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Vietnam in History and Transformation

Selected Readings

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CHAPTER 4

The Nguyen's policies on Confucian education promotion in Southern Vietnam

Do Thi Huong Thao

One feature that distinguished the education policy of the Nguyen dynasty and that of previous ruling houses was the expansion and development of education and examination in the south. As a result of its southward expansion, Vietnam's territory under the Nguyen was much larger than during the Le dynasty. An understanding of history in general and education policies in particular will be impossible without an adequate understanding of "the influence of southern regionalism in national political life".¹ This article discusses in detail one aspect of the issues related to examination, i.e. education promotion policies in the southern part of the country, and how the policies enabled the Nguyen to boost the number of academically achieving scholars in the south.

4.1. Southern Vietnam – a "non-Confucianized land"

Compared with the historical and cultural breadth of the Red River Delta, the relatively new land of southern Vietnam featured a wide range of geographical, historical, cultural and economic differences. This land, which was home to various ethnic groups, including the Khmer, the Cham, the Ma, the Stieng, the Chinese, and the Kinh...², came under strong Indian influence. Trinh Hoai Duc described the religious life of the southern inhabitants as characterized by "a strong reverence for Buddha, belief in

¹ Cooke, Nola, 1997, "The Myth of the Restoration: Dang Trong Influences in the Spiritual Life of the Early Nguyen Dynasty (1802-47)", in: Reid, Anthony, 1997, *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies – Responses to Modernity in the Diverse States of Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750-1900*, Houndmills, London, p.270.

² According to research materials, this area was home to Austronesian-speaking inhabitants such as Jarai, Rhade, Churu and Roglai and Austroasiatic-speaking communities, such as Mnong and Stieng, apart from the Cham ethnic group. [Cited from Li Tana, 1999, *Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* [Xứ Đàng Trong – Lịch sử kinh tế - xã hội Việt Nam thế kỷ XVII – XVIII], Tre Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, p.23.

psychics and preference for goddess”.³ One of the most noticeable features was that, compared with other localities especially in the north, southern Vietnam was originally “non-Confucian” where Confucianism was not held in high regard, and even unheard of.⁴ Woodside once observed that the south was probably more Buddhist and less Confucian than the northern and central parts of Vietnam.⁵

Residing in the Mekong River Valley, the people of southern Vietnam had more propitious natural conditions than the northern and central regions, as they were less exposed to extreme weather events while their land was more fertile and inhabitable, thus “generating easy profit without too much labour”.⁶ Part of *Gia Dinh Gazetteer* (*Gia Định thành thông chí*) by Trinh Hoai Duc reads: “The city of Gia Dinh of our country features enormous land and bumper crops, posing no grave concern about famines and cold weather”.⁷ It also has “ample rice and fish”⁸ together with plentiful products. The production of rice in the south was convenient, so many southern inhabitants made a living out of trading activities. And as Choi Byung Wook put it, southern dwellers “held rice in low regard”.⁹ And all of the five *trấn* of Gia Dinh, including Phien An, Bien Hoa, Vinh Thanh, Dinh Tuong and Ha Tien, were described by Trinh Hoai Duc as having trading activities. For example, in Phien An “the vessels and boats travel to and fro, one mask after another, carrying hundreds of items assembled together”; the town of Bien Hoa enjoyed “frequent passage of

³ Trinh Hoai Duc, 1999, *Gia Dinh Gazetteer* [*Gia Định thành thông chí*], Education Publishing House, Hanoi, p.142.

⁴ Li Tana, 1999, *Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* [Xứ Đàng Trong – Lịch sử kinh tế - xã hội Việt Nam thế kỷ XVII – XVIII], Tre Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, p.16.

⁵ Woodside A.B., 1988, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Nguyen and Ching Civil Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London, p.220.

⁶ Cited from Nguyen Hai Ke, 2009, “The Southern Traits in Vietnamese Culture early 19th Century (seen from *Dai Nam nhất thống chí*)” [Nét Việt Nam Bộ trong văn hoá Việt Nam đầu thế kỷ XIX (Qua ghi chép của *Đại Nam nhất thống chí*)], in: *Some Historical Issues of Southern Region by the end of the 19th Century – Scientific Symposium Proceedings* [Một số vấn đề lịch sử vùng đất Nam Bộ đến cuối thế kỷ XIX – Kỷ yếu hội thảo khoa học], Thegioi Publishers, Hanoi, p.286.

⁷ Trinh Hoai Duc, 1999, *Gia Dinh Gazetteer* [*Gia Định thành thông chí*], Op cit, p.141.

⁸ Trinh Hoai Duc, 1999, *Gia Dinh Gazetteer* [*Gia Định thành thông chí*], Ibid, p.160.

⁹ Choi Byung Wook, 2010, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng* [Vùng đất Nam Bộ dưới triều Minh Mạng], Thegioi Publishers, Hanoi, p.168.

merchants” while the town of Ha Tien “specialized in trade and business”¹⁰...

Unlike the North and Central Coast, the inhabitants of the South were less keen on learning, presumably due to the relatively more favourable physical conditions. For the northern and central people, pursuing an academic path was a gateway to officialdom to escape penury or move from rags to riches. The southerners were a bit different. As they were endowed with favourable natural conditions, which generated economic benefits, they did not perceive “learning to become a mandarin” as the ultimate goal of their lives. Choi Byung Wook observed that southern young locals were given windows of opportunities to have an easy life, for example by doing business, instead of serving in the court.¹¹ As a result, the number of southerners who earned a high position in the court through academic excellence was insignificant. In other words, the southerners were seen as “liberal people who were less inclined to succumb to feudal royal power; they were even less bound by Confucius and Mencius’s moral principles”.¹² In the eyes of the Nguyen’s rulers, especially Minh Menh, “the southerners were more interested in trade and business than in agriculture, even less in academic pursuits”.¹³ Minh Menh once remarked that, “the people of Gia Dinh are better known for their integrity and loyalty than their learning avidity”.

After its southward expansion and settlement of the capital in Phu Xuan (Hue), the Nguyen dynasty was confronted with a dilemma between, on the one hand, the court’s needs to promote Confucianism, expand the mandarin state, and single out talented men through examinations (building a meritocracy), and on the other hand, the bare fact that the inhabitants of the south had little if any tradition of academic excellence. Besides, “for a long time after 1802, the Nguyen dynasty had not gained a firm footing in the

¹⁰ Trinh Hoai Duc, 1999, *Gia Dinh Gazetteer* [Gia Định thành thông chí], Ibid, pp.150-151

¹¹ Choi Byung Wook, 2010, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng* [Vùng đất Nam Bộ dưới triều Minh Mạng], Ibid, p.181.

¹² Institute of Culture, 1984, *Some Characteristics of Mekong River Delta Culture*, Hanoi, pp.105-106.

¹³ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Education Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol. 2, p.124.

North, and hence was in dire need of a stable political rear”¹⁴ in the Central Coast and the South of the country. It was no coincidence that different Nguyen rulers, from Gia Long to Tu Duc, all took very keen interest in training the mandarin and creating a spiritual legitimacy for the court by organizing learning and examination activities in the South.¹⁵

In the North, the Nguyen ruling house was met with certain resistance from members of the intellectual circle who still identified themselves strongly with the Le dynasty.¹⁶ Immediately after his accession to the throne in 1802, Gia Long issued consecutive decrees calling upon the mandarins serving under the Le dynasty and the literati of the north to join the new administration. Although certain Confucian scholars responded to the king’s appeal and some officials of the preceding court did join the Nguyen’s mandarin, such number in general remained limited.

In the initial years of Minh Menh’s rule, some tribute students (*Sinh đồ*) and *Hương cống* of the Le court were appointed to positions of the Nguyen dynasty. For example, Ly Thien Duong, Le Tri, Nguyen Huy Cam, Hoang Pham Lam, and Ho Trong Dien were chosen as Provincial Educational Officer (*Đốc học*) in Quang Binh, Quang Ngai, Bien Hoa¹⁷, Cao Bang, Nghe An respectively while Pham Dinh Ho was appointed *Hành tẩu* (roving official) in the Literature Secretariat (*Hàn lâm viện*).¹⁸ Faced with a lukewarm support from the northern literati, Minh Menh had to issue repeated decrees in search of remaining talented men in the northern citadel and Thanh-Nghe when he visited the north. The king once observed to his close aides that, “the land from the Linh river northwards is of high literary (academic) traditions. Despite my decree last year, no one has nominated himself though. It has been months since I sojourned here in

¹⁴ Cao Tu Thanh, 1996, *Confucianism in Gia Định* [Nho giáo ở Gia Định], Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, p.118.

¹⁵ Cao Tu Thanh, 1996, *Confucianism in Gia Định* [Nho giáo ở Gia Định], Ibid, p.120.

¹⁶ Tran Thi Vinh, 2002, “The Political System of the Nguyen Dynasty (under the Reign of Gia Long and Minh Menh)” [Thế chế chính trị thời Nguyễn (dưới triều Gia Long và Minh Mạng)], *Journal of Historical Studies*, Vol. 6, p.3.

¹⁷ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Op cit, Vol. 2, p.144.

¹⁸ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Ibid, Vol. 2, p.146

the northern citadel, yet the situation remains unchanged. Is it because the literati feel they do not live up to that appellation of ‘talented men’?”¹⁹

While the continued use of northern intelligentsia through training and examinations proved to be a practical and effective enterprise, the number of intellectuals remained modest and fell short of the need, not to mention the fact that they were not always available. As a result, although a certain number of northern scholars already joined the mandarin state of the Nguyen dynasty in its early years, the Nguyen rulers still wanted to use in the new court the people they trained.²⁰ John Whitmore argued that with the Nam Ha base, it seemed that the Nguyen court wanted to adopt directly the Chinese model rather than indirectly through the northern literati from the previous centuries.²¹

Under the reign of Minh Menh, the court really wanted to “increase the number of officials in its bureaucracy”²², but it was met with the fact that the number of southerners who participated in the examination system and the success rate was inconsiderable. Specifically, under the reign of Minh Menh, a candidate in Gia Dinh “took the exam eight times without fulfilling the genres of the four exam grounds”²³, prompts the Chief of Education to ask for favour to be listed in the reserve register.²⁴ The academic tradition in the north was reflected in various cases, including the excellence of clans where fathers and sons, grandfathers and grandsons, uncles and nephews, younger and elder brothers became Presented Scholar (Tiến sỹ) or Doctoral Laureate, or villages with high rate of academic

¹⁹ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), *Essential Records of Minh Mênh Reign* [Minh Mênh chính yếu], Collection of ancient writings by National Committee for Translation, Ministry of Culture and Publication, Vol. 1, p.170.

²⁰ Tran Thi Vinh, 2002, “The Political System of the Nguyen Dynasty (under the Reign of Gia Long and Minh Menh)” [Thế chế chính trị thời Nguyễn (dưới triều Gia Long và Minh Mạng)], *Ibid*, p.5.

²¹ John Whitmore, 1998, “The Historical Aspects of Vietnamese Confucian Learning” [Khía cạnh lịch sử của Nho học Việt Nam], *Past and Present Journal*, Issue 57B, p.18.

²² Woodside, A.B. 2002, “The Central Government of the Nguyen and the Qing Dynasty – Power Structure and Communication Process” [Chính quyền trung ương triều Nguyễn và nhà Thanh – Cơ cấu quyền lực và quá trình giao tiếp], in: *Issues of Vietnamese History* [Những vấn đề lịch sử Việt Nam], bimonthly *Past and Present Journal*, Tre Publishing House, p.204.

²³ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 1998, *An Abbreviated History of Our Dynasty* [Quốc triều chính biên toát yếu], Thuan Hoa Publishing House, Hue, p.203.

²⁴ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Education Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol. 3, p.56.

success such as Hanh Thien in Nam Dinh, Mo Trach in Hai Duong, and many others in the villages of Thanh Tri, Tu Liem of Hanoi, the private schools with renowned Confucian scholars; the system of village Confucius Temples (văn từ, văn chỉ). Nola Cooke believed that as there was no mechanism that linked exams with officialdom, the lack of academically achieving families or great scholar clans in the South made it difficult for the Nguyen dynasty to re-establish the examination system in the South as it had done with the North.²⁵ During the very first regional exam conducted under the reign of Gia Long in 1807, “no southern sites were included”.²⁶ It was not until the 12th year of the Gia Long reign (1813) did the Nguyen dynasty begin to administer regional exams in provinces from Quang Binh southward.²⁷

The Nguyen’s needs to appoint and employ people from the central and southern provinces in the state bureaucracy were clearly reflected in Minh Menh’s policy since 1824. In ordering Board of Rites’ *Thư Tham tri* (vice-minister) Hoang Kim Hoan to oversee the Quốc Tử Giám (literally “National College” or “Imperial School”), the king said, “When they conquered China, the Qing dynasty, whose ancestors were of Manchu extraction, used the Han Chinese people for official positions, even though the Manchu people were barbarians. Why do we, a land of civilized people, not compare to them. *Why should the northerners always assume officialdom?*”²⁸ This was a clear message from the Nguyen in their efforts to put Nam Ha people in the charge of overseeing Quốc Tử Giám, which involved managing the national education system and other managerial positions in general.

In 1826, after looking at the results of the metropolitan exams where all the nine passed candidates were of northern background, Minh Menh

²⁵ Cooke Nola, 1994, “19th Century Vietnam Confucianization in Historical Perspective Evidence from Palace Examination 1463-1883”, Op cit, p.306.

²⁶ Cooke Nola, 1994, “19th Century Vietnam Confucianization in Historical Perspective Evidence from Palace Examination 1463-1883”, Ibid, p.307.

²⁷ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2002, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Education Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol. 1, p.864. [17 candidates passed this exam as Hương, 9 of whom were from Quang Duc and 8 were from Gia Định]

²⁸ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Op cit, Vol. 2, p.348.

said: “Now that our country has been reunited under the same house, I regard both northerners and southerners to be my offspring, my subjects. Therefore, whether someone is appointed depends on his talent and merit, with no prejudice or bias whatsoever as to his regional background. Also, the northern and southern candidates were trained in the same education system. How come all the passed candidates happened to be northerners? We should pick at least one or two who come from Thua Thien southward, so that the southern literati could be encouraged”.²⁹ It was thanks to this decision by Minh Menh that Phan Thanh Gian, a southern doctoral laureate, was selected in this exam and later rose to the position of Minister of the Board of Rites, Board of Finance and Board of Justice.

In 1830, faced with the realities of the academic performance of the southern region, the imperial court decided that if those provinces from Thanh Hoa northward failed to recommend enough *Cống sinh* as required, officials’ salaries would be cut, three months for the head of the province and six months for the *Quốc Tử Giám* head official. For localities from Quang Binh southwards, however, the local official would only be given a reprimand instead of having his salary cut, as the number of excellent students remained low and “it would seem too harsh to apply the rule”.³⁰ Explaining his decision, Minh Menh said: “the land of Gia Dinh boasts many talented men, but recently due to a declined interest in academic pursuit, few distinguished scholars have been brought to attention. However, given the fact that this region was a recent cultural extension, the examination rules to be applied here “should be revised and relaxed”.³¹

Into the reign of Tu Duc, the situation did not witness any remarkable change. Tu Duc himself was aware of the insufficient and inefficient scholarly tradition of the south. In an imperial decree issued in 1853, the King said that, “recently in exams of different levels (*Chế khoa*,

²⁹ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Op cit, Vol. 2, p.489.

³⁰ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Op cit, Vol. 3, p.102.

³¹ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Ibid, Vol. 3, pp.309-310.

Hội khoa), few people from Quang Binh southward had their names on the pass list. From Phu Yen to Ha Tien, there were even fewer”.³²

In an effort to “bring the new southern land into the socio-political system of the whole country”³³, the Nguyen took different measures to boost and promote education in the south, although this policy was not strongly and explicitly enunciated. A further goal was to prepare sufficient personnel for the establishment of a government mechanism from local to central levels.

4.2. The Nguyen’s policies and measures to promote Confucian learning in southern Vietnam

Fully aware of the contradiction between the grave shortage of academically achieving people in the south and the increasing need for establishment of the bureaucracy through examinations, the Nguyen initiated various policies to close the numerical and quality gap in examination between the north and the south. In the following section, we will divide the events, activities, regulations related to education promotion in the south into three categories, namely *organization of learning, examination and appointment of successful candidates through examinations*.

4.2.1. Promoting learning and exam-taking in the South

(i) Appointing officials for learning

Understanding that “statesmanship relies to a great extent on talent and education”³⁴, the Nguyen decided that for the examination system to develop, it was necessary to firstly raise public interest in learning and organize learning activities in all localities. Therefore, one year after his

³² Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2007, *Administrative Records of Đại Nam* [Khâm định Đại Nam Hội điển sự lệ (tục biên)], Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol. 6, p.32.

³³ Vu Van Quan, Quach Thi Hoa, 2011, “Administrative Planning and Demographic and Land Management in Southern Vietnam under the Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1858)” [Quy hoạch hành chính và quản lý dân cư – đất đai ở Nam Bộ dưới thời Nguyễn (1802-1858)], in: *Some Issues of the Historical and Societal Process* (State-level scientific project: The Formation and Development of Southern Vietnam) [Một số vấn đề tiến trình lịch sử xã hội (Đề án Khoa học cấp Nhà nước: Quá trình hình thành và phát triển vùng đất Nam Bộ)], Thegioi Publishers, Hanoi, p.418.

³⁴ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Op cit, Vol. 1, p.574.

accession to the throne, King Gia Long approved an initiative made by Gia Dinh's head official Nguyen Van Nhan to choose in each of the local commune one man of literary dignity to teach the children in the commune in order to address the problem of Gia Dinh people "abandoning the pen".³⁵ Accordingly, "each commune was to choose a man of literary talent, exempt him from corvée, and ask him to teach the local children. Children from 8 years or above entered primary level, followed by learning of the *Book of Filial Piety* (Hiếu kinh) and *Book of Loyalty* (Trung kinh); from 12 years and above, they first learned the *Analects* (Luận Ngữ) and then *Mencius* (Mạnh Tử), then *The Doctrine of the Mean* (Trung Dung) and *The Great Learning* (Đại học). After 15 years of age, they started learning *Classic of Songs*, *Classic of Documents*, *Classic of Change*, *Record of Ritual* (Thi, Thư, Dịch Lễ), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (Xuân Thu)".³⁶

In 1805, the court appointed Truong Chi Ly, Vo Xuan Bieu, Hoang Cong Xuan as Chief of Education and Deputy Chief of Education of Gia Dinh. It was also in this year that the Gia Dinh School was completed.³⁷ In 1839, the district educational officers (*Huấn đạo*) were appointed to such districts as Phuoc Chanh, Binh An, Long Thanh (Bien Hoa), Tan Minh, Vinh Binh (Vinh Thanh), Kien Hung, Kien Đang (Đình Tuong) upon the proposal of Gia Dinh's chief official.³⁸

As for candidates, Tu Duc ordered in 1853 that the southern recommended men (*Cử nhân*) who were not known for academic excellence should be merged into provinces with more academically successful people in order to encourage learning. The order read, "The three provinces of Khanh Hoa, Bien Hoa, and Ha Tien have too few candidates. Therefore, I give my permission to let them work under the tutelage of the chiefs of education in neighbouring provinces such as Binh

³⁵ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Ibid, Vol. 1, p.574.

³⁶ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Ibid, Vol. 1, p.574.

³⁷ Cao Tu Thanh, 1996, *Confucianism in Gia Định* [Nho giáo ở Gia Định], Op cit, p.118.

³⁸ Cao Tu Thanh, 1996, *Confucianism in Gia Định* [Nho giáo ở Gia Định], Ibid, pp.120-121.

Thuan, Gia Định, and An Giang so that they can become better by learning from their peers and teachers”.³⁹

It was also in this year that the Nguyen court, realizing that students from Quang Binh southward to Ha Tien scored very low in the *Chế khoa* and *Hội khoa*, allowed the regional graduates and learners at localities to join the students at Thua Thien and other provinces, with the following numbers: 20 students for Thua Thien, 18 for Quang Nam, Binh Định, Vinh Long, 15 for Quang Binh, Quang Ngai, Định Tuong, An Giang, Quang Tri; 10 for Binh Thuan, Khanh Hoa, Bien Hoa, Ha Tien, Phu Yen”.⁴⁰ These people were granted by the court with salary and rice for learning. Two years later in 1855, Tu Duc set out a graduate quota for students in the mountainous areas of the north, including Cao Bang, Lang Son, Thai Nguyen, Tuyen Quang, Hung Hoa, Quang Yen, with 3 to 6 students apiece.⁴¹ In numerical terms, it seemed clear that the students who came from provinces of Quang Binh southward were given more preferential treatment.

In 1854, those candidates and recommended men of southern provinces like Gia Định, Định Tuong, Long Tuong, etc. who got high results in exams were selected as students of the provinces and were granted foods by the court according to their ranks in learning.⁴² Students of a province were taught by the education chief of that province. This procedure was implemented as part of a proposal submitted to Emperor Tu Duc by the Board of Rites, in which “by royal grace, and as an encouragement for education at the border regions, the students are added

³⁹ Vietnam’s Institute of History, Centre for Preservation of Hue Ancient Capital Complex, 2007. *Administrative Records of Đại Nam* [Khâm định Đại Nam Hội điển sự lệ (tục biên)], Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol. 6, p.33.

⁴⁰ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Education Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol. 7, pp.275-76.

⁴¹ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2007, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Ibid, Vol. 7, p.408.

⁴² State Archives Department, National Archives Centre I, 2004, *Inventory of Imperially Annotated Documents of the Nguyen* (Tu Duc VIII (1854) – Tu Duc IX (1855) [Mục lục châu bản triều Nguyễn (Tự Đức VIII (1854) – Tự Đức IX (1855))], Unpublished, stored at National Archives Centre I, Volumes 50 to 53, pp.499-500.

to the list of candidates at provincial schools and receive food and grants applicable to those who come from provinces of Quang Binh southward”.⁴³

Students who were of ethnic minority background in southern Vietnam were also entitled to education, enabling them to close the scholarly gap with their Kinh counterparts. The Nguyen wanted to use learning and examinations as a method of aligning the way of thinking and culture of the ethnic minority groups along the Confucian line.

(ii) *Setting up the Gia Dinh regional exam ground and enacting a flexible locally administered exam-taking policy (phụ thí)*

To assist candidates from the southern parts in competing in high exams, the Nguyen established an on-site/local exam ground, called the Regional Exam Ground of Gia Dinh, and enacted a flexible exam-taking policy.

The regional exam ground of Gia Dinh became functional in 1813, six years after the first regional exam under the Nguyen was held in 1807. The Gia Dinh exam ground hosted candidates from such regions as Binh Thuan, Phien An, Bien Hoa, Vinh Thanh, Dinh Tuong and Ha Tien. The ground was solidified with bricks and tiles in the 7th year under the reign of Thieu Tri (1846).⁴⁴ By the first year under the reign of Tu Duc (1848), the working sites of the proctors and examiners all had their roofs tiled, with four sections (called *vi*) of the ground separated by a wall.⁴⁵ The exam ground was situated on the land of Hoa Nghia Hamlet; west of Gia Dinh citadel, now part of the Youth Activities Centre at 9 Pham Ngoc Thach, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City.⁴⁶ The ground had a circumference of 193.6 *zhangs* with a fence of 4.5 metres. The Gia Dinh exam ground lasted 45

⁴³ State Archives Department, National Archives Centre I, 2004, *Inventory of Imperially Annotated Documents of the Nguyen* (Tu Duc X (1856) [Mục lục châu bản triều Nguyễn (Tự Đức X (1856))], Unpublished, stored at National Archives Centre I, Volumes 55 to 58, pp. 333-334.

⁴⁴ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Education Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol. 6, p.1034.

⁴⁵ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Op cit, Vol. 7, p.69.

⁴⁶ Nguyen Dinh Dau, 2002, “The Literati of Gia Định – Bình Dương” [Sĩ phu Gia Định – Bình Dương], in: *Historical Issues of the Last Dynasty in Vietnam* [Những vấn đề lịch sử về triều đại cuối cùng ở Việt Nam], Centre for Preservation of Hue Ancient Capital Complex, *Past and Present Journal*, Hue, p.127.

years, from 1813 to 1858 when the French colonizers invaded Vietnam. During its history, the Gia Dinh ground organized 19 exams from which 264 recommended men (Cử nhân).⁴⁷ According to the *An Giang Gazetteer*, in 1864 upon the conquer of three eastern parts of the southern provinces, the Nguyen moved the regional exam ground of Gia Dinh back to An Giang. However, only one exam was chosen for this year cohort and only ten candidates passed it.⁴⁸ The regional exam ground of An Giang was the last one to function in the south before this land fell completely into the hands of the French.⁴⁹

By convention, candidates for the regional exam had to return to their natal home villages to take the exam. Those who were caught of falsifying their names and places of birth would be dismissed even though they had passed the exam, be it baccalaureate, bachelor, or doctoral degree.⁵⁰ As for the southern student, the Nguyen applied a flexible policy with regard to choosing the exam venue. Specifically in 1821 Minh Menh allowed “candidates from Phu Yen southward to choose the place of exam at their discretion while those from Binh Dinh northward had to take the exam in their respective hometown”⁵¹, meaning that southern examinees could sit for exams right in the place they were residing without having to return to their villages of origin.

In 1834 the Nguyen retained the regulation that candidates who had been studying in a different province were to return to their native hometown to take exams. People who had been living for a long time in provinces from Bien Hoa southward, or born in the capital city, or residing in Tong Son district in provinces from Quang Binh southward were

⁴⁷ Statistics from *Book of Laureates at Regional Official Examinations* [Quốc triều Hương khoa lục], by Cao Xuan Duc.

⁴⁸ Statistics from *Book of Laureates at Regional Official Examinations* [Quốc triều Hương khoa lục], by Cao Xuan Duc.

⁴⁹ An Giang People’s Committee, 2007, *The Geography of An Giang* (draft) [Địa chí An Giang (Sơ thảo)], For internal circulation, p.92.

⁵⁰ Nguyen Dynasty Cabinet, 2005, *Administrative Records of Đại Nam* [Khâm định Đại Nam Hội điển sự lệ], Thuan Hoa Publishing House, Hue, Vol. IVB, p.80.

⁵¹ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Op cit, Vol. 2, p.136.

allowed to take exam right at their current place of residence, known locally as *phụ thí*.⁵²

This policy of *phụ thí* enabled the southern students to take exams in their current residence in places other than the south. A case in point was Nguyen Chinh, born in Phu My Tay hamlet, Binh Duong district, Tan Binh, Gia Dinh province. His father, who was appointed as *Cai đội* (military officer) of Hung Hoa province, took his son along. Upon retirement, his father did not return to the former natal village; instead, he asked the court to allow him to settle down permanently in Hung Hoa. In 1857, as it would be inconvenient to come back to Gia Dinh to take the regional exam, Nguyen Chinh asked for permission to sit for the exam in Hanoi. His request, however, got rejected by the Board of Rites and the royal court, as by regulation, he had to take the test in his village of origin. As he was making his journey back to Gia Dinh, the court changed its mind and allowed him to sit for the exam in the central province of Thua Thien, having decided that it was almost impossible for him to reach Gia Dinh in time for the exam day. As a result, Nguyen Chinh came out on top of this exam and in an ensuing exam in 1862 he went on to attain the Doctoral Laureate title (*Đệ tam giáp đồng Tiến sĩ xuất thân*). It was from this example that the Nguyen court issued a new regulation which read “from today onwards, children of officials serving in the six provinces of the south away from their homeland, who accompany their fathers or who are born in the new place, are allowed to register for exam in that very province if they have already passed the *Tú tài* exam. Otherwise, the local chief official is supposed to make a decision as appropriate”.⁵³

From 1858 onwards, as few southerners were interested in pursuing the academic path and the exam ground of Gia Dinh had fallen into disuse, Tu Duc allowed candidates of the six southern provinces to take exams in

⁵² Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Education Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol. 4, p.118.

⁵³ State Archives Department, National Archives Centre I, 2004, *Inventory of Imperially Annotated Documents of the Nguyen* (Tu Duc X (1856) – Tu Duc XI (1857) [Mục lục châu bản triều Nguyễn (Tự Đức X (1856) – Tự Đức XI (1857))], Unpublished, stored at National Archives Centre I, Volumes 90 to 95, p.52.

Thua Thien in order to save them from the inconveniences of having to return to their natal villages.⁵⁴

The policy of *phụ thí* made exam-taking easier for the southern student. It also reflected the Nguyen's policy of encouraging learning and endeavour in learning among southerners.

4.2.2. *Adjusting the method of administering and marking exams*

Under the Nguyen dynasty, the regulations at the exam site were extremely strict, from registration of candidates to preparation of exam questions, to delivery and marking of papers. However, there were certain "preferential treatment" in the process of administering and marking exams in the southern region.

In the regional exam of 1819, for example, when the exam-takers of Gia Dinh ground felt the question was too difficult for them, they made a real fuss on the spot and announced their intention to quit the exam right in the first round. Chief Examiner Ngo Vi and Proctor Tran Van Dai had to "replace the question with another easier one to return the situation to normal".⁵⁵

In 1834, as there were too many southern candidates taking the regional exam in Thua Thien, the court had their exam rolls numbered and colour-coded in order to make it easier for later classification. Students native to Thua Thien, Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Binh Dinh got yellow, blue, red, black, purple respectively while *those from Phu Yen southward received a green colour*. The passing number was predetermined at 30. Yellow, blue, black, purple had 6 passes apiece while red and green had 2 each.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2007, *Administrative Records of Đại Nam* [Khâm định Đại Nam Hội điển sự lệ (tục biên)], Op cit, Vol. 6, pp.72-73.

⁵⁵ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2002, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Op cit, Vol. 1, pp.993-994

⁵⁶ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Op cit, Vol. 4, p.180

In 1835, it was realized that during the metropolitan exam, the number of examinees who passed was “below average nationwide”⁵⁷, and that southern students were “at a certain disadvantage in terms of marks when they competed”⁵⁸, the court divided the regional exam into three parts ones. The smaller exam had two rounds that last one entire day each. *Cử nhân* (recommended men), *Giám sinh* (students in Quốc Tử Giám) in Thua Thien, Quang Nam and Quang Ngai (called *Nam trực* or ‘southern wing’), Quang Binh and Quang Tri (called *Bắc trực* or ‘northern wing’) and Binh Dinh to Binh Thuan (called *Tả kỳ* or ‘left side’) southward attended the same round. They were given separate questions, and were marked depending on the quality of their essay”.⁵⁹ According to this regulation, during the metropolitan exam, the northern and southern candidates took separate exams, thus helping southern students to avoid direct competition with their northern counterparts. Accordingly, in terms of time, in the first exam of the first round, the *Cử nhân* and *Giám sinh* of the capital, the wings and ‘*Tả kỳ*’ came back to the south to take the entrance exam on the 4th of March; in the second exam of the first round, the *Cử nhân* and *Giám sinh* from the “right side” (or *Hữu kỳ*) returned to the north to attend the entrance exam on the 6th. The first exam of the second round was on the 11th while the second exam of the second round was on the 13th. The first exam of the third round was on 19th while the second exam of the third round was on the 20th of March.⁶⁰ As we can see, in all the three exams, the northern and southern candidates did not sit for the exam on the same day. However, as it was decided that such administration of exam was in no way convenient, the Nguyen decided that northern and southern candidates were to take the exam on the same day, but in two different sites of the examination ground. Whenever it came to exam time, *Cử nhân* and *Giám sinh* in the capital city, the wings and Ta ky southward were to do the test

⁵⁷ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Ibid, Vol. 4, pp.508-09.

⁵⁸ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Ibid, Vol. 4, pp.508-09.

⁵⁹ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Ibid, Vol. 4, pp.508-09.

⁶⁰ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Ibid, Vol. 4, pp.508-11.

in the Giáp site while their counterparts in provinces from hữu kỳ northward were to do the test on the Ất site, and on the same day.⁶¹ The examiners might rely on the kind of site to determine whether they were marking essays written by the northern or southern candidate so that decisions of choice could be made.

In addition, under the reign of Tu Duc in 1852, after switching from the three-phased exam to a four-phased one, the king even allowed the exam ground of Gia Dinh “loosen the regulations and gave candidates more generous marks”.⁶²

4.2.3. *Increasing the passing rate/graduation quota*

Along with adjusting the method of administering and marking exams to suit the level of southern candidates and select southerners for officialdom, the Nguyen also increase the ‘pass’ quota (*giải ngạch lấy đỗ*) for *Cử nhân* of the south.

In the first dynastic year of Thieu Tri, 1841, the Nguyen began to fix the number of passed candidates in the exam grounds. This practice was referred to as the ‘pass’ quota. As such, the Thua Thien ground chose from the Nghe An ground, Hanoi, Nam Dinh and *Gia Dinh ground* were allowed to take 38, 25, 23, 21 and 16 *Recommended Men* (*Cử nhân*) respectively.⁶³ Under the reign of Thieu Tri, the passing rate of regional exam was determined based on the number of candidates competing locally, and by a ratio of 10 to 1⁶⁴ meaning that for every ten candidates, one would be selected. In 1846, as there was a huge turnout, the quota for Gia Dinh was made 20.⁶⁵ During the reign of Tu Duc, the quota for each exam ground was higher than that of the Thieu Tri era. Yet the Gia Dinh ground

⁶¹ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2004, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Ibid, Vol. 4, pp.508-11.

⁶² Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2007, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Op cit, Vol. 7, p.251.

⁶³ Cao Xuan Duc, 1993, *Book of Laureates at Regional Official Examinations* [Quốc triều Hương khoa lục], Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, p.207.

⁶⁴ State Archives Department, National Archives Centre I, 2004, *Inventory of Imperially Annotated Documents of the Nguyen* (Thieu Tri VI (1846) – Thieu Tri VII (1848) [Mục lục châu bản triều Nguyễn (Thieu Tri VI (1846) – Thieu Tri VII (1847))], Unpublished, stored at National Archives Centre I, Volumes 37 to 40, pp.208-209.

⁶⁵ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2007, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Education Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol. 6, p.914-915.

remained the place with the lowest number of successful *Cử nhân*, fluctuating from 9 to 20.

In numerical terms, the regional exam ground of Gia Dinh, as discussed earlier, had the lowest quota for *Cử nhân*. However, to determine whether the 9 to 20 quota of *Cử nhân* for Gia Dinh was significant or not in comparison with Gia Dinh itself and other provinces, we made a comparison between the number of people sitting for regional exams and the ‘pass’ quota in Gia Dinh and other exam grounds nationwide.

Imperially sealed administrative documents (*châu bản*) of the Nguyen provide us with sufficient information about the number of competitors nationwide in 1858, the final year before the regional exam ground of Gia Dinh stopped functioning. We rely on the following data for comparison and analysis.

*Number of candidates participating in the regional exam and the number of Cử nhân in the exam grounds of 1858*⁶⁶

Exam grounds	Number of candidates	The number of Cử nhân
Nghe An	3442	18
Hanoi	3381	22
Nam Dinh	3303	22
Thua Thien	3018	21
Thanh Hoa	1929	12
Binh Dinh	1531	13
Gia Dinh	683	9

The above table shows that the four most attended exam grounds were Nghe An, Hanoi, Nam Dinh and Thua Thien, with over 3,000 candidates and the quota for *Cử nhân* in these grounds also ranged between 18 and 22. Gia Dinh had the lowest number of examinees and ‘pass’ rate,

⁶⁶ State Archives Department, National Archives Centre I, 2004, *Inventory of Imperially Annotated Documents of the Nguyen* (Tu Duc X (1856) – Tu Duc XI (1857)) [*Mục lục châu bản triều Nguyễn* (Tự Đức X (1856) – Tự Đức XI (1857))], Unpublished, stored at National Archives Centre I, Volumes 96 to 100, pp.195-264.

638 and 9 respectively. The number of candidates at the four biggest exam grounds was fivefold that of Gia Dinh, but the number of *Cử nhân* was only between 2 and 2.4 times higher.

The table also shows that the ratios of candidates per *Cử nhân* in the exam grounds of Nghe An, Hanoi, Nam Dinh, Thua Thien, Thanh Hoa, Binh Dinh, Gia Dinh were 191/1, 153/1, 150/1, 143/1, 160/1, 117/1 and 75/1 respectively. These figures were close to King Tu Duc's regulation of "having 1 *Cử nhân* and 4 *Tú tài* out of every 200 candidates".⁶⁷ They also show the competition ratio between the candidates of the Gia Dinh regional exam ground was the lowest nationwide. The quota of 13 *Cử nhân* for Gia Dinh, as discussed earlier, was a significant number considering the number of candidates and the overall comparison with the northern and central regions which had strong academic traditions.

That is not to mention the fact that in this 1858 exam, if there had been 13 *Cử nhân* selected in the Gia Dinh exam ground instead of the actual figure of only 9, the 75/1 ratio would have been reduced to 52/1. Administrative documents evidence of the Nguyen dynasty and reports submitted to the court by the Board of Rites show that the number of southern candidates who succeeded as *Cử nhân* in reality was lower than the quota set by the imperial court. A case in point was in 1843 in the regional exam ground of Gia Dinh. When the number of *Cử nhân* selected was lower than the quota, the court decided to add Nguyen Duc Nhuan, who only succeeded as *Tú tài*, to the list of *Cử nhân*, "so that the quota is met".⁶⁸

In 1853, Tu Duc began to set quota for students from Quang Binh southward. In 1866, in an annotated decree that he approved with his own handwriting, King Tu Duc remarked that "provinces from Nghe An northward have a long academic tradition, and they often outnumber their

⁶⁷ State Archives Department, National Archives Centre I, 2004, *Inventory of Imperially Annotated Documents of the Nguyen* (Tu Duc XXIII (1869) [Mục lục châu bản triều Nguyễn (Tự Đức XXIII (1869))], Unpublished, stored at National Archives Centre I, Volumes 221 to 226, pp.91-92.

⁶⁸ Cao Xuan Duc, 1993, *Book of Laureates at Regional Official Examinations* [Quốc triều Hương khoa lục], Op cit, p.244.

southern counterparts in metropolitan exams by two to three times”.⁶⁹ As a result, the king allowed the regional exam examiners to take an additional number, but no more than five ‘passes’. “For provinces from Quang Binh southward, as the academic tradition remains relatively recent, each exam ground is allowed to take an additional 10 ‘passes’ to be proportional”.⁷⁰

It was thanks to these policies of regional encouragement by the Nguyen dynasty that officials who were of southern background increased significantly. Looking at the quota, the number of ‘passes’, one can conclude that the Nguyen had a policy to increase the number of ‘passes’ at the exam ground of Gia Dinh, from 8 under the reign of Gia Long to 16 in the exam of 1842, or even to 18 in 1846 under the reign of Thieu Tri. According to an estimate by Choi Byung Wook, within the space of 28 years (1813-1840), the Nguyen recruited a total of 912 *Cử nhân* nationwide, 94 of whom were of southern background, accounting for 10.31%. In the ensuing 10 years (1841-1850) another 113 southern *Cử nhân* (11.92%) out of 948 nationwide were selected.⁷¹ Philippe Langlet suggests that the proactiveness of the six provinces of southern Vietnam was reflected in the number of people who passed in the exams of Gia Dinh: under the reign of four kings, the annual average number rose from 1 to 3.7, then to 11.2 and 5.9. Therefore, these six provinces enjoy an increase of 2.5% in the national list of successful scholars throughout Vietnam.⁷²

⁶⁹ State Archives Department, National Archives Centre I, 2004, *Inventory of Imperially Annotated Documents of the Nguyen* (Tu Duc XIII (1869) [Mục lục châu bản triều Nguyễn (Tự Đức XIII (1869))], Unpublished, stored at National Archives Centre I, Volumes 221 to 226, p.91-92.

⁷⁰ State Archives Department, National Archives Centre I, 2004, *Inventory of Imperially Annotated Documents of the Nguyen* (Tu Duc XIII (1869) [Mục lục châu bản triều Nguyễn (Tự Đức XIII (1869))], Ibid, Volumes 221 to 226, p.91-92.

⁷¹ Choi Byung Wook, 2010, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng* [Vùng đất Nam Bộ dưới triều Minh Mạng], Op cit, p.198.

⁷² Philippe Langlet, 1995, “Some comments on native place of people passing Vietnamese court’s examinations (1802 – 1858)” [Một số nhận xét về xuất xứ của những người đỗ đạt qua các kỳ thi cử do triều đình Việt Nam tổ chức (1802-1858)], in: *90 years of Research on Vietnamese Culture and History* [90 năm nghiên cứu về văn hóa và lịch sử Việt Nam], Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, p.220.

4.2.4. Employing more southerners in the bureaucratic system

Apart from loosening the criteria in exams to attract more southerners, the Nguyen rulers also issued decrees to appoint an increasing number of southerners to positions in the government of different levels.

In the 13th year of Gia Long reign (1814), the king summoned the local tributes (Hương cống) who had passed the exams in the two grounds of Quang Duc and Gia Dinh and appointed them into *Cống sĩ viện*, saying the purpose was to “give them easy positions so that they have more time for further studies”.⁷³

In 1823, Minh Menh ordered the selection of *Sinh đồ* from Gia Dinh. Those who were capable of serving as an official would be recruited to positions in the six offices.⁷⁴ In 1834, he asked the local officials to include *Tú tài* from 40 years of age to return to the capital city for examination. Those who passed with distinction would be appointed as acting *Giáo thụ* (prefectural educational officer) while people who passed with average scores were appointed as *Huấn đạo* (district educational officer) and finally, those who finished with low levels in the provinces from Quang Binh southward served as *Hành tẩu* from Ha Tinh northward had to start all over again their academic career.⁷⁵

In 1838, Minh Menh issued an additional decree which read, “now the region of Tran Tay is in need of officials. The court hereby informs the serving officials, and ask them to disseminate this information, that from Quang Binh to Binh Thuan, all men of literary and calculation talent who wish to work for the court will be accepted, regardless of whether they were born in Quang Binh and Binh Thuan and between. Those who are living in the capital city will have their names registered by the Board of Personnel while those living in the vicinity of the capital (including *trực kỳ* and *tả kỳ*) will have their names recorded and recommended to the Board

⁷³ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2002, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Op cit, Vol. 1, p.888.

⁷⁴ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2002, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Op cit, Vol. 2, p.302.

⁷⁵ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 1972, *Essential Records of Minh Mệnh Reign* [Minh Mệnh chính yếu], Op cit, Vol. 1, p.180.

of Personnel, waiting for the court to send a special envoy to Trần Ninh for recruitment of the talented. These people are not very lucky in their official path, so I grant them mercy and privilege. You all should feel grateful and encouraged”.⁷⁶

The two foregoing events show that there were certain different policies in recruiting and employing the academically achieving people in the north and south. The southerners might perform slightly worse than their northern counterparts, yet they were still employed and appointed as official in the south. The requirements for officialdom in the north were more strict and demanding. In the north, of the 639 candidates who became *Cử nhân* after the regional exams between 1813 and 1879 in Thang Long (later known as Hanoi exam ground) described in the *Book of laureates at regional official examinations* (Quốc triều Hương khoa lục) by Cao Xuan Duc, 508 were appointed by the court to different positions in the bureaucratic system. Five turned down the offer, and 126 had no information recorded about their appointments. Similarly, out of 658 *Cử nhân* of the regional exam of Nam Dinh (exams between 1807 and 1897), 194 had no information about appointment recorded in Cao Xuan Duc’s book. Two hypotheses exist for this absence of information. First, when Cao Xuan Duc compiled his book, no information was available about the appointments of these 320 *Cử nhân*. Second, these people were not appointed to any position whatsoever in the mandarin state, hence the missing information in Cao Xuan Duc’s book under the ‘Titles’ chapter.

The first hypothesis is a strong one, given the fact that in the preface of his book, Cao Xuan Duc made it clear about his method of recording information related to the appointments of *Cử nhân*. He wrote: “those whose careers had ended would be described as ‘serving until that position and rank’; otherwise, there would be no description. Those whose careers are promising and who are still in service would be described as ‘currently assuming that title’; if some information is uncertain, it will be left

⁷⁶ Institute of Historiography (Quốc sử quán), 2002, *The Veritable Annals of Đại Nam* [Đại Nam thực lục], Education Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol. 5, p.398.

blank”.⁷⁷ In this case, it could have been that the 320 *Cử nhân* were appointed as officials, but as no information was available, Cao Xuan Duc was unable to note down in his book. However, one noteworthy point was that Cao Xuan Duc compiled this book on the basis of the work of some predecessors and “after he returned to Hue to assume the role of the Chief of the Academia Historica and Minister of the Board of Learning (bộ Học), which gave him access to original documents about exams stored in the highest level of archives in the current Nguyen dynasty”.⁷⁸ If the second hypothesis was true, we would have an ironic situation where while more than 300 *Cử nhân* of the north were not appointed to any position, or in other words “made redundant” waiting for appointment, the royal court still had to search high and low for talented men in the south through examinations as there were few worthy of appointment.

In a research by Vu Van Quan and his associates, it was pointed out clearly that of the 300 people who had served as officials in Gia Dinh, over 200 had been working here for a long time and in the government agencies there was an increasing presence of officials who rose to power through examinations. It is noticeable that most of these officials were natives of provinces from Thanh Hoa southward to Thua Thien. Few of them were rooted in the northern citadel, and they held only second-rate positions if any.⁷⁹ Similarly, in a paper titled “*19th Century Vietnam Confucianization in Historical Perspective Evidence from Palace Examination 1463-1883*” Nola Cooke posited, by examining the biography and official path of various mandarins in the Nguyen bureaucratic system, that people of the southern expanse (Đàng Trong) were given preferential treatment from the court in every position of the government agencies as well as in their officialdom.⁸⁰ These results allow us to link to our second hypothesis,

⁷⁷ Cao Xuan Duc, 1993, *Book of Laureates at Regional Official Examinations* [Quốc triều Hương khoa lục], Op cit, p.79.

⁷⁸ Cao Xuan Duc, 1993, *Book of Laureates at Regional Official examinations* [Quốc triều Hương khoa lục], Ibid, p.18.

⁷⁹ Vu Van Quan, Quach Thi Hoa, 2011, “Administrative Planning and Demographic and Land Management in Southern Vietnam under the Nguyen dynasty (1802-1858)” [Quy hoạch hành chính và quản lý dân cư – đất đai ở Nam Bộ dưới thời Nguyễn (1802-1858)], Op cit, p.415.

⁸⁰ Cooke, Nola, 1994, “19th Century Vietnam Confucianization in Historical Perspective Evidence from Palace Examination 1463-1883”, Op cit, p.227.

which is that the Nguyen court preferred the use of southerners to govern southern provinces even when there remain abundant distinguished scholars in the north. We believe that there is an intimate link between the three factors of training – examination – appointment in the education policies of the Nguyen. It could have been because of the intention to use and appoint people of southern extraction in the mandarinates that the Nguyen rulers, especially those in the early years of the dynasty, initiated corresponding policies with regard to learning and examination. Put another way, the Nguyen issued policies based on the demands of the reality, and to a certain extent, these policies had generated effective results.

4.3. Conclusion

Compared with the northern and central parts of Vietnam, the 274 *Cử nhân* of the south constituted a modest figure⁸¹, accounting for less than one tenth the number of *Cử nhân* in the central region and 5.3% of the national total.⁸² Besides, the number of southerners who became doctoral

⁸¹ Of the 274 southern *Cử nhân*, 11 were natives of other provinces who came to take exams on an ad hoc basis [cited in Nguyen Dinh Dau, 2002, “The Literati of Gia Định – Bình Dương” [Sĩ phu Gia Định – Bình Dương], in: Historical Issues of the Last Dynasty in Vietnam [Những vấn đề lịch sử về triều đại cuối cùng ở Việt Nam], Centre for Preservation of Hue Ancient Capital Complex, *Past and Present Journal*, Hue, p.218].

⁸² Please refer to the table below

Number of Cử nhân of the regional exam grounds under the Nguyen dynasty

Region	Exam ground	Number of passes	Total	%
Northern	Kinh Bac	7	2007	38.5%
	Son Tay	19		
	Son Nam	200		
	Hai Duong	5		
	Thang Long	130		
	Hanoi + Nam Định	1646		
Central	Nghe An, Thanh Hoa	1353	2939	56.3%
	Quang Duc	9		
	Truc Le	42		
	Thua Thien	1201		
	Binh Dinh	334		
Southern	Gia Dinh	264	274	5.3%
	An Giang	10		
Total			5220	100%

Source: Cao Xuan Duc, 1993, *Book of Laureates at Regional Official Examinations* [Quốc triều Hương khoa lục], Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House.

laureates or *Tiến sỹ* (literally Presented Scholar) under the Nguyen dynasty was also insignificant. That is also the reason why southern Vietnam was considered to be the least Confucianized land nationwide. On a broader perspective, it is not hard to see that while the Nguyen used “examinations as one means of official recruitment, the system never compared with that of the north”⁸³ as observed by Nola Cooke in her study on Vietnamese Confucianism of the 19th century.

However, if we put that figure of 274 *Cử nhân*, excluding *Tú tài*, in the context of a new land where Confucianism and Confucian learning remained relatively foreign and exotic, it will be easy to see the obvious effects of the efforts exerted by the Nguyen court over the promotion of Confucian learning in southern Vietnam. The Nguyen provided support, assistance and encouragement to southerners who pursued academic learning, examination and officialdom. This paper also proves that education is not restricted to its own domain; rather, it is intimately related to economic, societal, political and even cultural issues. By applying Confucian learning policies in the south, the Nguyen was actually exercising political, cultural and ideological influence over the region. While more sources of literature are needed to conclude with absolute certainty that a strong policy of “Confucianizing the South” was in place, what has been discussed in this paper allows us to make a tentative argument that the Nguyen at least wanted to carry out such a policy through the regulations and realities of implementing education in the south by the Nguyen rulers, in the belief that “policy formulation has to be based on the specific contexts of each locality”.⁸⁴ To use the words of Nola Cooke, the process of Confucianizing provides the key to understanding 19th century Vietnam and Nguyen rulers.⁸⁵ Although the level of Confucianization in the south was not equal to that of the northern and central parts, as the region participated in this process at a later stage, Confucianism had step by step gained a foothold and created its own imprint on the new land of southern Vietnam.

⁸³ Cooke, Nola, 1994, “19th Century Vietnam Confucianization in Historical Perspective Evidence from Palace Examination 1463-1883”, Op cit, p.282.

⁸⁴ State Archives Department, National Archives Centre I, 2004, *Inventory of imperially annotated documents of the Nguyen* (Tu Duc I (1848) – Tu Duc XV (1862) [Mục lục châu bản triều Nguyễn (Tự Đức I (1848) – Tự Đức XV (1862))], Unpublished, stored at National Archives Centre I, Volumes 369 to 378, p.153.

⁸⁵ Cooke, Nola, 1994, “19th Century Vietnam Confucianization in Historical Perspective Evidence from Palace Examination 1463-1883”, Op cit, p.271.