

# On the financial structure and personnel organisation of the Trịnh Lords in seventeenth to eighteenth-century North Vietnam

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*After the restoration of the Lê dynasty, the Red River delta region was flooded with military men who set up and controlled irregular departments from the end of the sixteenth to the first half of the seventeenth century. The imperial administration became a shell during the Lê-Trịnh period, with the Trịnh Lords as de facto rulers who constructed their own parallel government on the basis of these local departments. This analysis of contemporary inscriptions indicates that the Trịnh Lords subsequently expanded their administration and secured their rule by absorbing large numbers of Red River delta literati, while retaining many eunuchs in influential financial and military roles. Overall, the Trịnh bureaucracy, comprising of the Lục Phiên and Lục Cung, was a kind of financial organisation combined with a military district system because it harnessed the existing military organisation.*

## Introduction

The Lê dynasty, which was established in 1428, reached its peak during the reign of Lê Thánh Tông (r.1460–1497) when it introduced the centralised administrative system of the Ming dynasty. The Lê throne was usurped by Mạc Đăng Dung three decades after Lê Thánh Tông's death, but was restored in 1533 with the support of Nguyễn Kim. The restored dynasty's first stronghold was in Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An provinces, before it regained the Red River delta from the Mạc in 1592. However, although a Lê emperor presided nominally, the region came to be ruled by the *Chúa Trịnh* (Trịnh Lords).

After Nguyễn Kim's death, Trịnh Kiể́m inherited his power, which then passed on to his descendants. After the Lê emperor granted Trịnh Tùng a peerage, *Bình An Vương* 平安王, in 1599, the Trịnh Lords established their own court, *Vương phủ* 王府, and took on all powers of government.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The Nguyễn clan, which lost their power struggle against the Trịnh, emigrated south and established an independent base at Huế. The Nguyễn Lords constructed a very different governing structure to that of the northern Trịnh Lords. See Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 1998).

While the Lê–Trịnh government continued to use the institutions of the Lê dynasty to ensure legitimacy, in particular those set up during Lê Thánh Tông’s reign, the Trịnh Lords used the process of restoration to construct a parallel administration to further secure their own power. This resulted in a complicated governing structure in which the Lê dynasty and the Trịnh Lords coexisted. The structure of the Lê–Trịnh government, especially that of the Trịnh Lords, has been insufficiently studied due to the shortage or inaccessibility of relevant historical documents. Previous research, such as Đặng Phương Nghi’s classic study,<sup>2</sup> has largely depended on a few authentic chronicles and edited historical sources, for instance, *Đại Việt Sử ký Toàn thư* (The complete annals of Đại Việt; hereafter *Toàn thư*)<sup>3</sup>, *Khâm định Việt sử Thông giám Cương mục* (The imperially ordered annotated text completely reflecting the history of the Viet; hereafter *Cương mục*),<sup>4</sup> and *Lịch triều Hiến chương Loại chí* (Regulations of successive dynasties by subject-matter; hereafter *Loại chí*),<sup>5</sup> to examine the Lê–Trịnh government. Given that this period was officially under the Lê, the dynastic records contain only fragmentary descriptions about the Trịnh Lords’ unofficial court and government, which makes scholarly analyses difficult.

Hence, previous studies of the political history of the Lê–Trịnh period have not sufficiently examined the nature of its government and organisation. John K. Whitmore, for instance, suggests that the Mạc dynasty emphasised the institutional succession of Lê Thánh Tông’s reign for its own legitimacy, and that the Lê–Trịnh government similarly relied upon the Lê family’s bloodline.<sup>6</sup> However, official titles in contemporary historical documents suggest that the Lê–Trịnh administration also was modelled on Lê Thánh Tông’s reign. This was a natural course of events since the Lê–Trịnh government was a ‘Lê dynasty’ in form only so long as a Lê emperor was presiding. On the other hand, most scholars recognise that the Trịnh Lords held the real power in the government. The Trịnh Lords were not merely influential subordinates in the Lê emperor’s court, but established their own court and governing structure independent of the Lê, which enabled them to have a stable and lengthy period in power. The ensuing coexisting institutions in the Lê–Trịnh governing structure created practical administrative complications, which could also confuse those seeking to understand the relationship between government and society during this period. However, the availability of archival material on Vietnamese history has drastically improved in recent years — of particular significance, as far as the

2 Đặng Phương Nghi, *Les institutions publiques du Viêt-nam au 18e siècle* (Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1969).

3 Chen Chingho, ed., *Đại Việt Sử ký Toàn thư*, 3 vols. (Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, Tokyo University, 1984–86).

4 *Khâm định Việt sử Thông giám Cương mục* (Taipei: National Central Library, 1969).

5 There are many manuscripts of *Loại chí*; here, I use the manuscript owned by Toyo Bunko (*Lịch triều Hiến chương Loại chí*, 49 vols., X-2-38, Toyo Bunko, Tokyo). Representative historical documentation on the official postal system in the Lê–Trịnh government is found in *Quan chức chí* in the 19th century *Loại chí*. However, the present article refers to Lê-period sources wherever possible, for instance: *Lê triều quan chế* (Government-Regulated Organisation of the Lê Dynasty), Han-Nom Institute, Hanoi, A.51; *Lê triều hội điển* (Collected Regulations of the Lê Dynasty), Han-Nom Institute, A.52; and *Quan chế điển lệ* (Authentic Regulations of the Government-Regulated Organisation), Han-Nom Institute, A.56, etc.

6 John K. Whitmore, ‘Chung-hsing and Cheng-t’ung in texts of and on sixteenth-century Vietnam’, in *Essays into Vietnamese pasts*, ed. Keith W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca: SEAP Publications, Cornell University, 1995), pp. 116–36.

seventeenth to eighteenth century Red River delta, is the publication of *Tổng tập Thác bản Văn khắc Hán Nôm* ('Corpus of ancient Vietnamese inscriptions'; hereafter, *Corpus*).<sup>7</sup> *Corpus* includes many inscriptions from village stelae containing useful information for examining government structures in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries. These texts alleviate some of the present lack of historical information on this period.

Some aspects of the Lê-Trịnh government were clarified by a study focusing on the role of eunuchs. In the 1970s, Wada Masahiko highlighted the extensive activities of Vietnamese eunuchs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including as financial bureaucrats and military commanders.<sup>8</sup> Due to a lack of primary source material at the time, the study of eunuchs was not developed further, but their important role is now finally being realised again, due to the availability of village documents and inscriptions in recent years. For example, Hasuda Takashi discusses the case of one eunuch who worked in Nghệ An province as a liaison officer for international trade in the seventeenth century.<sup>9</sup> A similar situation existed in Bát Tràng village, famous for its ceramics, where a eunuch married the granddaughter of a Japanese firearms trader.<sup>10</sup> He not only played an important role in finance, but was influential in Red River delta communes and society. Studies by Simao Minoru and Li Tana further demonstrate the eunuchs' influence on and contributions to rural society.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the unification of religious groups in villages (Giáp甲) by eunuchs often provoked disputes in many villages, including Bách Cốc and Bát Tràng.<sup>12</sup> Their contributions to, and the opposition from, villages were interrelated, and illustrate that the eunuchs' activities often caused the reorganisation of Red River delta communities.

Such analyses demonstrate that positing a simple oppositional framework made up of the 'Thanh-Nghệ military men' against 'the Red River Delta village literati',<sup>13</sup> is not enough to understand the whole structure of the Lê-Trịnh government. For instance, Lê Kim Ngân examines the Lê-Trịnh power structures and emphasises that the Trịnh Lords perpetuated a type of military regime.<sup>14</sup> His study reveals that

7 Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, Nguyễn Văn Nguyên, and Philippe Papin, eds., *Tổng tập Thác bản Văn khắc Hán Nôm*, vols. 1–22 (Hà Nội: Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm, 2005–2009).

8 Wada Masahiko, 'ベトナム黎明末阮初の宦官について' [On the Vietnamese eunuchs of the late Lê and early Nguyen dynasties], *Report of the Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies* 10 (1978): 23–44.

9 Hasuda Takashi, '17世紀ベトナム鄭氏政権と宦官' [The eunuchs in seventeenth century Vietnam], *Machikaneyama-Ronso: History* 39 (2005): 1–39.

10 Ueda Shinya, 'ベトナム黎明鄭政権の地方統治: 17–18世紀鉢場社の事例' [The local administration of the Lê-Trịnh government in 17th to 18th century Vietnam: An example of Bát Tràng village], in *近世の海域世界と地方統治* [Local administration and the maritime world of early modern East Asia], ed. Yamamoto Eishi (Tokyo: Kyuko Shoin, 2010), pp. 256–64.

11 Shimao Minoru, '19世紀–20世紀初頭北部ベトナム村落における族結合再編' [Reorganisation of lineage connections in the 19th to early 20th century Northern Vietnamese village], in 〈血縁〉の再構築 [Reconstruction of 'blood relations'], ed. Yoshiwara Kazuo, Suzuki Takatoshi and Suenari Michio (Tokyo: Fukyo-sya, 2000), pp. 213–54; Li Tana, 'Tongking in the age of commerce', in *Anthony Reid and the study of the Southeast Asian past*, ed. Geoff Wade and Li Tana (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012), pp. 246–68.

12 Shimao, 'Reorganisation', pp. 222–4; Ueda, 'The local administration', pp. 261–2.

13 Keith Taylor, 'The literati revival in seventeenth century Vietnam', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 18, 1 (1987): 1–23.

14 Lê Kim Ngân, *Chế độ chính trị Việt Nam thế kỷ 17 và 18* [Political system in 17th and 18th century

the Lê dynasty's institutions were a mere shell, and that the Trịnh Lords had much more substantial power. Lê Kim Ngân does so through an examination of the institutional framework, paying attention to the dual structure of the Lê–Trịnh government. This is an important argument, but his study is limited to the relations between the Lê and Trịnh courts, and, due to the inaccessibility of historical sources, does not include information on the Trịnh bureaucracy. On the other hand, Keith Taylor reveals that the political rise of the Red River delta literati caused a policy shift from a military-backed restoration to improved domestic administration during the second half of the seventeenth century. While Taylor's article does include the important case of an early Trịnh Lord selecting his own bureaucrats via private connections, it does not mention the importance of the eunuchs at all.<sup>15</sup> One common problem shared by these studies is that they are only interested in who took political initiative in the Lê–Trịnh government; they do not examine the governing structure and underlying conflicts, or which groups of people supported it. In other words, they examine the head without asking what kind of body supported it. Another problem is that it is difficult to link political history to social history without examining governing institutions. Since Sakurai Yumio's study positing that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries constituted the formative period of autonomous villages in the Red River delta,<sup>16</sup> various studies have focused on social aspects of the period,<sup>17</sup> but the gap between political and social history has made it difficult to put this era into proper perspective.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, this essay seeks to contribute new historical material to the study of this period. First, it re-examines the political history of the Lê–Trịnh before the establishment of the *Lục Phiên* 六番 (Six Departments) during Trịnh Cương's reign (1709–1729), i.e., paying particular attention to how the Trịnh Lords constructed their governing institutions. The organising of the *Lục Phiên* was almost completed during Trịnh Cương's reign, and there were no systemic reforms after this. Second, it then

Vietnam] (Saigon: Phân khoa Khoa học xã hội, Viện đại học Vạn Hạnh, 1974), pp. 363–7. The Trịnh Lords' governing structure is also examined in Nguyễn Đức Nhuệ, 'Tìm hiểu tổ chức 'Phiên' trong bộ máy nhà nước Lê Trung hưng' [About the 'Phien' organisation in the state apparatus under the Lê Trung hưng dynasty], *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử* 294 (1997): 46–51, which is based on Lê Kim Ngân's study.

15 Taylor, 'The literati revival': 7–8.

16 Sakurai Yumio, ベトナム村落の形成 [The formation of Vietnamese 'traditional' villages] (Tokyo: Sobun-sya, 1987).

17 On the popularisation of Confucianism supported by the literati, see Shimao Minoru, 'ベトナムの家礼と民間文化' [Family ritual and popular culture in Vietnam], in アジアの文人が見た民衆とその文化 [Common people and culture from the point of view of Asian literati], ed. Yamamoto Eishi (Tokyo: Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, Keio University, 2010), pp. 101–44. For case studies of autonomous villages, see Simao Minoru, 'Reorganisation'; Ueda, 'The local administration', and Ueda Shinya, 'ベトナム・フエ近郊の村落社会と親族集団の形成: 18–19 世紀ティンフオック村の事例' [The formation of village society and kinship groups in the environs of Huế, Vietnam: The case study of Thanh Phước village from the 18th to 19th centuries], *Journal of Oriental Research* 72, 1 (2013): 100–36.

18 Keith Taylor, in 'Surface orientation in Vietnam: Beyond histories of nation and region', *Journal of Asian Studies* 57, 4 (1998): 949–78, emphasises the political suppression of the 17th to 18th century Red River delta literati; however, his description of regional characteristics through literary works is too episodic. Taylor does not examine the governing system and its organisation, therefore, he does not distinguish the political situation of literati from the closing of villages due to overpopulation and a shortage of arable land. See details in Ueda, 'The formation of village society': 128–30.

examines the organisation of bureaucratic personnel under the Trịnh, paying particular attention to the eunuchs. Previous studies examined certain individuals, but were unable to show their institutional position in the Lê-Trịnh government, owing to the lack of historical sources, and therefore could not integrate the eunuchs into political history. This study uses the information in contemporary inscriptions to clarify the position of the eunuchs and the literati in the Lê-Trịnh government in order to provide a wider perspective on government in the seventeenth to eighteenth century Red River delta.

### 1. Appearance of *phiên* under seventeenth-century Trịnh rule

As a preliminary step to examining the *Lục Phiên* in the eighteenth century, this section considers the initial establishment of the Trịnh administration in the seventeenth century. According to official chronicles, the seventeenth-century Trịnh court had three *phiên* 番 (departments): *Hộ Phiên* 戶番 (Department of Personnel), *Binh Phiên* 兵番 (Department of War), and *Thủy sư Phiên* 水師番 (Department of the Navy). In 1718, Trịnh Cường reconstituted these three into six departments: *Lại Phiên* 吏番 (Department of Personnel), *Hộ Phiên* 戶番 (Department of Revenue), *Lễ Phiên* 禮番 (Department of Rites), *Binh Phiên* 兵番 (Department of War), *Hình Phiên* 刑番 (Department of Justice), and *Công Phiên* 工番 (Department of Works). These six departments were collectively known as the *Lục Phiên* 六番 (Six Departments).<sup>19</sup> This means that the administrative and financial system embodied in the *Lục Phiên* did not appear suddenly in the early eighteenth century, but rather that it was preceded by *phiên* in the seventeenth-century Trịnh court.

As mentioned, the Lê royals who acceded to the throne with the help of armed factions in the Thanh-Nghệ provinces had almost no real power,<sup>20</sup> and their loss of control increased after the Red River delta was recovered. The Trịnh administrative system had been more or less openly constructed independent of the Lê court in the Red River delta, especially after Trịnh Tùng established his own court in 1599. This led to conflicts between the officials of the two administrative systems, as recorded in a lawsuit in *Toàn thư*:

Although, with respect to the matter of public officials, the [Lê] Ministry of Personnel already exists, the establishment of irregular officials is permitted. Although, with respect to taxation, the Ministry of Revenue already exists, dispatched men compete to collect taxes from the people. Although, with respect to lawsuits, trial courts already exist, accepting false statements is frequent, they capture people, and wrest their property ... With respect to the law and precedents, the rule of the ancient Emperor already exists splendidly, and troop commanders are not permitted to supervise people, but merely permitted to command soldiers. However, troop commanders are ruling over people and property just as they like, arbitrarily increasing the [number of] soldiers by

19 *Toàn thư*: 1044. *Loại chí*, vol. 14, 13a–13b. The departmental titles obviously imitate the Chinese Six Ministries. In practice, the official duties, personnel organisation, and legislative roles of these departments were very different from those of the Chinese.

20 *Toàn thư*: 850.

conscripting five to six people from one family, and levying tax on one rice field two or three times. *Cai Tông* 該總, *Cai Xã* 該社 judged the trial lawsuit.<sup>21</sup>

According to this record, the Six Ministries and the judicial system of the Lê were in place at this time. However, this extract shows us that conscription and tax collection were being disrupted by troop commanders who were operating outside the imperial system.

Interestingly, the trial lawsuit itself was signed by officials holding irregular titles. These irregular local officials were more or less openly permitted to operate by the Ministry of Personnel. In local areas, the duties of the Lê administration, which was represented by the prefecture (*phủ* 府) and district (*huyện* 縣), were being eroded by self-interested military men. Thus, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, although new organisations had been constructed outside of the Lê administration, the relationship between the two institutional orders had not been arranged, resulting in conflict at the local level.

If this were the case, it must be asked exactly who these local irregular officials were, and why their actions were in conflict with the Lê administration. The Lê military was modelled on the Ming, and included the Five Chief Military Commissions, as well as the Guard system.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Lê military strength was based mostly amongst the guards in local areas. Official military posts derived from these systems in the Lê-Trịnh government, for example, commissioners-in-chief (*Ngũ quân Đô đốc* 五軍都督) or guard commanders (*Chỉ huy sứ* 指揮使) only demonstrated rank, as their actual functions had largely disappeared due to war in the sixteenth century.<sup>23</sup> The main army of the Lê-Trịnh government was now composed of soldiers from the Thanh-Nghệ provinces, who had been the driving force behind the Lê restoration and were kept on as *Thanh-Nghệ Ưu binh* 清又優兵 afterwards.<sup>24</sup> These troops were led by unit commanders called *Cai kỳ quan* 該奇官, *Cai đội* 該隊, *Chính Đội trưởng* 正隊長, *Đội trưởng* 隊長, etc. From an institutional point of view, these military commanders and their soldiers were just as formidable as the private army of the Trịnh Lords.<sup>25</sup> Each military unit had its own salary area called a *Chế lộc* 制祿, i.e. a fixed area that was taxed by the commander. This salary system was set up independently of the Lê military, which did not operate in this way.<sup>26</sup> This new form of remuneration for commanders caused serious problems for the local Lê administrators

21 Ibid.: 934–5.

22 This military system introduced under Lê Thánh Tông was not just a copy of the Ming dynasty's, however. Under this system, soldiers from the Thanh-Nghệ provinces were in charge of defending the capital. This means that the original Lê military could not exclude regional troops from its national organisation. See Yao Takao, 黎初ヴェトナムの政治と社会 [Politics and society under early Lê dynasty Vietnam] (Hiroshima: Hiroshima University Press, 2009), pp. 117–32.

23 Ueda Shinya, ‘ベトナム黎鄭政権における鄭王府の財政機構: 18世紀の六番を中心に [The financial organisation of the Lê-Trịnh government in the eighteenth century Vietnam: An examination of “Luc Phien” in the princely court of Trịnh]’ (*Southeast Asian Studies* [東南アジア研究] 46, 1 (2008): 38–9.

24 Lê Đình Sỹ, ‘Về binh chế: Tổ chức quân đội triều chính vua Lê chúa Trịnh’ [About the military system: Military organisation of the Lê-Trịnh government], in *Chúa Trịnh: Vị trí và vai trò lịch sử* [Trịnh Lords: Their historical position and significance], ed. Ban Nghiên cứu và biên soạn lịch sử Thanh Hóa; Viện sử học Việt Nam (Thanh Hóa: Xí nghiệp In Ba Đình Thanh Hóa, 1995), pp. 298–9.

25 Taylor, ‘The literati revival’: 4–5.

26 Ueda, ‘Financial organisation’: 37–40. See also Ueda, ‘The local administration’: 261–3.



because commanders in the Red River delta were directly supervising their own salary areas. Overall, the coexistence of the Lê and the Trịnh administrations caused significant confusion at the local level.

The lawsuit quoted also indicates the presence of many irregular local officials who set up departments in the provinces without obtaining the central government's permission. These irregular positions were repeatedly prohibited from the middle to the latter half of the seventeenth century, beginning in 1653:

Irregular official titles such as *Cơ sát* 譏察, *Tuần sát* 巡察, *Đồng huyện* 同県, *Cai huyện* 該県, *Cai tổng* 該總, *Tuần tổng* 巡總, *Thủ ước* 守約, *Thủ khoán* 守券, and *Chấp khoán* 執券, etc. are abolished. Among these abolished officials, persons who are determined to be rendering distinguished service are permitted to proceed to the capital for appeal, and will be appointed depending upon their talents. Otherwise, they must confine themselves to repenting their former mistakes and following the path of virtue for the rest of their lives. If they persist in their old customs and create a disturbance, the people will be permitted to complain to the authority in order to prohibit them strictly.<sup>27</sup>

One should note here the Trịnh court's conciliatory attitude to those who had been banned, allowing them to apply for suitable posts in the capital. This regulation clearly demonstrates the Trịnh court's intention to hire qualified and experienced persons.

Proclamations against irregular positions continued, such as one issued in 1662 that 'a soldier in the local administrative village of each region, province, prefecture, and village must not gather people by professing himself an official, and must not deprive good people of property by the establishment of an irregular department'.<sup>28</sup> Another statute in 1674 clearly stated that 'each of the Grand Defenders [*Trần thủ* 鎮守] ... must not establish irregular officials at their own discretion to threaten the calm lives of the people'.<sup>29</sup> The Grand Defender was an official position during the last stage of the early Lê dynasty which remained influential in the Lê-Trịnh government because it oversaw provincial militaries under the direct command of the Trịnh Lords.<sup>30</sup> Another 1684 prohibition showed that there were 'irregular officials called *Cai huyện*, *Cai tổng*, *Cơ sát*, *Tuần bộ*, etc., who have many guns, [and] act unlawfully'.<sup>31</sup> These documents indicate that the region saw a flood of military commanders and soldiers actively establishing local irregular positions in conflict with the Lê administration.<sup>32</sup>

27 Nguyễn Sĩ Giác, ed., *Lê-triều Chiêu-lệnh Thiện-chính* [Lê dynasty edicts and statutes for wise government] (Saigon: Đại học viện Saigon, Trường Luật khoa Đại học, 1961) pp. 400–1; hereafter, *Thiện-chính*.

28 *Thiện-chính*: 354–55.

29 *Ibid.*: 40–41.

30 Ueda Shinya, 'ベトナム黎鄭政権の官僚機構: 18世紀の鄭王府と差遣' [The Lê dynasty bureaucracy of northern Vietnam during the 18th century: The Trịnh 'Shogunate' and the dispatch of ministers], *Journal of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko* 91, 2 (2009): 103–6; Sakurai, *Traditional villages*: 24.

31 *Thiện-chính*: 372–75.

32 The general populace was not very conscious of the illegality of these departments, however, despite repeated government prohibitions. *Corpus* includes many inscriptions containing irregular official titles. See, for instance, inscriptions N. 4146 (1671), N. 5409–5410 (1682), N. 6244–6245 (1692), N. 8023 (1711), etc.

**Table 1: Lower-ranking bureaucrats of the Trịnh court, 1630–1709**

Years	No. of bureaucrats <sup>a</sup>	No. who passed lower civil service examinations
1630s	1	0
1640s	3	2
1650s	7	6
1660s	1	0
1670s	11	2
1680s	20	7
1690s	38	11
1700s	44	8

Note: <sup>a</sup> Most of lower ranking official titles in this period were simplified in the inscriptions. In this table, I only extract the persons who clearly work in the Trịnh court.

Sources: *Corpus*, vols. 1–15; Ueda Shinya, 黎鄭政機構の研究 (Study of the Lê–Trịnh government structure), (Ph.D. diss., Hiroshima University, 2010), pp. 101–4.

However, after the mid-seventeenth century, the frequent prohibitions placed on such local irregular officials began to curtail their activities. Simultaneously, more lower-ranking bureaucrats called *Thị nội thư tả* 侍内書寫 (department secretaries), under the direct control of the central Trịnh court, were gradually recruited. Table 1 summarises data in the *Corpus* inscriptions on these lower-ranking personnel of the Trịnh court from 1630 to 1709.

This table demonstrates that successful candidates of the *Thư toán khoa* 書算科 (lower civil service examinations), the literati, represented a constant ratio amongst the lower Trịnh court bureaucrats. These examinations were held once every ten to fifteen years in the seventeenth century, then every twelve years in the eighteenth century; at least 1,000 candidates passed each time. In the seventeenth century the examinations were held in 1628, 1652, 1661, 1675, and 1686.<sup>33</sup> Notably, the examinations were carried out at closer intervals after 1652, coinciding with the forbidding of irregular departments in 1653. This means that, after the mid-seventeenth century, the suppression of irregular positions and the absorption of literati were performed in parallel. One can assume that the Trịnh Lords began to replace the irregular officials — military officers and soldiers — in local bureaucracies with Red River delta literati after the 1650s. Therefore, the political rise of the literati around Phạm Công Trứ and the promotion of various policies based on Confucianism, as indicated by Taylor, must be considered to be an extension of this development.<sup>34</sup>

The expansion of the Trịnh administration after the mid-seventeenth century is reflected in changes to the official titles of lower bureaucrats. In the early seventeenth century, these titles did not include *phiên*, but usually contained the term *Vương phủ* (Trịnh court). As of 1649, however, official titles sometimes also included the term

33 *Kiến văn tiểu lục* 見聞小錄 [Fine records of experience], Han-Nom Institute, Hanoi, VHv. 1322/1, 64a–64b. This does not mention the examination in 1628. However, according to the inscriptions of N. 3930, N. 4646–7, and N. 4648–4651, *Mậu Thân khoa* (戊辰科 Examination of *Mậu Thân* year (=1628)) was also held in 1628.

34 Taylor, ‘Literati revival’.



**Table 2: Secretaries-in-chief of departments in the *Corpus* inscriptions**  
**E: Eunuch I (year passed): Imperial scholar M: Military man X: ambiguous person (Civil vassal?)**

Year	Phiên (Department)				Inscription no.
	<i>Hộ phiên</i> (Revenue)	<i>Bình phiên</i> (Military)	<i>Thủy sư phiên</i> (Navy)	not clear	
1649			M		9986-9987
1663		E			3703-3704
1675				M	9843-9846
1679		I ( ? )			6068
1682	E				4161-4162
1686	E				9954-9957
1689		I (1680)	I (1670)		1710-1713; 2605-2606; 5568-5571
1690	E				714-717
1691			I (1670)		12727-12730
1692	I (1685)				7098-7101
1693			I (1670)		6390-6393
1695	I (1683), I (1685)		I (1670)		6459-6462; 8196-8199; 10022-10023
1696	E, I (1685)		I (1670)		3986-3989; 6315-6317
1697			I (1688)		6350-6353
1698	I (1685)		I (1688)		275-276; 289-290; 7174-7177
1699			I (1670)		5210-5213
1700	E	I (1685)	I (1670)		1225-1228; 5118-5119; 7032-7035; 7152-7155; 8569-8572; 8585-8588; 12810-12811
1701			I (1670)		8187-8189
1702	I (1688), I (1691)	I (1685)	I (1670)		3197-3198; 5109-5112; 6435-6438; 14633
1703		I (1683)	I (1688)		3413-3414; 13533-13536
1704		X	I (1697)		2319-2322; 4199-4200
1705		I (1697)			13775-13777

1706	I (1685)			6439–6442; 9691–9692
1707		E		9797–9798
1711	I (1694)			5576–5579
1713		I (1688)		1462–1465; 1466–1469
1715	I (1700)			5855–5858
1716	I (1700)			2752–2755

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1718 *Lục phiên (Six Departments)*

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	<i>Lại phiên</i> (Personnel)	<i>Họ phiên</i> (Revenue)	<i>Lễ phiên</i> (Rites)	<i>Bình phiên</i> (Military)	<i>Hình phiên</i> (Justice)	<i>Công phiên</i> (Works)	Inscription no.
1718	E			E			452–455; 5370–5371
1721						I (1712)	7764–7767
1725					E		9195–9198
1726					E		6488–6489
1727		E					2344–2353
1732				I (1715)			7480–7483
1734		X			I (1724)		1471–1474; 4209–4210
1736				I (1727)	I (1721)		4553–4555
1737		X			I (1721), I (1733), E		824–827; 867–870; 3274–3275; 3423–3424; 3518– 3520; 3529–3532; 3535–3536
1744						E	2453–2454
1751	I (1731)						7389–7392
1761			I (1748)				6342
1763				X			952–953
1765		E					8381–8384
1767			I (1748)		I (1757)		3148–3149; 14535
1768		I (1754)					4220–4223

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Continued

Table 2: Continued

Year	Phiên (Department)				Inscription no.
	Họ phiên (Revenue)	Binh phiên (Military)	Thủy sư phiên (Navy)	not clear	
1771	E, I (1757)				1000–1003; 1052–1053; 1054–1055
1772	E				3269–3271
1773	E	E		E	2502, 2504; 2503, 2505; 2875; 7015–7016
1775		E		E	2499–2500, 2513; 7030–7031; 7089; 9934–9935
1777				E	7093–7094; 10245–10246
1780	E				2805
1783				I (1779), E	684–687; 7019–7020; 9928–9929

Sources: *Corpus*, vols. 1–15; data from Ueda Shinya, 'Study of the Lê-Trịnh government structure', pp. 106–8.

*phiên*.<sup>35</sup> While the exact date of the establishment of *phiên* in this system cannot be ascertained, the personnel data compiled in Table 2 nonetheless suggests that the Trịnh government was divided into three departments in the mid-seventeenth century. This supports the conjecture that the first appearance of *Thủy sư Phiên* and *Binh Phiên* in legislative documents was in 1666.<sup>36</sup> However, it is difficult to know precisely how duties were allocated among the three *phiên*, because the sources on the seventeenth-century *phiên* are fragmentary. The surviving documents indicate that *Binh Phiên* and *Thủy sư Phiên* took charge of military management, for example, assuming authority over the assignment of the Thanh–Nghệ soldiers and the substitution of disabled soldiers.<sup>37</sup> This contrasts with early seventeenth-century practice, when each military unit recruited its own soldiers directly.<sup>38</sup> While sources related to *Hộ Phiên* in the seventeenth century are more limited, their first appearance in the *Corpus* occurs in 1686.<sup>39</sup> The first appearance of the *Trưng thu hiệu* (Tax collection office), the financial arm of the *phiên*, is in 1678.<sup>40</sup> From these sources, the *Hộ Phiên* can be presumed to have been set up around 1680; thus, the Trịnh financial organisation appears to have been set up slightly later than its military organisation.

In summary, the construction of the Trịnh Lords government can be divided into two periods. First, the Trịnh Lords, having taken control of the Red River delta in 1592, continued to maintain the armed forces of the Thanh–Nghệ provinces as their own power base, with military men and soldiers stationed in each newly restored territory. This resulted in the disorderly establishment of irregular departments and the extension of the power of the military in local areas in the early seventeenth century. In the second stage, the Trịnh Lords considered this a reckless military-directed development, rather than a reinforcement of their own power. Therefore, after the mid-seventeenth century, the Trịnh Lords began to strengthen their control over the Red River delta by seeking to abolish irregular positions and set up regular administrative departments, partly by recruiting massive numbers of literati-bureaucrats from the area.

## 2. Trịnh Cương and his reign

This section examines internal politics from the reign of Trịnh Căn (1682–1709) to that of Trịnh Cường (1709–1729), in order to understand the establishment of the *Lục Phiên*. Keith Taylor has described the political rise of the Red River delta literati (as represented by Phạm Công Trứ) during the second half of the seventeenth century; however, his analysis does not extend to the subsequent political situation.<sup>41</sup> In particular, one needs to pay attention to the manner of Trịnh Cường's accession in order to understand his policies after coming to power.

During Trịnh Tráng's reign (1623–1657), the Trịnh court began to recruit Red River delta literati as bureaucrats, a move which supported their political rise. As a

35 Inscription N. 9986–7 in *Corpus*.

36 *Thiên-chính*: 356–58.

37 *Thiên-chính*: 356–8; 368–70.

38 *Thiên-chính*: 348–9; 352–3.

39 Inscription N. 714–7 in *Corpus*.

40 *Thiên-chính*: 148–9.

41 Taylor, 'Literati revival': 13–15.

result, and as Taylor indicates, local administrations under Trịnh Căn (1682–1709) came under central control to a greater degree than before. Trịnh Cường's policies were solidified by the reorganisation of the existing governing structure, and supported by the Red River delta literati, as represented by imperial scholars such as Nguyễn Công Hãng 阮公沆, Lê Anh Tuấn 黎英俊, and Nguyễn Công Cơ 阮公基. Both these individuals were appointed during Trịnh Căn's reign through the higher civil service examination, and they went on to play important roles as policymakers during Trịnh Cường's reign. Therefore, this study will first examine the political situation through their activities as senior bureaucrats in the Trịnh court.

There is a detailed record for Lê Anh Tuấn in his family genealogy, the second half of which includes his many letters of appointment.<sup>42</sup> After passing the higher civil service examination in 1694, Lê Anh Tuấn was first assigned to the Han Lam Academy, and subsequently to the Six Offices of Scrutiny (1707–9), the Six Courts (1709–1715), and the Six Ministries (1715–c.1732). Most of his posts in the imperial court were insignificant, however. At first he was sent to Kinh Bắc province as a member of staff for the Grand Defender (1695–1707), before being called to the Trịnh court as *Trí Phiên* 知番 (Secretary-in-chief of department), and *Bồi tụng* 陪從 (Vice minister of Trịnh court). After that, he was promoted to *Tham tụng* 參從 (Minister of Trịnh court)<sup>43</sup> in 1720. In other words, his imperial Lê positions indicated only his official rank, while his substantive career as bureaucrat was in the Trịnh Lords' government. His was not an exceptional case, but similar to that of many imperial scholars who worked in the Trịnh Lords government while holding shell titles in the Lê court.<sup>44</sup> The *Corpus* inscriptions contains the records of many imperial scholars who held official titles in both the Lê and Trịnh courts.<sup>45</sup> As in Lê Anh Tuấn's case, it was typical for an imperial scholar to work at a local military administration at the start of his career, before being promoted to the Trịnh court; after which he would be consecutively appointed as secretary-in-chief of a department, vice minister, and minister of the Trịnh court.<sup>46</sup> The appearance in the records of imperial scholars under the Trịnh Lords meant that the literati-bureaucrats of the Lê court, which was losing real power due to the Trịnh administrative expansion, were being absorbed into the Trịnh government. These imperial scholars were to play an important role in policymaking during Trịnh Cường's reign.

Two scholars, Nguyễn Quý Đức 阮貴德 and Đặng Đình Tường 鄧廷相, played a key role in the accession of Trịnh Cường, and had long careers as civil bureaucrats

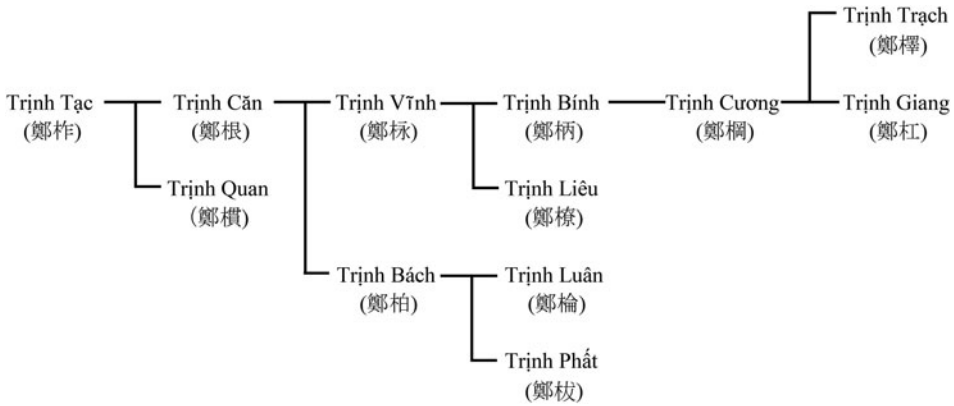
42 *Lê tộc Gia phả*, Han-Nom Institute, A. 2807. See also Ueda, 'The Lê dynasty bureaucracy': 109–16.

43 Most of the official Trịnh titles did not resemble those of the previous Chinese dynasties. Official Chinese titles usually had the name of the institution first, followed by the rank/title (for example, 戶部尚書). However, official titles of in the Six Departments had the rank/title first, followed by the name of the institution (for example '知侍内書寫戶番'). This follows the Vietnamese word order (modified word is first, modifier is latter).

44 To expand the Lê-Trịnh bureaucracy officials working for the Trịnh Lords were 'dispatched' from the Lê court. Officially, this process needed the permission of the Lê emperor, however, he had no real authority over personnel affairs. See Ueda, 'Lê dynasty bureaucracy': 109–16.

45 *Ibid.*: 97–106.

46 One cannot ascertain exactly when this recruitment of imperial scholars to the Trịnh Lords' government became routine. However, one should at least examine the case of Phạm Công Trứ, who was dispatched to the Sơn Nam province in 1642 as the Grand Defender's staff of Trịnh Tạc. Taylor, 'Literati revival': 8.



**Figure 1. Trịnh clan members involved in the accession of Trịnh Cương**

Sources: Trịnh tộc thế phả (*Han Nom Institute, VHv. 1756*); Trịnh vương phả ký (*Han Nom Institute, A. 676*); Trịnh thị thế phả (*Han Nom Institute, VHv. 373*).

under the Trịnh Lords. According to inscription N.587–90, Nguyễn Quý Đức was born in Đại Mục village, Từ Liêm district, and entered the Trịnh Lords government in 1670 at the age of 23. In 1676, he passed the imperial examination and was first assigned to the Han Lam Academy. In 1680, however, he was dispatched to Cao Bằng as a staff of Grand Defender. After returning to the capital, he was sent to Hải Dương province in order to quell riots in 1698. He gained Trịnh Căn's confidence by succeeding in this task, and began to participate in policymaking for the Trịnh court. According to *Toàn thư*, in 1703, Trịnh Căn consulted Nguyễn Quý Đức on the difficult task of selecting a successor. Trịnh Căn — who had himself succeeded Trịnh Tạc after the latter passed away at the age of 77 in 1682 — was already 50 years old. Considering the average lifespan of the time, he was not young at all, and in 1684, he named his second son Trịnh Bách 鄭柏 as his successor, as his first son Trịnh Văn 鄭栢 had already passed away.<sup>47</sup> However, three years later, in 1687, Trịnh Bách also passed away.<sup>48</sup> In 1688 Trịnh Căn therefore nominated Trịnh Bính 鄭柄, his grandchild, the son of his first son Trịnh Văn, as his successor.<sup>49</sup> Unfortunately, Trịnh Bính passed away in 1702.<sup>50</sup> Trịnh Căn began to waver due to this series of deaths, until he decided to nominate Trịnh Cương, Trịnh Bính's son, and his great-grandson. This decision was based on Nguyễn Quý Đức's and Đặng Đình Tường's stated opinions in 1703 that succession should be limited to his direct descendants (see Fig. 1).<sup>51</sup>

The selection of Trịnh Cương's successor was such an unstable process that Trịnh Căn began to hesitate, and consulted with his subordinates about this decision. This was due to the many grand-uncles and uncles who could be potential successors, and

47 *Toàn thư*: 1014.

48 *Toàn thư*: 1016.

49 *Toàn thư*: 1016–17.

50 *Toàn thư*: 1029.

51 *Toàn thư*: 1029–30.



who might insist on Lord status via lineage due to this series of early deaths. Furthermore, this situation was complicated by a faction of Trịnh clan members who commanded the military camp surrounding the capital. According to *Toàn thư*, Trịnh Luân 鄭楡 and Trịnh Phát 鄭拔 had plotted a coup d'état, but were executed along with Đào Quang Nhai 陶光涯, Lê Thì Đường 黎時棠, and Nguyễn Quang Phụ 阮光輔 after the prosecution of Nguyễn Công Cơ.<sup>52</sup> Trịnh Luân and Trịnh Phát, who were the sons of Trịnh Bách, were also discontented with the relocation of successor status to Trịnh Vĩnh's bloodline after Trịnh Bách's death. While the motives of these members of the Trịnh clan are apparent, those of the three people executed along with Trịnh Luân and Trịnh Phát are not as clear. There are no further details about Nguyễn Quang Phụ. However, the *Toàn thư* shows that Đào Quang Nhai was likely a son of Đào Quang Nhiêu 陶光饒, who had been actively involved in the Trịnh–Nguyễn conflict under Trịnh Căn.<sup>53</sup> Đào Quang Nhai was appointed as Grand Defender of Nghệ An province in 1661.<sup>54</sup> Lê Thì Hiến 黎時憲 was the father of Lê Thì Đường, and had also been involved in the Trịnh–Nguyễn conflict under Trịnh Căn. In 1672 he too had been appointed as Grand Defender of Nghệ An province, after Đào Quang Nhiêu. Both were the sons of influential commanders in charge of the defence of the volatile border zone. From these facts, one can surmise that the factional group supporting Trịnh Luân and Trịnh Phát had strong connections to the Thanh–Nghệ military men and their frontline troops.

On the other hand, unlike his predecessors, Trịnh Cường himself did not have military experience. His most powerful supporter in military affairs was Đặng Đình Tướng, a member of the most influential clan in Sơn Nam province. During the sixteenth century, Đặng Huấn 鄧訓 served as a vassal for the Trịnh Lords, and his daughter had married Trịnh Tùng and given birth to the next Lord, Trịnh Tráng. Subsequently, the Đặng and Trịnh families maintained this strong blood connection through repeated intermarriage. According to his family genealogy,<sup>55</sup> Đặng Đình Tướng passed the higher civil service examination in 1670, and was consecutively on the staff of the Grand Defender of Kinh Bắc province and the Surveillance Commissioner of Sơn Tây province. After these posts, he returned to the capital in 1688, and was consecutively Secretary-in-Chief of the Navy, and Vice-Minister in the Trịnh court. Notably, even though he was a civil bureaucrat for the Lê dynasty, he was promoted to his status in the Trịnh court while holding an additional post as a military unit commander. His career obviously had precedent, as his family had produced many high-ranking military men, due to their family connection to the Trịnh Lords. In 1705, Đặng Đình Tướng was transferred from a civil to a military bureaucracy, and went out to Sơn Nam province as its Grand Defender. Article 1709 of his family genealogy, written when Trịnh Căn's health had deteriorated, explains

52 *Toàn thư*: 1030–31.

53 In *Toàn thư*: 990, one person named Trịnh Cơ 鄭樞, who was the son of Đào Quang Nhiêu, appears with Lê Thì Đường. He was pardoned for using the family name 'Trịnh', and then changed his name. It is possible that Trịnh Cơ and Đào Quang Nhai were therefore the same person. It is also likely that the *Toàn thư* entry for the third month of 1704 intentionally recorded his original name because he had rebelled against the Trịnh Lord.

54 *Toàn thư*: 966.

55 *Đặng gia phả hệ toàn chính thực lục*, vols. 4–6, Han-Nom Institute, A. 633/2, pp. 114–34.

that Trịnh Cường let Đặng Đình Tướng manage the armaments. Then, as soon as Trịnh Căn passed away, Đặng Đình Tướng immediately marched into the capital with 9,000 soldiers from Sơn Nam province, and overcame Trịnh Liễu 鄭櫟 at his military post. Thus, Trịnh Liễu, who was the uncle of Trịnh Bính, gave up his ambition to the throne, and Trịnh Cường was able to ascend to the throne safely.<sup>56</sup> While *Toàn thư* does not record this military confrontation at all, the genealogy of Đàm Công Hiều 譚公徇, Trịnh Cường's tutor, contains this episode after Trịnh Căn's death.<sup>57</sup>

This challenge to his accession also indicates both Trịnh Cường's lack of military experience and insufficient connection with the military men, as well as the fact that his support base was in the Red River delta, especially in Sơn Nam province. His grand-uncles and the uncles commanding the Thanh–Nghệ military were serious threats to his position. This led to a series of policies aimed at breaking the court's dependence on the Thanh–Nghệ power structure and at reinforcing control over the Red River delta.

While the initiation of taxation of private rice fields in 1722 is apt to attract attention,<sup>58</sup> they were carried out in parallel with military reform. In fact, Trịnh Cường took military authority away from the Trịnh ruling family in 1722, and established six new troops, which were placed under the command of his maternal relatives.<sup>59</sup> According to *Cường mục*, these troops consisted of soldiers from the Red River delta, as well as newly enlisted soldiers from the Thanh–Nghệ provinces.<sup>60</sup> This move was obviously aimed at limiting the military influence of Trịnh clan members. The previous Trịnh Lords had depended on the military might of the Thanh–Nghệ provinces, and only enlisted the Red River delta people when they needed more troops for larger military campaigns.<sup>61</sup>

Trịnh Cường had carefully prepared for this enlistment exercise in the Red River delta for several years. New conscripts from the Red River delta were required to prepare vast public rice fields, because the regulations required all soldiers to provide certain allotted rice fields in their villages. For this purpose, Trịnh Cường had ordered a survey of the cultivated areas and population of the Red River delta for the first time in about fifty years, leading to new regulations for the conscription of Red River delta citizens between 1720 and 1722.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, new enlistees from the delta had caused a decrease in tax yields, because tax revenues were dependent on the

56 *Đặng gia phả hệ toàn chính thực lục*: 137–8.

57 *Đàm thị Gia kê*, Han-Nom Institute, VHv. 1353. This is the genealogy of the Đàm clan in Ngô Tiên village (Kinh Bắc province). The first edition was compiled by Đàm Công Hiều in 1718, and the second edition by Đàm Thận Đức 譚慎德 in 1832.

58 See, for example, Đỗ Đức Hưng, 'Trịnh Cường, Nguyễn Công Hãng và cuộc cải cách tài chính ở Đàng Ngoài thế kỷ 18 [Trịnh Cường, Nguyễn Công Hãng and financial reorganisation in 18th century Northern Vietnam]', in *Chúa Trịnh: Vị trí và vai trò lịch sử* [Trịnh Lords: Their historical position and role], ed. Ban Nghiên cứu và biên soạn lịch sử Thanh Hóa; Viện sử học Việt Nam (Thanh Hóa, 1995), pp. 298–99.

59 *Toàn thư*: 1054.

60 *Cường mục*: 3281–2. One can confirm the commanders of six new troops in 1764 in *Chính Hòa tiến sĩ đề danh bi ký*, Han-Nom Institute, A. 421, 27a–28a. See further Ueda, 'Lê dynasty bureaucracy': 98–108.

61 *Thiện chính*: 360; *Toàn thư*: 1051–2.

62 *Toàn thư*: 1046–55.

public rice fields. It is likely that Trịnh Cường's tax reforms were created in order to prevent a further decline in revenues from the region. Trịnh Cường also changed the enlistment regulations, reducing requirements for the Thanh–Nghệ provinces from one soldier for every three persons to one soldier for every five persons, while enlisting one soldier for every five persons in the Red River delta in 1721. In this way, he established new troops in 1722.<sup>63</sup>

In sum, Trịnh Cường was dependent on the support of the Red River delta, and very wary of his agnates and of the Thanh–Nghệ commanders; this caution led to a programme of enlisting soldiers from the delta and reinforcing supervision of the military. At the same time, the Trịnh financial and military organisation was approaching completion with the establishment of the *Lục Phiên* in 1718. The following section analyses the records of the *Lục Phiên*, paying attention to the eunuchs, who have been mentioned in previous studies as having important military and financial roles during this period.<sup>64</sup>

### 3. *Lục Phiên*

As mentioned, the Trịnh court had three *phiên* in the seventeenth century, which were rearranged in 1718 into the *Lục Phiên* (the Six Departments), staffed by civil officials, eunuchs, and the Trịnh Lords' vassals.<sup>65</sup> Concurrently, the tax collection department was reorganised into six groups collectively named *Lục Cung* 六宮 (the Six Palaces). Scholars agree that the Six Ministries of the Lê lost their powers by transferring their duties to the *Lục Phiên* of the Trịnh court.<sup>66</sup> *Lục Cung* itself comprised of six groups, each of which consisted of around fifteen various tax collection offices.<sup>67</sup> However, there are two perspectives regarding the hierarchical relationship between the *Lục Phiên* and *Lục Cung*.

According to Sakurai, the *Lục Phiên* of the Trịnh court imitated the Six Ministries of the Lê court, and therefore the duties of the Ministry of Revenue were inherited by the *Hộ Phiên* (Department of Revenue). Naturally, *Lục Cung*, which was an aggregation of tax collection offices, belonged to the *Hộ Phiên*.<sup>68</sup> From this perspective, *Lục Cung* was a substructure of the *Hộ Phiên*. According to Lê Kim Ngân's analysis of tax collection during this period, however, each *phiên* supervised its own *cung*, so that *Lại Phiên* supervised the *Tả trung cung* 左中宮 (Left–Centre Palace), *Hộ Phiên* supervised the *Hữu trung cung* 右中宮 (Right–Centre Palace), *Lễ Phiên* supervised the *Đông cung* 東宮 (East Palace), *Binh Phiên* supervised the *Nam cung* 南宮 (South Palace), *Hình Phiên* supervised the *Tây cung* 西宮 (West Palace), and *Công Phiên* supervised the *Bắc cung* 北宮 (North Palace). Concerning operating budgets, each *phiên* performed its duties with the permission of the *Hộ Phiên*.<sup>69</sup> From this perspective, *Lục*

63 Under Trịnh Cường there was also a tendency to both restrain the power and also reinforce the supervision of the Grand Defender. See *Toàn thư*: 1039; 1045; 1056.

64 Wada, 'On the Vietnamese eunuchs'; Hasuda, 'The eunuchs'.

65 *Toàn thư*: 1044.

66 Lê Kim Ngân, *Chế độ*: 293–8; Sakurai, *Traditional villages*: 190.

67 See further Sakurai, *Traditional villages*: 190–91; Lê Kim Ngân, *Chế độ*: 339–44.

68 Sakurai, *Traditional villages*: 191.

69 Lê Kim Ngân, *Chế độ*: 295–6. Judging from their locations, the local allotment of tax collection seems to have been as follows: the Left–Centre and Right–Centre Palaces were in charge of tax collection of around Hanoi; East Palace was in charge of Hải Dương province; South Palace was in charge of southern

*Phiên* was a complex office, which simultaneously supervised tax collection while also performing the Six Ministries' duties.

The duties of the Six Ministries and of the *Lục Phiên* are presented in *Bạch ty Thủ vụ* 百司庶務 (General affairs of all government offices),<sup>70</sup> which defined the duties of all government offices in 1751, and forms the basis of this examination. For example, under this regulation, the Ministry of Works 'must accomplish duties to examine appealed trials from *Công Phiên* (Department of Works), and to check the affairs of manufacturing and grants, while observing regulations'.<sup>71</sup> The Department of Works had many different duties, from the supervision of the cadastre (taxable property) of the affiliated *Cung*, to the maintenance of manufactures and government property, the provision of government rice fields, and the examination of lawsuits.<sup>72</sup> Hence, the *Công Phiên* actually carried out the duties of the Ministry of Works as well as financial duties, while the Ministry only played the part of inspectorate for the *Công Phiên*. This structure was similar to that of the other *Phiên*, each of which had financial duties, while also inheriting the duties of the Six Ministries. One can observe the actual workings of this system in the *Toàn thư* chronicle entry from the eleventh month of 1725.<sup>73</sup> According to this entry, Trịnh Cường gave the *Công Phiên*, not the *Hộ Phiên* nor the *Hình Phiên*, an order to investigate embezzlement by the tax offices, and the embezzlers appealed to the Ministry of Works. When one assumes that *Lục Cung* is the substructure of *Hộ Phiên*, as Sakurai argues, Trịnh Cường's order appears to be unreasonable. Instead, it seems more appropriate to consider that the *Công Phiên* were in charge of managing taxation cadastres as *Bạch ty Thủ vụ* records, as Trịnh Cường ordered the *Công Phiên* to expose the embezzlement. Moreover, the inscriptions N.3616–3617 in the *Corpus* record an appeal by a woman named Đường Thị Tùng 楊氏從, who was living in Phường Lan village and contributed a rice field to her village:

In the year before last [1783], the public rice field, which was more than three *mẫu* [about 10,800 m<sup>2</sup>] in the domain of Văn Lan village was registered as the public rice field of our village by a Department of Works' mistake. As a result of appealing to the Trịnh court day after day, the Trịnh court officials accepted this error, and decided to assume that this land is a public rice field of Văn Lan village. They sent this decision to the *Công Phiên* to correct the taxation cadastre, and informed the *Hộ Phiên* official of it. Taxes increased so much that our village has not shared them yet ....

In this case, the department that determined which village would pay taxes on the disputed rice field was not a *Hộ Phiên*, but rather a *Công Phiên*, and the Trịnh court officials gave instructions to make the correction in the *Công Phiên* records, but only informed the *Hộ Phiên*. It is therefore clear that the local departments,

Sơn Nam province; West Palace was in charge of Sơn Tây and northern Sơn Nam province; North Palace was in charge of Kinh Bắc province. Furthermore, each Palace was allotted a mountainous area. Those living in the Thanh–Nghệ provinces were exempted from taxation and thus did not have tax collection offices.

70 *Bạch ty Thủ vụ*, Han-Nom Institute, VHv. 1273. *Lê Tấn thân Sự lục*, Han-Nom Institute, VHv. 1762, and *Loại chí* include the same content. This document is also recorded in *Toàn thư*: 1133–34.

71 *Bạch ty Thủ vụ*: 14b.

72 *Bạch ty Thủ vụ*: 20a–20b.

73 *Toàn thư*: 1060.

with the exception of the *Hộ Phiên*, also participated in the management of both the taxation cadastre and the tax calculation, and thus both of the documents cited above support Lê Kim Ngân's argument.

However, when one examines the personnel organisation of the *Lục Cung* in detail, a problem arises regarding the assumption that *phiên* (department) and *cung* (palaces) were separate systems. According to *Hội điển*, for example, all of the directors of the main tax collection offices belonging to the *Bắc Cung* were higher officials of the *Công Phiên*.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, the inscription quoted above does not refer to the *Bắc Cung* either. This suggests that *Công Phiên* bureaucrats supervised most of the tax offices, and as such, the organisational boundaries between the *Công Phiên* and the *Bắc Cung* are not clear. Rather, one should consider that each was unified in terms of its personnel organisation. It is likely that each palace within the tax collection office was one section of the corresponding Department.<sup>75</sup>

Therefore, this structure indicates two institutional characteristics of the *Lục Phiên*. First, that the *Lục Phiên*–*Lục Cung* system was divided into six fields for the purposes of tax collection and setting expenditure, namely, personnel, revenue, rites, war, justice, and works. *Lục Cung* was not an independent department, but was rather the name of the tax collection system within the *Lục Phiên*. Indeed, each department in this system had its own financial arm for carrying out the duties of the Six Ministries. While the names of the offices are similar, the structure of the *Lục Phiên* was nonetheless totally different from that of the Six Ministries. Second, the *Lục Phiên* occupied a much lower political position in the government than the Lê Six Ministries. In inscriptions N.3616–3617, the Trịnh court's policy decisions were made by *Tam tưng* 參從 and *Bồi tưng* 陪從, who were called *Phủ liệu quan* 府僚官 in general terms,<sup>76</sup> and the *Lục Phiên* was the practical office for performing their orders. This examination of the *Lục Phiên* indicates some structural differences between the Trịnh and the Lê institutions.

#### 4. Personnel and structure of the *Lục Phiên*

This section examines the organisation of personnel in the *Lục Phiên*. Although previous studies have noted the importance of eunuchs in the Lê–Trịnh government,<sup>77</sup> they do not indicate which positions the eunuchs occupied within the system. Given the scarcity of descriptions of the Trịnh court in the dynastic chronicles, we have had little knowledge of this bureaucratic group during this period. To shed more light on this, Tables 2 through 4 extract data from the *Corpus* inscriptions regarding persons holding official *Lục Phiên* titles.<sup>78</sup> Here, eunuchs are those further

74 *Lê triều Hội điển*, under the heading 'Công thuộc'.

75 This is more clearly displayed in the titles of the Six Palaces bureaucrats, because all of those working at tax offices held the title of *Lục Phiên*, while there was no tax collection office per se. See Ueda, 'Financial organisation': 44–6.

76 Fujiwara Riichiro, 東南アジア史の研究 [Studies on the history of Southeast Asia] (Tokyo: Hozokan, 1986): 541–3; Ueda Shinya, '17世紀ベトナム黎鄭政権における国家機構と非例官署 [The administrative structure and irregular departments of the Lê–Trịnh government in 17th century Vietnam]', *Tenri Bulletin of South Asian Studies* 33 (2006): 24–6.

77 Wada, 'Vietnamese eunuchs': 40; Hasuda, 'Eunuchs': 15–16.

78 In the *Corpus* inscriptions, many other people have *Lục Phiên* titles. In these tables, only those holding the posts in a particular year are cited, so as to avoid confusion of data.

**Table 3: Vice secretaries-in-chief (副知番), Assistant secretaries-in-chief (僉知番) and Dispatched secretaries-in-chief of departments (内差) in the *Corpus* inscriptions**  
**E: Eunuch I (year passed); Imperial scholar X: ambiguous person (Civil vassal?)**

Year	<i>Hộ phiên</i> (Revenue)	Departments <i>Binh phiên</i> (Military)	<i>Thủy sư phiên</i> (Navy)	not clear	Inscription no.
1657				X	3924–3925
1681			E		4459–4462
1686			E		2516–2517
1689			E		2509–2512
1690			E		5907–5910
1691			E		3999–4000
1694	E	E			5602–5603
1697		E, E			8565–8568; 8798–8801
1698			E		13557–13561
1700		E, E	X, E, E		1225; 4459–4462; 7032–7035; 7152–7155; 8569– 8572; 8585–8588
1701		E			9697–9700
1702	E				6435–6438
1704			E		2625
1706	E, E		E		3970–3972; 6439–6442; 9691–9692
1712		E			7349–7350
1716		E			2752–2755

*Continued*



Table 3: Continued

Year	<i>Hộ phiên</i> (Revenue)	Departments <i>Bình phiên</i> (Military)	<i>Thủy sư phiên</i> (Navy)	not clear	Inscription no.		
1717	E				10557–10560		
1718	<i>Lục phiên</i> (Six Departments)						
	<i>Lại phiên</i> (Personnel)	<i>Hộ phiên</i> (Revenue)	<i>Lễ phiên</i> (Rites)	<i>Bình phiên</i> (Military)	<i>Hình phiên</i> (Justice)	<i>Công phiên</i> (Works)	Inscription no.
1719				E			2335–2336; 2455–2456
1720		E					7297–7298
1724		E					7042–7044
1725						E	12026–12027
1727			E				2343–2344; 2471–2472
1729						E	8597–8600
1732						E	8812–8815
1732			X				8812–8815
1734					X	E	461–464; 2308
1734	E					E, E	6753–6756; 8806–8809; 13623–13625
1736		E				E	4553–4555
1737			X			E, E	2497–2498; 3423–3424; 3274–3275
1738			E		E	E, E	2235; 2255; 3404–3405; 7156–7159; 8792–8795
1739				E		E, E	6739–6742; 6749–6752; 7810–7813; 8612–8614
1740			E				7970–7971
1741				E			2493–2496
1742	E						3421–3422
1744		E, E	X				2453–2454; 3737–3738; 8205–8206

1749		E	X			950–951; 5403–5406
1750			E			11333
1751	E					8322–8323
1752				E		3050,3052
1718	<b>Lục phiên (Six Departments)</b>					

	<i>Lại phiên</i> (Personnel)	<i>Hộ phiên</i> (Revenue)	<i>Lễ phiên</i> (Rites)	<i>Binh phiên</i> (Military)	<i>Hình phiên</i> (Justice)	<i>Công phiên</i> (Works)	Inscription no.
1756						X	3266
1757		X					1925–1928
1759	E						7170–7171
1760					E		9790
1761			E				8348
1763	E						1062–1063
1766		E		E		X	9815–9818; 10730–10733; 10920
1767	E	E					3148–3149; 3976–3977
1769	E						6782–6783
1770						E	6918–6919
1771		E	E				1000–1003; 8761–8764; 8810–8811
1775						E	2762
1780	E		E			X	469, 475; 7312–7315
1782				X			299–300; 301, 308; 302,305–307
1783	E						9701–9702
1785						X	5758–5759

Sources: *Corpus*, vols. 1–15; data from Ueda Shinya, 'Study of the Lê-Trịnh government structure', pp. 109–12.

classified as *Nội giám* 內監 (Eunuch) and *Ty lễ giám* 司禮監 (Directorate of Ceremonials). Table 2 contains data on *Tri Phiên* 知番 (Secretaries-in-Chief of the Department), Table 3 has data on *Phó tri Phiên* 副知番, (Vice Secretaries-in-Chief of the Department), *Thiêm tri Phiên* 僉知番 (Assistant Secretaries-in-Chief of the Department), and *Nội sai* 內差 (Dispatched Secretaries-in-Chief of Department). These officials were the highest-ranking bureaucrats in charge of the main tax collection office in each Department.<sup>79</sup>

Based on their distribution in these tables, one can conclude, as did Wada and Hasuda, that eunuchs played an important role in the Trịnh Lords' financial organisation,<sup>80</sup> and indeed, there is a high possibility that over half of the tax revenue was administered by eunuchs.<sup>81</sup> More importantly, many eunuchs in the finance department and elsewhere always held additional posts as commanders, i.e. their elevated positions as financial bureaucrats existed in parallel to their military positions.<sup>82</sup> This suggests a close relationship between the financial and military arms of the Trịnh Lords' government. Here, we further test this possibility by examining the data on lower-ranking bureaucrats.

One can confirm the presence of lower-ranking *Lục Phiên* bureaucrats who held the official titles of *Cai hợp* 該合 and *Thủ hợp* 首合. Although it is not efficient to enumerate all of the lower ranks cited in the *Corpus*, as they are numerous and their official titles were only inscribed briefly, data on some lower bureaucrats of the *Lục Phiên* are summarised in Table 4. Notably, this group also held official titles in the Lê government, and in fact there was a strong tendency for such officials to maintain additional local administrative positions, such as 'Vice Governor of Prefecture' (*Động tri phủ* 同知府) and 'Vice Governor of District' (*Huyện thừa* 縣丞). One important consideration here is to establish whether or not the Trịnh and the Lê dynasty posts were concurrent.

Indeed, two possibilities exist, the first of which is that the Trịnh Lords gave *Lục Phiên* posts were given as additional posts to local Lê administrators for the purpose of tax collection. In this case, one must regard the local administrative unit of the Lê, that is the prefecture and district, as the end unit of the Trịnh financial organisation.<sup>83</sup> The second possibility is that the Trịnh court had its own local tax collection structure, separate from the local offices of the Lê dynasty, and gave the Lê dynasty's official post to this constituent for the sake of convenience. Should this be the case, one must try to determine which unit actually undertook tax collection at the local level.

It would be appropriate to examine the actual working places of these *Lục Phiên* lower bureaucrats in order to analyse the two possibilities. In 1664, one statute regulated official rank conferment to lower-ranking bureaucrats of departments, and

79 *Hội điển*, under the heading 'Công thuộc'.

80 Wada, 'Vietnamese eunuchs': 24–8; Hasuda, 'Eunuchs': 15–16.

81 For more details on the organisation of data in the tables, see Ueda, 'The financial organisation', pp. 45–54.

82 See also personal records of two *Tri Phiên* eunuchs in the inscriptions N.1456–1459 and N.1466–1469 in *Corpus*.

83 Trần Thị Vinh proposes this view in 'Thế chế chính quyền nhà nước thời Lê-Trịnh: Sản phẩm đặc biệt của lịch sử Việt Nam thế kỷ 17–18 [State and government system in the Lê-Trịnh period: A special product of Vietnamese history in the 17th–18th centuries]', *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử* 332 (2004): 21–30.

**Table 4: Lower-ranking *Lục Phiên* bureaucrats mentioned in the *Corpus* inscriptions**  
**P: Passed lower civil service examinations X: Ambiguous person**

Year	<i>Lục Phiên</i> (Six Departments)						not clear	Inscription no.
	<i>Lại phiên</i> (Personnel)	<i>Hộ phiên</i> (Revenue)	<i>Lễ phiên</i> (Rites)	<i>Binh phiên</i> (Military)	<i>Hình phiên</i> (Justice)	<i>Công phiên</i> (Works)		
1719	P			X, X				1047-1048; 2335-2336
1720		X				X		13376-13379; 13675-13678
1721			X					9111-9114
1722					P, X			14180-14183
1723						P		2156-2159; 7112-7115
1724		P		X			X	6372-6375; 7042-7044; 10012
1726	X, X		X					8224-8227; 8666-8667
1728							X	7193-7194
1729		X, X						7887-7890; 9686-9689
1730?				X				5538-5541
1732			X					10169-10172
1734				X, X		X		461-464; 11389-11390
1735			X					2718, 2721-2722
1736				X				4553-4555
1737		X						2627
1738				P	X		X	812-813; 7040-7041; 8792-8795
1739	X		X	X				5643-5646; 8612-8614; 10540-10543
1745						X		65
1749				X				5403-5406
1750		X	X				X	456; 11331; 11332; 11333; 11334
1751	P							7848-7849
1753				X				3129-3130

Continued

Table 4: Continued

Year	<i>Lục Phiên (Six Departments)</i>						not clear	Inscription no.
	<i>Lại phiên</i> (Personnel)	<i>Hộ phiên</i> (Revenue)	<i>Lễ phiên</i> (Rites)	<i>Bình phiên</i> (Military)	<i>Hình phiên</i> (Justice)	<i>Công phiên</i> (Works)		
1755							X	10101–10102
1757					X			12644–12645
1764	X	X	X	X				11402–11403
1772		X						3444–3445
1773						X		7015–7016
1775		P						2499–2500, 2513
1776						X		3610–3611
1780		X, X						469, 475; 7312–7315
1783	P							1865–1866
1785	X						X	12196–12197; 12198–12199
1787		X						12806–12807

Sources: *Corpus*, vols. 1–15; Inscriptions no. 452–5 in *Corpus* refer to nearly 30 officials in the Military Department, but I do not add these entries in this table. Ueda Shinya, 'Study of the Lê-Trịnh government structure, pp. 116–17.

indicates that the granting of Lê posts to lower bureaucrats depended on their work performance. Furthermore, this statute was directed at lower bureaucrats working at 'Vương thân Trường doanh' 王親長營 (large garrisons under Trịnh family command).<sup>84</sup> Considering the Trịnh court's organisational expansion from around the 1650s, the purpose of this statute was to give Lê dynasty posts to new bureaucrats who were being absorbed into the Trịnh court. The Trịnh Lords' vassals were merely individuals with no special rank or title because the Trịnh institutional structure was established outside that of the imperial system. As a result, most of the Trịnh court officials held concurrent posts in the Lê administration. The dispersal of official Lê posts amongst the Trịnh Lords' subordinates as shown in the statute above reflects this situation.<sup>85</sup> More importantly, this statute indicates that such vassals were not only working in the central Trịnh court, but also in the army. In fact, the salary regulations for garrison soldiers in the eighteenth century provided that 'each secretary of the Six Departments receives 330 old copper coins'.<sup>86</sup> Considering these facts, it is likely that the lower-ranking bureaucrats of departments were working in local garrisons as civilian employees of the army or navy, and supervised by higher bureaucrats of departments who were concurrently military unit commanders. If this is the case, then one must consider that the Trịnh Lords' financial organisation was not based on the Lê court's local administrative unit, but rather on the basis of the army posts dotting the area.

To understand this perspective, one must examine the relationship between the Trịnh posts and the local administrative unit of the Lê dynasty. The entry for a District official in *Bạch ty Thủ vụ* sets forth the regulations pertaining to the District office:

When people within the jurisdiction come to appeal problems, excepting tax collection by the contractor, tax collection by an officer of the Grand Defender, and regulation against robbery by the Grand Defender, the District offices must give a judgment for all of the problems and make it public.<sup>87</sup>

In other words, the District officials did not have authority to collect taxes. Furthermore, when the contractor responsible for tax collection had trouble with taxpayers in a district, the District office was not to receive their appeal. That is, the local administrative unit of the Lê dynasty was completely removed from tax collection, based on rules set out by the Trịnh in the mid-eighteenth century. On the other hand, *Hội điển* records the following:

When a tax contractor denounces a village, or when a village sues for illegal tax collection, the *Lục Phiên* official must inquire into it within three days, and give a decision within 10 days. When a person appeals the decision, that would be also permitted within 10 days. An appeal made any later than this must not be accepted.

84 *Thiên-chính*: 24–6.

85 See Ueda, 'Financial organisation': 38–9.

86 *Hội điển*, under the heading 'Binh thuộc, Đồn trấn Bình lương'.

87 *Bạch ty Thủ vụ*: 31a.



This regulation was enacted in 1722, because the taxation cadastre had been placed under the authority of the *Lục Phiên* since 1718. As mentioned previously, the duties of the *Lục Phiên* included the examination of lawsuits, thus this coincided with the regulation quoted above. Therefore, one can conclude that the *Lục Phiên* did not only have jurisdiction over tax collection but also had jurisdiction over lawsuits relating to tax collection by this regulation. In this way, the Trịnh Lords constructed their own financial organisation by availing themselves of the existing military structure. As a result, tax collection and the military were integrated in the Trịnh Lords' government.

### Conclusion

The restoration of the Red River delta to the Lê dynasty at the end of the sixteenth century saw local irregular officials, previously under the control of military men, flood into the new territory. However, the presence of these officials should not be regarded as resulting from an arbitrary decision of the Trịnh Lords. Rather, they emerged from the disorderly but extensive influence of military men, and the institutional immaturity of the central Trịnh court. When the Trịnh Lords began to construct their own governing structure in the second half of the seventeenth century, however, these local officials obviously provided the Trịnh Lords with an institutional basis. The Trịnh Lords thus restrained the activity of these officials from the mid-seventeenth century, and began to construct what would become the new governing structure by absorbing significant numbers of literati from the Red River delta. The resulting financial organisation, the *Lục Phiên*, which was established in the early eighteenth century, was a kind of military district system, constructed by harnessing the military organisation.

However, one must then ask why eunuchs were still used so widely in the governing organisation of the Trịnh Lords. Indeed, from analysing their activities, it appears that the eunuchs of the Lê–Trịnh government had much in common with those of the Ming dynasty, as Hasuda argues.<sup>88</sup> However, the Trịnh Lords' government differed in important ways from that of the Ming. The governing structure of the Trịnh Lords did not have the Sinic distinctions of 'Inner court' and 'Outer court'. Both the financial and military organisations of the Trịnh were originally established outside of the imperial system, and were merely the Trịnh Lords' private organisations. Even if a Trịnh Lord and his governing structure held real power, he could not legitimately make his own organisation into the 'Outer court', because the Trịnh Lords were still subjects of the Lê emperor. Hence, the Trịnh Lords were obligated to expand their private organisation without the distinction of an 'Inner court' and 'Outer court'. My suggestion is that this lack of a clear distinction also allowed the eunuchs to enlarge their own orbits of power under the Trịnh.

The Trịnh Lords government has been characterised as a kind of military regime or clique. Yet it absorbed significant numbers of both literati and eunuchs from the Red River delta in the process of reinforcing central control from the second half of the seventeenth century. Even if this government was dependent on a military institutional framework, one hesitates to characterise the Trịnh Lords' reign solely as a

88 Hasuda, 'Eunuchs': 15.

‘government of military men’. A more constructive perspective regarding this period is not whether the Red River delta literati had political initiative or not, but rather the historical significance of the appearance of a non-Sinic government structure, as well as the vanishing organisational substance of the Lê dynasty. Recent studies suggest that the Trịnh Lord’s local rule depended on the territorial and blood connections of locally influential persons in the Red River delta.<sup>89</sup> Their rise brought about the collapse of Lê Thánh Tông’s centralised rule, while supporting the Trịnh Lords’ government. That is to say, the autonomous village initiatives by the literati and the Trịnh Lords were complementary. The widespread appointment of eunuchs during the Lê–Trịnh period reflects the particular institutional position of the Trịnh governing system. However, it is certain that this also opened up another channel for the people of the Red River delta to participate in government other than through the higher civil service examination for literati. The Nguyễn dynasty’s local rule must be considered as an extension of this socio-political development.

89 See Ueda Shinya, ‘ベトナム 黎鄭政權における徴税と村落’ [Tax collection and villages during Vietnam’s Lê dynasty under the Trinh lords], *Eastern Studies* 119: 91–107, and Ueda, ‘The local administration’: 265–66.