Confucian ethics and politics: meritocracy in Vietnam during the Early Le Dynasty (1428-1527)

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Abstract
Confucianism, a widely used philosophical system in Vietnam at the period, had a major impact on the Early Le Dynasty's philosophy of appreciating and using gifted people. This was the time when Confucian intellectuals had clear ideas of gifted people who were supposed to have moral qualities in addition to their skills. These people were skilled in the arts and culture but, more significantly, they were political and administratively savvy. This philosophy of appreciating gifted people helped the Early Le Dynasty go through an amazing period of progress and was important for later Vietnamese historical eras.
Key words: meritocracy, talent (talented individuals), confucianism, confucian Ethics and politics, Early Le Dynasty

1. Introduction

In Vietnamese history, the Early Le Dynasty in general, including the pool of talented individuals trained, selected, and utilized by the Early Le Dynasty in its early stages, built a peaceful society with a developing country, reaching the pinnacle of prosperity in the history of Vietnam's feudal regime. However, in the later stage, when the ideology of valuing talented individuals was not updated to suit the new situation and the practice of utilizing talented individuals was neglected, the Early Le Dynasty fell into crisis and collapsed in 1527.

The thinkers of the Early Le Dynasty unanimously agreed that talented individuals were those who possessed both moral virtues and abilities. These two qualities were equally important, indispensable, and manifested through the individual's effective performance. Valuing talented individuals meant trusting in their talent and virtue, reflected in: focusing on training talented individuals; selecting talented individuals; assigning tasks, evaluating fairly, and treating them appropriately.

There have been several research works on this topic. Bui Van Nguyen, in his book "Patriotism in Literature during the Lam Son Uprising" (Bui, 1980), affirmed that the thinkers of the Early Le Dynasty conceived talented individuals - the scholars - as people who possessed three virtues: wisdom, benevolence, and courage. They were considered the "pillars of the nation" with the mission to rebuild a peaceful and prosperous Dai Viet.

The book "History of Vietnamese Thought" (Nguyen, 1993), edited by Nguyen Tai Thu, delved into researching the thoughts and actions of some representative thinkers of 15th century Vietnam such as Nguyen Trai, Le Thanh Tong, and historians, thereby clarifying their views on human morality and the role of the gentleman in society.

Research on Early Le Dynasty's conception of the purpose and role of education: In the book "Lectures on Eastern Thought" (Tran, 2002), author Tran Dinh Huou argued that the purpose of Confucian education in Vietnamese feudal dynasties in general, and the Early Le Dynasty in particular, was to help people "understand the classics/ enlightened in the classics" (明經) - grasp the Confucian political line, and "focuses on good writing" (能文) - know how to create literature to motivate the people.

The book "A Brief Study on the Experience of Discovering, Training, and Utilizing Talented Individuals in Vietnamese History" (Pham, 2005), edited by Pham Hong Tung, identified the purpose of Confucian education in feudal Vietnam as training virtuous and talented individuals, building an ideal society, while analyzing the

process of selecting talented individuals in Vietnamese history in general, including the Early Le period.

Nguyen Q. Thang, in his book "Imperial Examinations and Education in Vietnam" (Nguyen, 2005), studied the Confucian examinations during the Early Le Dynasty to select officials. The author affirmed that through these examinations, the Early Le Dynasty discovered many outstanding talents with profound knowledge for the country.

The aforementioned works have affirmed the role of talented individuals in the prosperity of the Early Le Dynasty, identified Confucian education as the fundamental means of training talented individuals, and recognized Confucian examinations as the channel for providing talented human resources for the state administrative apparatus. However, these studies also noted the shortcomings of education in training talented individuals, which emphasized literature and poetry with rote learning, little critical thinking, and minimal focus on logical reasoning. Nevertheless, no study has yet analyzed the ideology of valuing talented individuals during the Early Le Dynasty in connection with Confucian ethics and politics, which is manifested in two main aspects: what defines a talented individual and the necessity of utilizing talented individuals.

Methodology, Aim and Scope

In order to offer a thorough grasp of the philosophy of appreciating talented people during the Early Le Dynasty, this work uses a mixed-methods methodology that combines quantitative data from archival sources with qualitative study of historical texts. Official records, decrees, and exam records are considered primary sources; academic publications and articles that address meritocracy and Confucianism in historical settings are considered secondary sources.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the Early Le Dynasty philosophy of rewarding gifted people, emphasizing its Confucian ethical roots and its consequences for society growth and government. Examined are the methods of training and choosing gifted people, the conceptual framework of ability and virtue as described by Confucian intellectuals, and the effects of these methods on the wealth and ultimate fall of the Early Le Dynasty. Drawing lessons from this historical era that can be used to current debates on meritocracy and talent management in governance is another goal of this work.

2. Conception of Talented Individuals

Thinkers in Vietnamese feudal history in general, and during the Early Le Dynasty in particular, all advocated using morality to govern the country. Nguyen Trai, a representative thinker of the Early Le Dynasty, believed that "if the king wants to rest with the people, he must ultimately use civilian rule (文治) to build a peaceful state" (Mai, 2001a: 151). This principle influenced the thinkers' conception of talented individuals.

During the Early Le Dynasty, talented individuals were referred to by various terms such as: heroes, great men, gentlemen, individuals of wisdom, strategy, talent and virtue, virtuous people, talented people, etc. However, thinkers unanimously agreed that talented individuals were those who fully possessed two qualities: talent and virtue. Specifically:

Firstly, talented individuals are those with abilities and talents. Their talents are manifested in: having knowledge; possessing methods of thinking, strategy, practical organizational skills, strategic vision; having the ability to perceive the laws of motion in nature and society, thus knowing how to act according to the times.

Talented individuals are knowledgeable, including Confucian knowledge and practical knowledge about contemporary national salvation and nation-building

efforts. According to Le Thanh Tong, this knowledge is not limited to familiarity with the books of sages, but also helps solve practical problems, such as teaching people to plant rice, emperor Wu managing water, Yi Yin and Zhou Gong helping the king build the nation (Nguyen, 1993: 304).

Talented individuals also possess methods of thinking, strategy, practical organizational skills, and strategic vision. Nguyen Trai believed that wise individuals must "recognize matters before they manifest" (Mai, 2001a: 507), planning great things through small actions. Thus, talented individuals can see things and events in motion and in relationships, thereby often achieving high effectiveness in their activities.

Talented individuals are also those who can perceive the laws of motion in nature and society, thus knowing when to advance or retreat, act or remain inactive according to the times. Nguyen Trai himself was an exemplar of understanding this law. Therefore, when the time was not right, he secluded himself to write “Strategy for Defeating the Wu” (平吳冊). When he met an enlightened king, he devoted himself wholeheartedly, and even when suspected by the king, he remained at ease "teaching a few Confucian scholars in the neighborhood".

Secondly, talented individuals must possess virtue. The virtue of talented individuals is manifested in noble qualities such as benevolence, righteousness, patriotism, love for the people, etc. Emphasizing the importance of virtue, Nguyen Trai believed that those who rely on virtue will be supported by heaven, earth, and people, thus "relying on virtue is good, relying on force is deadly" (Mai, 2001a: 713).

Given the crucial role of morality, the issue of cultivating morality was emphasized by thinkers. Right at the founding of the dynasty, to prevent a mindset of rest and indulgence, Le Thai To issued a series of edicts admonishing talented individuals and officials to cultivate their morality. He required the court officials to "serve the king with utmost loyalty, treat the people with complete harmony, abandon corrupt habits, eliminate laziness. Private factions must be ended; attitudes of deliberate violations must be abandoned. Regard the affairs of the state as one's own affairs; take the concerns of the people's livelihood as one's own concerns" (Mai, 2001b: 142).

In the Early Le Dynasty's conception, the talent of a gifted individual is inseparable from virtue. Both talent and virtue are indispensable values that do not exist separately or distinctly, but must be intertwined and equally necessary. Nguyen Trai stated: "A person without virtue and talent / Upon reflection, is lacking in both" (Mai, 2001c: 647).

Thirdly, the thinkers of the Early Le Dynasty unanimously agreed that whether a person is considered talented or not must be based on the practical effectiveness of their performance when entrusted with a specific important responsibility. Effectiveness is judged in terms of benefit to the country, the king, and the people. Nguyen Trai affirmed that the true meaning of knowledge must be manifested in "pursuing the righteousness of books" rather than just stopping at understanding. The kings of the Early Le Dynasty also believed that "those who hold the power to shepherd the people must ensure that where they govern, the people are well-fed and the foundations are stable" (Trinh, 2006: 47).

Not only affirming the talent and virtue of gifted individuals, the thinkers of the Early Le Dynasty also concretized talent and virtue through specific qualities (benevolence, wisdom, courage), in specific relationships (with the Way, with people, and with the talented individual themselves).

According to the representatives of this period, a talented person is one who has "benevolence" in the sense of love for people, especially those who labor and suffer. Because of their benevolence, they know "to think and do things that are lenient to the people". Benevolence is typically manifested in the ideal of practicing humaneness and righteousness. Therefore, the career of an enlightened ruler must be associated with humaneness and righteousness, "the deeper the humaneness and righteousness,

the farther the influence" (National Historiographer's Office of the Nguyen Dynasty, 2004: 309).

Talented individuals are also those with wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to know people, understand people, and strategize. Emphasizing the importance of wisdom, Nguyen Trai believed that Le Thach was a good general, with courage and benevolence, but because he lacked wisdom, he fell into a trap and was defeated (Mai, 2001b: 324). Nguyen Truc (1417-1473) believed that: "Without Wisdom, one cannot understand people", a ruler "who uses Wisdom to understand people can understand clearly and fully" (Le, 1998: 253).

The long and difficult mission of national liberation and nation-building requires talented individuals to have "courage". Courage is the willingness to accept difficulties and risks, to dare to innovate in thinking, and to persevere in achieving one's aspirations. Le Loi, when faced with chaotic times, took over twenty years to achieve great success but never lost heart, because he had courage and the belief that one must go through hardships to "become a true person".

In the conception of the Early Le Dynasty thinkers, benevolence - wisdom - courage were considered the fundamental qualities of talented individuals. When evaluating Le Loi, Nguyen Trai believed that Le Loi was a talented individual who possessed all three of these virtues, which led to his success.

The thinkers of the Early Le Dynasty also discussed how the talent and virtue of gifted individuals are manifested in their serious and standard behavior in relation to the Way, to others, and to themselves.

The relationship of talented individuals with the Way includes both the Way of Heaven and the Way of Humans. The Way of Heaven, or the principle of Heaven, is understood as the law of motion in nature, "without personal intent", enduring but flexible. The Way of Heaven manifests in society as the trend of history. The Way of Humans refers to social laws (the will of the people, public opinion), and the good moral values that people believe in. The Way of Heaven and the Way of Humans share the common point of aiming towards the ideal of humaneness and righteousness. Nguyen Trai argued: "Heaven's virtue favors life, the spirit's power does not kill. Raising an army of humaneness and righteousness is essentially to bring peace to the people. Those who follow this principle will encounter all kinds of blessings, those who go against it will stumble upon calamities" (Mai, 2001a: 655).

The thinkers of the Early Le Dynasty believed that although the Way of Heaven and the Way of Humans exist objectively, they have the ability to "resonate" with humans. Heaven supports the humane and righteous and brings calamities upon the brutal. Heaven reveals its will through natural phenomena such as storms, floods, droughts, favorable weather, etc. The Way of Humans is manifested in the compliance or evasion of subordinates to the orders of those in power. In a letter to an enemy general, Nguyen Trai said: "The disaster of the sinking ship the other day was a clear warning from Heaven. Then on the march, soldiers deserted and died in droves, showing that the people's resentment is even clearer... With Heaven's will and people's hearts like this, if you still insist on going against it, isn't it right that you bring defeat upon yourselves?" (Mai, 2001a, 700).

From this argument, the thinkers believed that to succeed, a gentleman needs to recognize and act in accordance with the Way. The gentleman's ability to perceive the Way is manifested in the awareness of the word "time" and actions that are "in harmony with time". The idea of requiring talented individuals to "adapt to changes according to the times, and measure one's strength to conduct oneself" is repeated many times.

Not only believing that humans must conform to the Way, the thinkers also emphasized human proactivity based on righteousness. Nguyen Trai believed that Heaven sets up many difficulties and dangers to test and entrust great missions to

talented individuals, therefore, talented individuals need to have faith in themselves. Ngo Si Lien also affirmed that human strength can overcome dangers. Through many historical pages, it can be seen that from the belief in humans, Ngo Si Lien in particular, and historians of this period in general, approached the view that "human determination can triumph over Heaven". However, this "only applies to the elite in society, identified as representative talents - the 'Son of Heaven' (king)" (Nguyen, 2016: 103).

The relationship of talented individuals with others was also of concern to the thinkers of the Early Le Dynasty. Besides, the relationship of talented individuals with the country and the people; the relationship between king and subject; the relationship among colleagues; and the relationship with oneself are very important.

The history of the Early Le Dynasty is a history of struggle for national independence and nation-building, so the thinkers of this period all believed that: those considered talented must have love for the country, compassion for the people, and work for the people and the country. This sentiment must be typically expressed in the sense of pride, affirming national sovereignty (Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Wu); in the unceasing awareness, determination not to let an inch of ancestral land fall into the hands of the enemy (Le Thanh Tong). The patriotism of talented individuals must be linked with love for the people. Therefore, although "weapons are violent things, and fighting is dangerous business" (Mai, 2001a: 721), talented individuals must seek lasting peace for the sake of the people.

The relationship between the king and his subjects is the core relationship of Confucian society. Talented individuals can be either the king or subjects. When talented individuals hold any "title", they must act according to the way of that title. In the Early Le Dynasty, the king was seen as the center in relation to heaven and earth, all things and people; as the one who "establishes standards on behalf of Heaven, accumulates blessings to bestow upon the people" (Mai, 2001b: 175). The king implements his rule through the corps of officials (subjects). Therefore, to govern effectively, the king must handle well the relationship with officials. According to the thinkers of this period, the king needs to: *First*, make every effort, fulfill the way of the king: "All the essential things about keeping the country and commanding the army, the methods of self-cultivation and governing the country, must be done with effort, never neglecting" (Mai, 2001b: 184); *Second*, the king needs to "maintain affection" in treating his subjects, so that "the bond is like that of flesh and blood", thus winning people's hearts, "everyone will gladly follow" (Mai, 2001b: 361). At the same time, the king must be impartial in his treatment; Third, to do so, the king must be an exemplar of self-cultivation to become an "enlightened ruler". Only then can the king fulfill the mission of ruling the country, ensuring a stable foundation and the people's peace of mind.

Regarding the relationship of subjects to the king, the thinkers basically affirmed that subjects and talented individuals must be loyal to the king. The reality of the Early Le Dynasty showed that even if a person was considered talented, if suspected of disloyalty, they would be punished, even executed. Nguyen Trai believed that subjects must remain loyal, even if the world and times change, or their own fortunes rise and fall, subjects must always maintain loyalty, never wavering: "Grinding does not wear away, dyeing does not turn black." (Mai, 2001c: 800).

However, the thinkers of the Early Le Dynasty all determined that loyalty to the king must be linked with patriotism. That is, only be loyal to a king who works for the people and the country. Therefore, the loyalty of talented individuals is manifested in the responsibility of subjects who know how to find ways to bring benefits to the people. In times of war, subjects must fight off enemies, seeking to wash away national humiliation. In peacetime, "those who hold official positions must know how to follow the king's will above, implement benevolent governance below, not cover up evil within, and not form factions without" (Mai, 2001b: 141-142). Ngo Si Lien

believed that talented individuals "when in office do not hide straightforward words,... Although straightforward words often offend the king's ears, they benefit the king's person" (National Historiographer's Office of the Nguyen Dynasty, 2004: 173). Thus, in the thinkers' conception, loyalty to the king is essentially responsibility to the country and the people.

The relationship between talented individuals serving as officials in the court (collegial relationships) was also of concern to the Early Le Dynasty thinkers. They believed that the unity and consensus of officials and talented individuals in carrying out their duties is a fundamental condition for protecting the dynasty and building the country. To achieve this, the thinkers required: First, each person should maintain the Way and keep a heart of benevolence and righteousness. From there, each person should be willing to suffer for themselves. Nguyen Trai called: "In the world of yielding to each other, all things are beautiful, / Both hardness and softness are fully understood on both sides" (Mai, 2001c: 969); Second, one should not treat others without benevolence and righteousness for material benefits: "Do not covet small profits that lead to hardship" (Mai, 2001c: 973); Third, each person should prioritize the common interest to "work together with all their might".

The thinkers of the Early Le Dynasty affirmed that the qualities of talent and virtue in talented individuals are not innate but must be acquired through a long process of self-cultivation. Therefore, in the relationship of talented individuals with themselves, the thinkers emphasized the principle of self-cultivation. In practicing self-cultivation, talented individuals need to maintain their nature by being content, not obsessing over fame and fortune: "Being content, one will not bring shame upon oneself" (Mai, 2001c: 1017). At the same time, talented individuals need to continuously cultivate knowledge to become masters and craftsmen, cultivate morality, keep their minds calm and serene in the face of life's changes and the ups and downs of human hearts: "The heart of a gentleman, a sage is like water" (Mai, 2001c: 1049). Le Thanh Tong advocated that people should limit personal ambition.

Thus, from the above research results, it can be affirmed that during the Early Le Dynasty, talented individuals were conceived as people with qualities of talent and virtue who, under certain conditions, through their creative activities, achieved relatively great successes, contributing to the overall development of the country.

3. The Necessity of Valuing and Utilizing Talented Individuals

Valuing and utilizing talented individuals can be understood as respecting the abilities and qualities of people. Valuing and utilizing talented individuals is manifested in basic aspects such as: training talented individuals; selecting talented individuals; utilizing talented individuals; treating talented individuals well; and requirements for those in charge of valuing and utilizing talented individuals.

Valuing and utilizing talented individuals was early on considered by the thinkers of the Early Le Dynasty as an urgent and necessary task for those in power. This is because talented individuals play an especially important role in the cause of national liberation and nation-building. Talented individuals are, in Nguyen Trai's words, those who "make the country as stable as Thai Son mountain, and the foundation as solid as a stone slab".

Firstly, talented individuals play an important role in the cause of national liberation. This was affirmed not only through written thoughts but also through the actual practice of defending the country at the time. In 1427, Le Loi issued an Edict to persuade heroes, affirming the importance of talented people in the cause of expelling the Ming invaders and liberating the nation: "All the citadels have been destroyed, only the Dong Quan citadel has not fallen. Because of this, I cannot sleep peacefully, cannot eat with pleasure, thinking day and night, my heart and liver drying up. Yet beside me, there are still no helpers (...) Therefore, I humbly and sincerely advise the

heroes (...) If there is anyone with high integrity like the Tu Hao, or in seclusion like Tu Phong, please come out to save the people from distress" (National Historiographer's Office of the Nguyen Dynasty, 2004: 289).

Secondly, talented individuals play an important role in the cause of nation-building. In the perception of the representatives of the Early Le Dynasty, talented individuals hold the position of pillars, the foundation for building a peaceful and prosperous country. Talented individuals can contribute to creating certain turning points and developments for the state and nation. Therefore, if their talents are mobilized and promoted to a high degree, it will contribute significantly to consolidating the dynasty's rule and developing the country in all aspects.

In 1429, right after coming to power, Le Thai To affirmed: "Prosperity must lie in appointing the virtuous" (Mai, 2001b: 126). Le Thai Tong continued to emphasize the view: "Governing the country must take talented individuals as the foundation" (Le, 1998: 241). By the time of Le Thanh Tong, he believed that: "The gentleman is the root for advancing to peace and prosperity" (National Historiographer's Office of the Nguyen Dynasty, 2004: 426), therefore, "for long-term peace and prosperity to unfold, if there are not abundant talented people, how can there be peace and prosperity" (Lam, 1993: 76).

The thought of emphasizing the role and affirming the necessity of valuing and utilizing talented individuals in developing the dynasty and the country was summarized in the "Inscription on the Names of Doctoral Graduates of the Nham Tuat Examination" written by Than Nhan Trung in 1484: "Virtuous and talented men are the primordial vitality of a State. If this vitality is strong, the State will be powerful and prosperous. If it is not, the State will weaken and have a low standing." (Trinh, 2006: 27-28). Here, we see the elevation of talented individuals to the utmost, talented individuals are seen as the elite force, playing a particularly important role in the prosperity of the country. From there, it requires the rulers, if they want to build a strong dynasty and country, to select and use talented people in all fields.

Thirdly, the thinkers of this period, as well as the historical practice of the Early Le Dynasty, contributed to affirming that: if talented people are not used, the country will fall into difficult situations, if the wrong people are used or talents are not properly promoted, the country could be lost, as Le Thai Tong pointed out the harm of misusing people could lead to the collapse of the dynasty (Le, 1998: 242). History has proven that for kings of the Early Le Dynasty who did not focus on valuing and utilizing talented individuals, or used talented individuals improperly, it was very easy to lead to a situation where subjects usurped power or even seized the throne. It can be affirmed that in the conception of the thinkers of the Early Le Dynasty:

Meritocracy play an important role in the cause of national liberation and the development of the dynasty and the country. Making good use of talented individuals is a political requirement, an inevitable demand.

4. Values and Historical Limitations of the Ideology of Valuing and Utilizing Talented Individuals in the Early Le Dynasty

4.1 Theoretical Value of the Ideology of Valuing and Utilizing Talented Individuals in the Early Le Dynasty

During this period, thinkers put forth a perspective on "talented individuals" and basic criteria for identifying a "talented individual". Qualitatively, these were people with knowledge, abilities, and outstanding moral qualities. Quantitatively, these were people who demonstrated their talents and virtues in their work, in the effectiveness of their practical activities, and in their standard behavior in relationships with the Way, society, others, and themselves. Along with presenting the concept of talented individuals, the thinkers affirmed the role of talented individuals in the cause of protecting and building the country, meaning that in all periods, whether in war or peace, in prosperity or chaos, talented individuals are always the "vital energy" of the

nation, the force playing a pivotal role in protecting, building, and directing the country's development. Therefore, national leaders, if they want their dynasty to endure and the country to develop, must inevitably value and utilize talented individuals.

The ideology of valuing and utilizing talented individuals in the Early Le Dynasty was manifested first in setting the requirement for proactively developing education in a disciplined, rigorous, and universal direction, aiming to train a large number of talented individuals of good quality to supply the bureaucratic monarchical state. In education and training, the thinkers of the Early Le Dynasty emphasized the content of imparting knowledge and Confucian ethical standards. Thus, the thinkers of the Early Le Dynasty wanted to use education as a means to build a large pool of talented individuals, the intellectual class of the nation, but not an independent class, rather "engaged" talented individuals closely tied to the court. These were people capable of executing the governance of the people and the tasks assigned by the court.

The thinkers of the Early Le Dynasty also proposed diverse methods for selecting talented individuals, based on the principle: focusing on talent and virtue, not overly emphasizing the origin of birth. The basic methods of selecting talented individuals in this period included: examinations, recommendations, and nominations with increasingly rigorous and scientific regulations. Notably, under the Early Le Dynasty, examinations were the main path to join the ranks of officials. In principle, all members of all social classes, through their talent, education, and virtue, could succeed through examinations and advance in the officialdom. The idea of equality in advancement and selection of talented individuals for official positions based on educational level clearly shows the superiority in the ideology of the Early Le Dynasty compared to previous periods. It also shows that the thinkers wanted to change from the policy of "appointing based on family relations" (nhiệm nhân duy thân), which was predominant in the Ly and Tran dynasties, to "appointing based on talent and virtue" (nhiệm nhân duy hiền) as the main approach.

Along with the ideas of training and selecting talented individuals, the representatives of the Early Le Dynasty also put forth ideas on using talented individuals in a strict and orderly manner. Notably, from the beginning, the State had a policy of establishing a specialized agency for appointing and using talented individuals; building a scientific process for using talented individuals, accompanied by a diverse, multi-dimensional inspection and examination system.

The ideology of inspecting and examining talented individuals in the Early Le Dynasty has many valuable points. To inspect and examine talented individuals, the Early Le Dynasty proposed both external inspection and supervision systems (through the Six Departments, Imperial Censorate, imperial envoy system) and internal organizational inspection and supervision (examinations, periodic assessments). A special feature of the external inspection and supervision system in the Early Le Dynasty was that the inspection and supervision agencies were independent of the agencies being inspected and supervised. They were directly responsible only to the king. This broad authority and independence created real power, allowing them to evaluate and recruit talent objectively. The distinctive feature of the "internal" inspection and supervision system was: Before Le Thanh Tong's time, the idea of examinations and assessments had appeared, but mainly focused on official duties and the results of inspections and supervision were only to ensure the effectiveness of the king's orders. Under Le Thanh Tong, the examination system targeted officials, with the purpose of re-selecting officials. The talent examination system brought practical results. It encouraged officials to work actively, maintain self-respect, and avoid breaking the law to not be deemed "unworthy of office".

Another valuable idea in talent utilization during the Early Le dynasty was the introduction and application of the recusal system in both the selection and use of officials to prevent corruption in the state's employment of talent.

To encourage talented individuals to constantly improve their knowledge, ethics, and work skills, Early Le thinkers proposed diverse ways of treating talent, including both political and economic rewards. At the same time, the state also introduced a system of punishment, demotion, and retirement for those who failed to meet the requirements of talent utilization.

Early Le thinkers also set out very specific requirements for those in charge of utilizing talent. Through these requirements, it can be seen that the thinkers raised the issue: to utilize talent, the subject must also be talented, talented in leadership and management. They must have strategic vision, clear thinking, a foundation in Confucian knowledge, and patriotism, prioritizing national interests.

In general, every dynasty in Vietnamese feudal history had ideas about rewarding talent, but perhaps the Early Le dynasty's thoughts on talent utilization best expressed the spirit of "respecting the Way" and elevating Confucian intellectuals. This spirit was fundamentally in line with the historical conditions of 15th century Vietnam.

4.2 Practical value of Ideology of Valuing and Utilizing Talented Individuals in the Early Le Dynasty

The Early Le court applied quite thoroughly various methods of talent selection, with the civil service examination being the most important. Talent during this period was mainly selected through examinations. Notably, the civil service exams in the Early Le period became more frequent, more open, and more standardized over time. Children from honest commoner families with ambition and talent could participate in the exams, hoping to establish a career. With this correct and progressive policy, the Early Le dynasty, especially from the Hong Duc era, achieved two goals: First, it trained and recruited the best people, the talents for the country. As a result, the state succeeded in transferring power from the less educated military officials to the talented Confucian scholars. Second, the state succeeded in its policy of deeply integrating Confucianism into social life. This is reflected in some estimated figures:

In 1490, the state determined the administrative map of the country. Accordingly, the whole country had 6,851 communes (Mai, 2001b: 538). After 11 years (during which there was no war or major administrative reform, so we assume the number of communes remained unchanged), in 1501, perhaps due to the large number of people studying and taking exams, the Le king had to limit the number of people allowed to participate in the provincial exams: 20 people for large communes, 15 for medium communes, and 10 for small communes (Mai, 2001c: 28). If we assume an average of 10 people per commune were allowed to take the exam, then at the end of the 15th century - early 16th century, each provincial exam had about 68,510 candidates.

The pass rate for the provincial exam was about 10% (reflected in the number of people participating in the metropolitan exam each year). The pass rate for the metropolitan exam was even lower. If in 1442 the pass rate was 7.3% (meaning about 7.3 out of 100 candidates passed), by 1502, this rate had decreased to 1.2%. Those who failed would return to their studies and wait three years to retake the exam. The pass and fail rates would repeat. These figures, based on old historical records, may not accurately and fully reflect the number of participants in the provincial exams or the pass/fail status of candidates in the Early Le period, but they somewhat show the rigorous nature and strict screening of the exams during this time.

In its 100 years of existence, emphasizing and promoting Confucian examinations, the Early Le dynasty selected an increasing number of talents through civil service exams. With 26 metropolitan exams, the state chose nearly 1,000 doctorate degree holders, including 21 first-rank scholars. In his 38 years of rule alone, Le Thanh Tong held 12 metropolitan exams, passing 501 doctorate degree holders, including 9 first-rank

scholars. Compared to the over 800-year history of the Vietnamese examination system (1075-1918), which had 183 metropolitan and palace exams, selecting 2,899 student of the Taixue (Imperial Academy) (called “Thai hoc sinh” 太學生 in the Ly and Tran dynasties), including 46 first-rank scholars (Dang, 2011: 181), it's clear that the education and examination system of the Early Le dynasty reached its peak in feudal examination history. The Early Le court thoroughly utilized this Confucian talent pool in building the bureaucratic monarchical government apparatus.

On the other hand, the vast majority of scholars in the Early Le period who did not pass the exams returned to their villages, lived with the people, and participated in village affairs. They became active propagators of Confucianism, allowing it to deeply penetrate social life and raising the level of education in rural areas to a certain extent.

With its policy of utilizing talent, the Early Le dynasty trained and developed a large pool of talents, including outstanding cultural figures, scientists, politicians, and military leaders such as: Le Loi, Nguyen Trai, Le Thanh Tong, Ngo Si Lien, Phan Phu Tien, Luong The Vinh, etc. There were exemplary educators for many generations like: Nguyen Trai, Nguyen Truc, Luong Dac Bang, etc. And patriotic, talented diplomats such as: Dao Cong Soan, Nguyen Thien Tich, Dam Van Le, etc. They were the elite of the nation, contributing greatly to the cause of preserving and protecting the country. They were also the "vital energy", greatly contributing to the supreme prosperity of the Early Le dynasty. This reinforced Nguyen Trai's generalization about Vietnamese history: "Although strength and weakness may vary at times, heroes are never lacking" with strong practical evidence.

From a broad perspective, the ideas of talent utilization in the Early Le period made a significant, direct contribution to guiding the ruling class in building the state apparatus and developing a team of Confucian intellectual talents capable of helping the king manage society, contributing to the creation of a strong centralized monarchy. At the same time, the talent utilization ideas of this period also contributed importantly to the achievements of Dai Viet in the latter half of the 15th century, from maintaining independence and autonomy, expanding territory, to developing the country in all aspects. Thanks to the correct policy of utilizing talent, Vietnam in the latter half of the 15th century was a civilized nation. Dai Viet "reached a level on par with the advanced countries in the region and the world at that time, capable of 'counterbalancing' the Ming dynasty of China (the strongest empire in Asia in the 15th century)" (Nguyen, 2012: 179).

5. Conclusion

To proactively obtain talented and virtuous individuals meeting the dynasty's standards, the Early Le dynasty actively trained talent according to Confucian ideology. Education with appropriate content and methods was given top priority. To select talent, thinkers proposed basic forms: civil service examinations, recommendations, and nominations. Among these, civil service examinations were fundamental and most discussed; recommendations and nominations were increasingly perfected and held important positions. After selecting talent, the state had a policy of "using talent according to ability". Closely linked to utilization was the emphasis on inspection, checking, and supervision. To encourage talent to manifest and flourish, rulers had regular reward policies with many appropriate forms and strict punishment policies. To accomplish all of this, the king's wisdom, virtue, and spirit of seeking talent played a decisive role. To effectively utilize talent, leaders must have strategic vision and clear thinking. Meeting these conditions would create a favorable environment for many talents to emerge and develop.

In the Early Le period, the idea of talent utilization was highly valued. However, this idea was not perfected at once but spontaneously formed according to specific

historical conditions. Generally, the development of talent utilization ideas can be envisioned through two relatively distinct stages: From Le Loi to the end of Le Hien Tong's reign, the idea of talent utilization was highly regarded, considered one of the most important tasks of rulers; From Le Uy Muc to Le Chieu Tong's reign, talent utilization was neglected and loosened. The ideas of talent utilization in these two periods directly affected the quality of the talent pool and were important factors in creating both the prosperity and decline of the Early Le dynasty, while leaving behind great historical values and lessons for both contemporaries and posterity.

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