

# The Presence of Chinese Merchants in the Lạng Sơn Region of Vietnam during the Seventeenth Century

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## Introduction

The Lê dynasty was established in 1428 in northern Vietnam following independence from Chinese occupation in the early fifteenth century. Usurped by the Mạc in 1527, the Lê throne was restored in 1532 and the Red River delta was regained from the Mạc in 1592. In the early seventeenth century, the conflict between the Trịnh family and the Nguyễn family escalated within the Lê dynasty. In northern Vietnam, the Trịnh family—called *Chúa Trịnh* (Trịnh Lords)—usurped the authority of the Lê emperor and established its own court, *Vương phủ* (王府). The Nguyễn family, which had already established its base in central Vietnam in the late sixteenth century, began to establish its own independent kingdom. As a result, the Lê dynasty was bifurcated.

During “The Age of Commerce” (1450–1680), international trade in East and Southeast Asia flourished. In the case of northern Vietnam, from the 1600s to the 1630s, Japanese<sup>1</sup> and Portuguese<sup>2</sup> merchants sailed to northern Vietnam in order to procure silk products and ceramic wares for the Japanese market. After the Japanese government adopted its closed-door policy in the 1630s, however, the Dutch became major traders between Japan and northern Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> From the latter half of the 1640s, Chinese merchants took a dominant role in this trade. Northern Vietnam’s role in international trade peaked from the 1660s to the 1680s, when Chinese products such as textiles and ceramics were not exported to the international market because of the restrictive maritime policies imposed by the Qing rulers. However, after the Qing lifted restrictions on coastal and offshore trade in 1684, northern Vietnam lost its position in commercial traffic (Iioka, 2010: 49-58; 2011: 120-132).

Because of the aforementioned thriving international trade, urbanization progressed in northern Vietnam (Nguyễn Thanh Nhã, 2013: 214-246); in fact, in the contemporary capital of Thăng Long, handicraft artisans and merchants assembled from surrounding areas, which led to the development of a market network and, ultimately, a new commercial district (Chen Chinh-ho, 1970; Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, 1983; Sakurai, 2012). Furthermore, thriving maritime trade led to the development of a riverine commercial city, Phố Hiến, located on the left bank of the Red River. Phố Hiến played an intermediate role in the riverine traffic network from Tongking Gulf to Thăng Long, and Chinese and European merchants settled there from the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth centuries (Abe, 2013; Đỗ Thị Thùy Lan, 2015).

During the eighteenth century, Anthony Ried’s “Chinese century” thesis focused on the inflow of Chinese laborers into Southeast Asia through the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly their mining labor in Southwest China and mainland Southeast Asia (Reid, 1997; 2004). In northern Vietnam, as many previous studies have noted, large numbers of Chinese laborers worked at dozens of mines in the northern upland during the eighteenth century (Wada, 1961; Phan Huy Lê, 1963; Suzuki, 1975). Their large-scale mining activities there became a significant supplement to the state coffers during this period (Vũ Đường Luân, 2014, 35-39).

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<sup>1</sup> Under the *shuin-sen* (red seal vessels) system from 1604 to 1635, Japanese merchants played a pivotal role in commercial exchanges between Vietnam and Japan (Iwao, 1985: 347–357; Nagazumi, 2001: 152–169).

<sup>2</sup> After 1626, when the Macao-northern Vietnam route was inaugurated by Jesuit missionaries, the Portuguese in Macao maintained regular trade with northern Vietnam until the late 1660s (George Bryan Souza, 1986: 119).

<sup>3</sup> On Dutch commercial activities in northern Vietnam, see Hoang Anh Tuan’s work (2007).

Some scholars considered these phenomena to be factors in contemporary economic growth (Woodside, 1997; Lieberman, 2003, 435-440; Nguyễn Thanh Nhã, 2013); however, problems remain that have not yet been analyzed. First, although most scholars have focused on such famous commercial centers as Thăng Long and Phố Hiến, few have examined the economic situation of other regions. Second, although countless researchers have discussed maritime trade during the seventeenth century, few have highlighted the importance of contemporary inland trade in northern Vietnam.

In order to overcome these problems, above all, focus is needed on the economic situation of other non-notorious regions to accurately estimate the importance of maritime and/or inland trade for each region. Therefore, this article analyzes the economic situation of the Lạng Sơn region, located at the eastern end of northern Vietnam, and the influence of the inland commercial traffic between northern Vietnam and Guangxi in China, which previous studies have not yet analyzed. In this article, I focus on the formation of market towns, called *phố* (廂), in the Lạng Sơn region during the late seventeenth century. Although some researchers have also discussed *phố* as trading posts in the Sino-Vietnamese border area (Li Tana, 2012: 67-75; Vũ Đường Luân, 2014: 38) during the eighteenth century, they have not yet focused on the geographical characteristics of the specific region(s) and the background to the formation of *phố* within a local historical context.

## 1. The Formation of Market Towns in the Lạng Sơn Region

### 1.1 Geographical Characteristics of the Lạng Sơn Region

The Lạng Sơn region is located at the eastern end of northern Vietnam, bordering China's Guangxi province. Ethnic minorities (today called the Tày and Nùng people) make up the majority of the population in this region. The Lê dynasty relied on a number of hereditary chiefs to lead its administration (Ito, 2003: 43-48; Nguyễn Quang Huynh (chủ biên), 2011). Its border zone with Guangxi is a mountainous area, characterized by continual yet private traffic (Hasuda, 2005). The Kỳ Cùng River (淇窮江), which connects to the Zuo River (左江) in Guangxi, played a key role in the riverine traffic network in the region. In addition, the Lạng Sơn region was located on the tributary route to China during the Ming-Qing period. Tributary envoys to China passed through the region and entered Guangxi via Trần Nam pass (*Trần Nam Quan* [鎮南關]), which is today's Hữu Nghị pass. In 1721, a postal road from Thăng Long to Trần Nam pass was built along this route (Chen [ed.], 1986: 1050). Such geographical conditions indicate the importance of present-day Lạng Sơn city's central area where riverine traffic and the postal road intersect. The first market town in the Lạng Sơn region was also established in this area.

### 1.2 Formation of Kỳ Lừa Market

The first market town in the Lạng Sơn region recorded in Vietnamese sources is Kỳ Lừa market (*phố Kỳ Lừa* [駞驢廂]). According to *Lịch Triều Tạp Ký* (歷朝雜紀, "Miscellaneous Records of Successive Dynasties"), the order of Trịnh Cương (鄭綱), promulgated in 1717, designated Kỳ Lừa market as one of five market towns where foreign merchants were permitted to trade. Furthermore, this order referred to "those who have already resided for a long time" at these five market towns, which indicates that foreign merchants, mainly Chinese, resided at Kỳ Lừa market since the previous century (LTTK, vol.1).

Later sources record that a contemporary provincial official named Thân Công Tài (申公才) opened Kỳ Lừa market (ĐNNTC, 41, 32b; BTĐDCL, 11, 16b-17a). According to the Vietnamese chronicle *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (大越史記全書, "The Complete Annals of Đại Việt"), Thân Công Tài was granted the title of *Hán*

*Quận Công* (漢郡公) in 1665 (Chen (ed.), 1986: 981) and was said to govern Lạng Sơn province without staying in this region (ĐNNTC, 41, 32b).

In present-day Lạng Sơn city, there remains an inscription of *Tôn Sư Phụ Bi* (宗師父碑),<sup>4</sup> engraved when a shrine was built to commemorate Thân Công Tài in 1683. This inscription has four sides, the front and back of which detail how the *Tả Phủ* shrine was founded by Chinese merchants and the indigenous chiefs of the Lạng Sơn region. One of the inscriptions reads as follows:

Thân Công Tài was granted the title of Dispatched Grand Defender of the Northern Circuit, Vice Commissioner-in-Chief of the Chief Military Commission of the East, and Hán Commandery Duke. His family records are registered in Như Thiết commune, Yên Dũng prefecture, Lạng Giang province (today in Như Thiết village, Hồng Thái commune, Việt Yên prefecture, Bắc Giang province). [We engrave this inscription] about holding ceremonies and burning incense for him. Now, Phiên Tướng and Phụ Đạo (both are hereditary chiefs), officials, and civilians in Lạng Sơn region in the Northern Circuit, merchants from thirteen provinces in the Upper State (China) and [residents at] seven units, having respect [for Thân Công Tài], built the inscription and the shrine to show special respect ... and purchased fields to retain incense. Every year, we will cultivate these fields to hold ceremonies.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, hereditary chiefs in the region, Chinese merchants, and residents from seven districts (*phường*, 坊) built a shrine to commemorate Thân Công Tài and purchased fields to retain incense. The names of those involved in building the shrine are engraved on the left and right sides of *Tôn Sư Phụ Bi*. As for local hereditary chiefs, those worthy of note are the Nguyễn Đình family in Thoát Lãng prefecture (e.g., Nguyễn Đình Kế [阮廷繼]), the Nguyễn Đình family in Văn Uyên prefecture (e.g., Nguyễn Đình Bảo [阮廷宝]), and the Vi family in Lộc Bình prefecture (e.g., Vi Đức Thắng [韋德勝] and Vi Phúc An [韋福安]).<sup>6</sup> It is likely that several influential hereditary chiefs in the Lạng Sơn region were involved in building the shrine for Thân Công Tài.

In addition to the hereditary chiefs, the names of Chinese merchants from thirteen provinces in the Upper State were also engraved on the left side of *Tôn Sư Phụ Bi*. This indicates that they also were involved in building the shrine for Thân Công Tài. Meanwhile, the front side of *Tôn Sư Phụ Bi* states the following:

He died at 64, at an auspicious time on the eleventh of August, [1683], and was given the title of Left Commissioner-in-Chief. [During his lifetime] he had great achievement for the royal family (the Lê court). He assisted [the Lê emperor] and gained [the Lê emperor's] affection, as a result of which he was dispatched to [Vương phủ] and granted the post of Grand Defender of the Northern Circuit. He paid attention to consoling people and endeavored to abolish troublesome and cruel [regulations?], leading officials and people in the whole of [the Northern Circuit] to be afraid of his strictness and glad

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<sup>4</sup> This inscription remains inside *Tả Phủ* shrine in Hoàng Văn Thụ district of Lạng Sơn city. In March 2013 and December 2014, I visited *Tả Phủ* shrine in order to conduct a survey of this inscription. The height of this epitaph is 208 cm, and the length and the width are 75 cm each. Some local documents from present-day Lạng Sơn province also introduce the Vietnamese translation and the original text of this inscription; however, there are some errors in their texts, and—what is worse—these documents only introduce three of the four sides of the inscription (Sở Văn hóa Thông tin Lạng Sơn, 2012: 195-198; Ủy ban Nhân dân thị xã Lạng Sơn & Sở Văn hóa Thông tin Thể thao tỉnh Lạng Sơn, 1993: 22-27).

<sup>5</sup> The original text is as follows: “奉差北道鎮守官東軍都督府都督同知漢郡公申公才。籍在諒江府安勇縣如鉄社。爲立奉祠香火事。茲見北道諒山處各州藩將・輔導・官民與上國十三省商客并本國七坊等、有尊敬心、建立碑廟奉祠、殊深厚意□□、始買田土、留爲香火、通年耕種、歲時奉祀。”

<sup>6</sup> On their genealogies and achievements in Lạng Sơn region, see Nguyễn Quang Huynh (chủ biên), 2011.

of his virtue. Merchants from all directions made a fortune at markets and hoped to open their stores on streets because of [Thân Công Tài's] guidance and protection.<sup>7</sup>

This inscription refers to commercial development as one of Thân Công Tài's primary achievements; thanks to him, "merchants from all directions" made a fortune. If that was the case, the reason why these hereditary chiefs and Chinese merchants built the shrine for Thân Công Tài might have been that they benefitted from their commercial activities at Kỳ Lừa market. As such, it is clear that Chinese merchants were engaged in trading activity at Kỳ Lừa market during the late seventeenth century.

On his way to Beijing during the 1740s, Nguyễn Tông Khuê (阮宗奎)<sup>8</sup> recorded that Kỳ Lừa market "is filled with houses and stores, and is a center of precious goods from Guangdong and Guangxi," which indicates the existence of permanent stores (SHTV, 9a). It is likely that Kỳ Lừa market continued to thrive from its formation in the late seventeenth century through the middle eighteenth century.

## 2. Inland Trade between Northern Vietnam and Guangxi during the Late Seventeenth Century

### 2.1 The Lạng Sơn Region

Where inland trade is concerned, the late seventeenth century is also the period when Chinese merchants expanded their activities via Guangxi to the Lạng Sơn region. The following engraving on an iron bell (cast in 1697), which remains at Thành pagoda,<sup>9</sup> informs that the pagoda was originally a benevolent location for the Chinese (*Thập Tam Tỉnh Hội Quán* [十三省会館]), inside of which they enshrined Saintly Emperor Guan (*Quan Thánh Đế Quân* [關聖帝君]):

We collected funds to cast a bell. The bell weighs more than six hundred kins. We respectfully placed [the bell] in front of the temple in memory of Saintly Emperor Guan in the benevolent association for the Chinese from thirteen provinces to enshrine eternally.<sup>10</sup>

An inscription, *Diên Khánh Tự By Ký* (延慶寺碑記),<sup>11</sup> from 1796 at Thành pagoda, also mentions that they used to worship Saintly Emperor Guan at Diên Khánh pagoda (which refers to what is now called Thành pagoda).

Diên Khánh pagoda is located outside the northern gate of Đoàn Castle, called Hương Lâm pagoda in the past. Now, we changed its name to Diên Khánh. ... In old days, because [this area was] crowded with merchants and full of commodities, they constructed this pagoda together, worshipping Saintly

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<sup>7</sup> The original text written in classical Chinese is as follows: "...年八月十一日吉時命終、壽生享齡六十四歲、加贈左都督職。皇家功大、輔成日隆寵待、奉差爲北道鎮守官。心存撫恤、務止煩苛、闔境官民舉皆憚其嚴、樂其德。群方商旅咸願藏於市、出於塗、並有啓保。"

<sup>8</sup> He was dispatched to the Qing dynasty at the end of 1741 (Chen, 1986, 1109).

<sup>9</sup> The Hannom Institute made rubbings of this epigraph (No. 16172). In March 2013 and December 2014, I visited Thành pagoda in order to conduct a survey on this bell.

<sup>10</sup> The original text written in the classical Chinese is as follows: "募鑄洪鐘壹口。重陸佰餘觔恭就十三省會館關聖帝君殿前、永遠供奉。"

<sup>11</sup> In March 2013 and December 2014, I visited Thành pagoda in order to conduct a survey of this inscription. The height of this inscription is 104 cm; the width is 64.5 cm; and the thickness is 16 cm. The Hannom Institute made rubbings of this epigraph as well (No. 16170-16171).

Emperor Quan. I discover that in old days, they cast the iron bell in Đinh Sửu year. [This was] 125 years ago, but it still remains today. <sup>12</sup>

When the iron bell was cast during the late seventeenth century, Chinese merchants resided and/or engaged in business in the Lạng Sơn region.

## 2.2 Guangxi

At the end of the Ming period, in Guangxi—where the majority of natives concentrated on agriculture who rarely engaged in commercial activity resided (Tsukada, 2000: 203)—merchants settled in only some principal cities. From the early-to-mid-Qing period, however, they expanded from the eastern part of Guangxi and the coastal area of the Xi river (*Xi Jiang* [西江]) to the western part of Guangxi (Tsukada, 2000: 187-240). According to recent discoveries by Chinese researchers utilizing local epigraphs, Chinese merchants from outlying provinces, mainly Guangdong, expanded their activities along the Xi River and built benevolent associations (i.e., pagodas) at important points for riverine traffic (Teng Langhua, 2011: 115-161; Hou Xuanjie, 2011: 173-183). For example, in Longzhou (龍州), *Yuedong huiguan* (粵東會館), the association for those from Guangdong, was built in 1707, and *Lianghu huiguan* (兩湖會館), the association for those from Hebei and Henan, was built in 1814 (Teng Langhua, 2011: 267-268, 277-278). As such, the late seventeenth through the eighteenth century was the period during which the trading activities of Chinese merchants from outlying provinces, particularly Guangdong, expanded into Guangxi. The presence of settled Chinese merchants in the Lạng Sơn region during the seventeenth century is considered to be an extension of this phenomenon; in fact, in the Cao Bằng region, the temple in memory of Saintly Emperor Guan was also established in 1678 (CBTL, 48b), which indicates the expansion of the riverine activities of Chinese merchants during the late seventeenth century.

Chinese merchants expanded their activities along inland routes via Guangxi to the Lạng Sơn region in the late seventeenth century, when Kỳ Lừa market was first opened. In the Lạng Sơn region, a market town was established against the background of the development of inland trade between northern Vietnam and China during the late seventeenth century.

## Concluding Remarks

In this article, I investigate the economic situation of the Lạng Sơn region, focusing the influence of the inland commercial traffic between northern Vietnam and Guangxi in China. In the late seventeenth century, Chinese merchants expanded their activities along inland routes via Guangxi to the Lạng Sơn region, leading to the establishment of benevolent associations (e.g., pagodas) and temples in memory of Saintly Emperor Guan for the Chinese. Against the background of the development of Sino-Vietnamese inland trade, Kỳ Lừa market was opened in the area where riverine traffic (Kỳ Cùng River) and overland traffic (postal road) intersected. The remarkable presence of Chinese merchants in the Lạng Sơn region in the late seventeenth century is a fact often overlooked by historians dealing with this time and place, and one deserving of greater attention.

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<sup>12</sup> The original text written in the classical Chinese is as follows: “延慶寺、在團城北門之外。昔號香林寺。今改爲延慶。... 昔時商客輳集、物力豐盛、相與構築斯寺、專奉關聖帝君。按、舊鑄鐵鍾歲在丁丑。距今一百二十五年、宛存。”

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