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Neo-Confucianism in Dai Viet in the 15th Century

For most of pre-colonial south-east Asian history, when people practiced religion, it was mainly Buddhism, Hinduism, or a mix of other local religions and traditions. However, Vietnam stands out for its embrace of Neo-Confucianism starting in the 14th century, and by the 15th century, it is the dominant, or at least most prominent, religion or philosophy in the state. The question is why did Vietnam, at that time established as the kingdom of Dai Viet, change from being a majority Buddhist country to a Neo-Confucious one? Why did it take place during the 14th and 15th centuries and how did this transition occur?

In the kingdom of Dai Viet, Neo-Confucianism was first able to take root in the late 14th century due to both political and economic turmoil seen throughout south-east Asia, mainly caused by overpopulation and climate change, and due to the occupation of Dai Viet by Ming China in the early 15th century which helped to sinicize Vietnam and bring Neo-Confucianism into direct contact with the people and political elites. Then, Neo-Confucianism was able to spread throughout Dai Viet due to the establishment of the Le Dynasty in the late 1420s by Le Loi and eventually flourished under the reign of his grandson Le Thanh Tong from 1460 to 1497. Both rulers used Neo-Confucianism to centralize the state, homogenize the population, and in the

case of Thanh Tang, embark on a mission to “civilize” both neighboring populations and rural peasants living in the countryside.

First, let’s examine how the seeds of Neo-Confucianism were planted in Vietnam as this plays a big part as to how the Vietnamese were introduced to it and why they would have been receptive to it in the first place. There are two main causes that led to this development: one is the tumultuous, if not disastrous, events that took place in the 14th century, and the second is the Ming occupation of Dai Viet from 1407-1428.

When looking at the 14th century, it is clear that numerous problems afflicted not just Dai Viet, but all of south-east Asia. Indeed, the entire region was facing land shortages due to rapid population growth and inefficient land distribution, numerous revolts, severe climate change causing droughts and thus famines, and overall political dishevel such as the kingdom of Champa raiding Dai Viet with great frequency in the latter half of the 14th century (Lieberman 367-372). These disasters piled on one another, and by the start of the 15th century, helped fuel a growing appetite for change in Dai Viet, especially among the intellectual literati scholars of Chinese classical studies. The literati were able to challenge the existing elite because “the old elite of the land - the Ly and Tran who had ruled from the 11th to 14th centuries and who hailed from the river delta - had been devastated by the events of the previous 60 years...and its Buddhist ideology had faded in the halls of power...The result was an ideological void that allowed the [literati] scholars to advance their own brand of thought within the halls of the royal court” (Whitmore “Paperwork...” 107-108). The literati increasingly saw Buddhism and the elites in government who supported it, as too aristocratic and in need of a return to classical values. They charged “that Buddhism had made people insensitive to those obligations on which the social order rested, scholars began to demand the selection of more educated officials who

would ‘love the people,’ as well as the establishment of Confucian-style schools in the country-side that would instill a stronger sense of social obligation. In the hands of these literati, stories about the legendary Vietnamese kingdom of Van Lang and Chinese stories of the ancient sage kings Yao and Shun were reworked to create specifically Vietnamese versions of Antiquity, a golden age, whose lessons in good governance promised an escape from the current impasse” (Lieberman 372-373). Therefore, we begin to see that the turmoil of the 14th century increased the calls for change and weakened the Buddhist elites in power, and that as a result, the educated literati of Dai Viet were looking to Neo-Confucianism to solve their problems. Akin to how Europeans revisited their past during the Renaissance, the literati reexamined their past which they perceived was, and subsequently rebranded as, a “golden age” and a model for how Confucian values, or at least non-Buddhist values, could be applied to Dai Viet to solve its problems. The disastrous 14th century fertilized the soil of change in Dai Viet and planted Confucian roots which would only grow in importance throughout the 15th century.

However, the events of the 14th century were not the only factor in spurring interest in Neo-Confucianism as at the beginning of the 15th century, from 1407-1428, Dai Viet was under Ming occupation which led to more exposure to the philosophy and overall increased sinicization of Dai Viet in general.

Under Ming occupation, “Dai Viet experienced the sustained influence of Neo-Confucian ideology, which not only included the traditional doctrines of filial piety but also demanded an ‘activist, state-oriented service’ based on officials’ absolute loyalty to the dynasty and on the moral superiority of the ‘civilized’ over the ‘barbarian’ ”(Kiernan 194). This last point of Neo-Confucianism, the civilized versus the barbarian, was very influential as we will later see in the last half of the 15th century, and it was first introduced in Dai Viet by the Ming who

“announced the...ambitious goal of civilizing the region and reincorporating it within the empire...in pursuit of their *mission civilisatrice*” (Lieberman 375). To accomplish this goal, the Ming began to sinicize Dai Viet, first by renaming the kingdom as “Jiaozhi” based on its classical Han Chinese name. Additionally, all Dai Viet government records were destroyed, government officials were forced to wear Chinese-style clothes, and over one hundred and twenty-six new civil service and Confucian schools were built, including for the first time in rural areas. Now under strict Ming rule, Neo-Confucianism spread rapidly throughout the region, and in 1419, *The Great Compilation of Neo-Confucianism* was introduced to elites (Kiernan 194; Lieberman 375). The Ming occupation directly contributed to the spread of Neo-Confucianism in Dai Viet through the building of schools, the promotion of Confucian books and writings to the populace and the literati, and its overall sinicization of the region further encouraging and strengthening cultural ties to China.

However, the occupation under Ming rule only explains so much as in the late 1420s, the Le Dynasty under Le Loi reestablished an independent Dai Viet and forced the Chinese back north, yet one still sees Neo-Confucianism growing in influence even more so throughout the 15th century. Therefore, with the disastrous 14th century-long in the rearview mirror, and no Chinese pressure forcing them to abide by the philosophy, there must be other reasons as to why the Vietnamese, and the literati, continued to adopt and practice it. The main reason that Neo-Confucianism spread during the 15th century was due to the Le Dynasty established by Le Loi, and to a much greater extent his grandson, Le Thanh Tong, as they both used various elements of Neo-Confucianism, like the civil service exam, to establish a strong, centralized, and effective administration, and to assist in homogenizing the vast and diverse populace now under the control of the Le Dynasty, sometimes with tragic consequences like what befell Champa.

Shortly after Ming rule had been thrown off in the late 1420s with Le Loi now in charge, a Confucian bureaucracy began to emerge in Dai Viet, and in 1434, a “triennial system of regional and metropolitan competitions” was proclaimed and over one thousand graduates passed the first round of the examinations, yet in the long run, the exams “remained irregular and dependent on official recruitment needs” (Kiernan 198). Furthermore, many talented poor people were encouraged to attend local Confucian schools with some attending the National College for Mandarins (Kiernan 199). These pieces of evidence showcase the fact that to run the newly founded Le Dynasty, Le Loi attempted to construct a more effective centralized bureaucracy, and Neo-Confucianism’s civil-service examinations provided an easy and relatively meritocratic process to fill its ranks, even though these exams were not always standardized and conducted only when needed to fill necessary positions. Still, this is evidence that the political elite, now in addition to the literati, of Dai Viet continued to embrace Neo-Confucianism of their own free will, even after the Chinese had left.

Additionally, Le Loi used Neo-Confucianism as a means to bring Buddhist monks and other religious leaders under the purview of the state, both centralizing the power of the state and strengthening it. For example, “in 1429, Le Loi ordered all Buddhist and Daoist monks to face examination on their knowledge of scriptures and morality. If they failed, they could not remain monks. As the sole alternative locus of authority, the Buddhist hierarchy continued to feel the pressure of a newly powerful state apparatus” (Kiernan 199). While monks had previously held great amounts of power and influence over the Vietnamese, that began to change under the Le Dynasty where now it was the state that controlled, regulated, and stipulated who could be a monk, meanwhile regularly subjecting them to examinations and further homogenizing the populace under one philosophy or religion which became Neo-Confucianism. Control over

religion, in addition to building an effective bureaucracy, are two main reasons why the Le Dynasty initially supported the continuation of Neo-Confucianism in Dai Viet.

However, we must not overstate the influence of Neo-Confucianism during Le Loi's rule as there is a plethora of evidence showing that Neo-Confucianism, while favored by the literati, still did not hold much sway over the kingdom's court which was still controlled by regional families. For example, Lieberman writes that "regionally-based family rivalries continued to influence early Le history...even as Neo-Confucian influence gradually increased. The Le dynasty, which the victorious Le Loi proclaimed in 1428, took steps to conciliate the...literati. To that end it...preserved key features of Ming administration, including the schools, a greater reliance on legal precedent, and from the 1440s, Dai Viet's first orthodox Chinese-style examinations...Nonetheless, through the mid-1400s not the literati, but Thanh Nghe military clans dominated the court. While honoring Confucian norms, when they selected officials southern soldiers favored not civil service exams, but family ties. Precisely because they had formed the backbone of Le Loi's army, and because Ming collaboration still tainted many Dong Kinh families, until 1460 southerners succeeded in maintaining an oligarchic structure..." (Lieberman 377-378). This piece of evidence succinctly summarizes the evidence discussed thus far while also discussing political realities at the time. The Le Dynasty, under its founder Le Loi, most certainly helped Neo-Confucianism spread by keeping much of the Ming administrative body intact like its bureaucracy and its Confucian schools, and that was because these were effective tools for Dai Viet to build a strong centralized government and educational system as previously mentioned, and it pleased the literati who were growing in influence. But crucially, at court, Neo-Confucianism was thrown out the window. The elites at court gave lip service to its ideas, yet disregarded its meritocratic ideals by ignoring exam scores and choosing high-ranking

positions based on family ties. These military clans, who had fought against the Ming Dynasty, were given preferential treatment and positions at court, and their suspicion of Neo-Confucianism, the philosophy of the enemy, blocked most of its sympathizers and supporters from the court until at least the rule of Le Thanh Tong. Therefore, Le Loi's period of rule cannot be given too much credit for spreading Neo-Confucianism when it was often disregarded, implemented improperly, or even blocked from court by many of the elites.

Though Le Loi first implemented Neo-Confucian reforms and civil service exams, it is his grandson, Le Thanh Tong, who deserves the credit for its increased influence over Dai Viet during the 15th century which he accomplished by mandating the civil service exam and increasing its importance, and implementing strategies to replace Buddhism and Daoism in the countryside with Neo-Confucian values and traditions. His reasons for doing so were to create a more effective, centralized state, to homogenize the population at large, and tragically, to conquer "barbaric" peoples and force them and other minority groups to become "civilized".

With Thanh Tong's ascendance to the throne, a "rising generation of Vietnamese literati educated in the Ming era and after finally came to power...[and] Neo-Confucian administrative rationality soon replaced aristocratic and military clan rule" (Kiernan 204). Finally, the literati, with many younger scholars having been educated under Ming rule and having had direct contact with the Ming administration, had a full-throated champion for Neo-Confucianism in charge. Almost immediately, Thanh Tong went about sinicizing much of Dai Viet and its government. One of his most recognizable impacts was the increased importance he gave to the civil-service exams throughout his rule. During his reign from 1460-1497, he "inaugurated regular triennial examinations on the classical texts. These competitions functioned not only to fill official appointments but also to train and deploy 'a country-wide, Neo-Confucian indoctrinated,

educated elite.’ The admissions process accepted only those candidates approved by village or military officials...The training was rigorous. The top post-1460 graduates earned doctoral degrees (tien si) that were of a higher level than those awarded over the previous four centuries...As many as 4,400 candidates presented for the first metropolitan examination in 1463, and forty-four achieved the tien si degree...By 1497, twelve triennial competitions had produced a total of 501 tien si” (Kiernan 205). Under Thanh Tong, there is an abundance of evidence demonstrating how he first regulated and standardized the civil-service exams, in contrast to Le Loi who merely made them available when necessary to fill open bureaucratic positions. Now these exams were held every three years, and they were not only used to fill regular government positions, but also to create a new cultured, and homogenized elite that could diffuse across the kingdom. The examinations were more rigorous, prestigious, and conferred a greater degree of education and authority upon those who managed to pass it. Under Thanh Tong, the top Neo-Confucian scholars were trained and developed and the staggering number produced under his reign is unprecedented before 1460.

Finally, it should be noted that “these literati-officials and their successors played prominent roles in the government of Dai Viet, going on embassies to Beijing, submitting memorials on a wide range of policy matters and joining their king in poetry sessions, all the while carrying out their specific administrative duties”(Whitmore “Paperwork...” 111). These officials increasingly became more and more prominent under Thanh Tong, and soon, the bureaucracy was far more effective and filled with hundreds of educated men, far more than in previous governments like under that of Le Loi.

Additionally, “the system of examinations – and preparation for the exams through private tuition and an expanded network of state schools – provided a reservoir of literate adepts

who had no chance of ever holding office but who served as cultural models in the villages. The new insistence that village headmen be literate, maintain Chinese-style family structures and serve as vanguards of moral transformation encouraged ambitious local families to pursue literacy and adhere to Confucian norms” (Lieberman 382). This overabundance of both literate men and graduates who did not become government administrators helped to infuse previously-lacking energy into cultural life throughout Dai Viet, and soon, new works were being written, and more research was being conducted in the fields of history, mathematics, botany, and military science (Kiernan 208). It wasn’t just the bureaucracy that civil service exams helped to improve, as the excess of educated and literate graduates were able to move into diverse cultural and scientific fields and improve their level and output of research. The fact that literacy also had tangible benefits, such as becoming the village headman, offered even more of an incentive to become literate and study Neo-Confucianism and take the civil service exam. This helped to homogenize Vietnamese culture as now both the educated elite and the peasantry were gradually becoming more literate and knowledgeable about Neo-Confucianism, which had the added benefit of infusing much-needed talent and skill into the bureaucracy and other academic fields.

Unfortunately, Thanh Tong’s profuse embrace of Neo-Confucianism also led to some tragic outcomes. One fundamental aspect of the philosophy is the conflict between those who are “civilized” and those who are “barbarians”. This is because one of the goals of Neo-Confucianism is to make sense of the world and order it accordingly, so there has always been a tension between who is civilized and who is not. Throughout history, Han Chinese have seen themselves as civilized compared to their “barbaric” Vietnamese neighbors in the south. However, Thanh Tong’s increased embrace of Neo-Confucianism led him to view the Vietnamese people as the civilized populace, and the Chams, located in present-day Southern

Vietnam, as the barbaric ones. John K. Whitmore writes that this reasoning led to an outlook where “in both his own villages and other countries, the ruler of Dai Viet now theoretically held the responsibility to tell the occupants how they ought to live” (“The Two Great...”). Indeed, Thanh Tong followed this train of logic to the teeth, and perhaps in retaliation for the “Ming treatment of Vietnam itself, [he] denounced them [Chams] as people insensitive to Heaven’s dictates who had to be transformed. After a massive invasion in 1470–1471, Thanh-tong took some 30,000 prisoners and destroyed the Cham capital Vijaya, whose desolation he advertised by displaying on the prow of his returning ship the Chamking’s severed head”(Lieberman 380). It’s also reported that large massacres took place and that “the victors put forty to sixty thousand Chams to the sword...China’s *Ming shi* annals add that the Vietnamese forces ‘smashed’ Champa: ‘[Dai Viet] sacked their country with massive burning and looting, and subsequently occupied their territory.’ Cham officials later told the Ming court: ‘[Dai Viet] destroyed our country’ ” (Kiernan 210). Neo-Confucianism strengthened and helped to centralize Dai Viet’s government during the 15th century, yet it also provided justification to “civilize” nearby territories thereby expanding the kingdom’s reach on the south-east Asian mainland.

Additionally, not only did Thanh Tong believe Neo-Confucianism gave him the power to conquer the Chams, but he also used the philosophy to “civilize” any non-Vietnamese minorities living in Dai Viet, while also further homogenizing all Vietnamese under Neo-Confucianism.

In the past, non-Vietnamese defectors, refugees, deportees, etc. were welcomed into Dai Viet without any procedure or stricture whatsoever. Under Thanh Tong, the newly captured Cham prisoners, in addition to other non-Vietnamese minorities already living in Dai Viet, were legally required to “correct themselves” and become Vietnamese by, for instance, acquiring Vietnamese names and marrying Vietnamese wives (Lieberman 380). This makes sense, as under

Thanh Tong's and the literati's interpretation of Neo-Confucianism, the civilized people were Vietnamese. Therefore, the goal should be to "help" others become civilized which meant all minorities needed to "correct themselves" in order to become Vietnamese, and thus, more civilized. Neo-Confucianism was adopted by Dai Viet to help unite and homogenize the fractious Vietnamese peoples under one centralized philosophy and government, yet Thanh Tong also used it as justification to invade other territories and capture "barbarians" under the auspices of "civilizing" them like the Vietnamese.

However, it wasn't just minorities that were coerced into changing themselves, but also those living in the more rural, Buddhist parts of Dai Viet. A major reason why Neo-Confucianism spread was that Thanh Tong and the literati undertook a massive project to introduce the philosophy to all the people of Dai Viet, not just the educated or those who lived in urban centers. A large portion of the peasantry, especially in the countryside, still practiced "immoral" and "incestuous" family practices...Buddhist rituals, witchcraft, and other 'superstitions'...But at the heart of the Neo-Confucian vision lay an insistence on proper family relations: mourning procedures, marriage rites...The new [Le law] code embodied these norms whose provisions district officials sought to honor while explaining laws and edicts to assembled villagers in words they could understand. Thus Sinic family norms began to influence the wider society...The court likewise sought to curtail monks, Taoist adepts, and sorcerers while sanitizing and centralizing cults of local deities dear to Ly and Tran monarchs. Efforts to transform the countryside rested on two administrative structures...a rationalized system of local governance and an expanded program of examinations. Some 9,700 villages in the Red River delta and Thanh Hoa were organized into a Chinese-style grid, exceptionally penetrating by Southeast Asian standards... authority at the highest levels continued to revolve around family

networks... Yet their own desire to strengthen the state joined their new cultural orientation to make leading families... ever more willing to honor Chinese-style procedures” (Lieberman 381-382). This evidence is extensive and shows to a great extent how rural peasants and villagers were systematically introduced to Neo-Confucianism and how older local religions like Daoism and Buddhism were increasingly curtailed and replaced. Importantly, this work was done at the local level by local officials who people trusted far more than a far-off bureaucracy or ruler. Even though the military clans and family ties still held influence at court, under Thanh Tong, all elites saw Neo-Confucianism as a useful tool for centralizing the state and homogenizing the entire population, so they began to naturally embrace it and practice it as a means of maintaining power over Dai Viet, and at court among the literati and Thanh Tong himself. Neo-Confucianism spread throughout Dai Viet in the 15th century thanks in large part to Thanh Tong who systematically spread the philosophy throughout the countryside at the district level. This in turn led the state to become more powerful and centralized under the Neo-Confucian system, which as a result, forced a suspicious court to follow suit if it wished to remain relevant and in power.

In summary, Neo-Confucianism was first able to take root in Dai Viet in the late 14th century due to political and economic turmoil which discredited the existing Buddhist order, and due to the occupation under Ming China which helped to directly introduce it to the literati and the populace. In the 15th century, the Le Dynasty founded by Le Loi was the first instance of the political elite of Dai Viet embracing Neo-Confucianism through the implementation of the civil service exam and bureaucracy, however, it wasn't until the rule of Le Thanh Tong that Neo-Confucianism was fully implemented in order to centralize the state, homogenize the population under one religion or philosophy, and to “civilize” rural peasants, non-Vietnamese minorities, and the Chams in order to force them to become more “Vietnamese”.