues to promote it impacts in a long period of time. In the 19th century, the Confucian worldview became the support for the affirmation of the position of the Nguyen dynasty, in particular the theory of Mandate of Heaven which acts as the foundation for the rise of the Nguyen dynasty to rule over a unified Vietnam. On the other hand, this very doctrine that the Nguyen dynasty wholeheartedly promoted was also aimed at threatening the people: opposing the king is synonymous to opposing the Heaven, and anyone who commits that sin will surely be punished; in this case, Nguyen kings are those to exert the punishment in the name of Heaven. This explains why Nguyen kings brought Confucianism back to its dominant position, considered this doctrine suitable for its political existence and relied on it to maintain their political power. The social role of Confucianism is larger than its social responsibility, so besides its merits, the doctrine itself also has certain limitations. The historical lesson left by the Nguyen dynasty on the social role of Confucianism is how to adopt it into the governance of the country. The values of this doctrine in terms of humanity and culture are still worthy of being promoted in the current context of development in our country.

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