



## BOOKSHELF

DOI: 10.54631/VS.2022.62-111112

### MILITARY HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL VIETNAM AS A SUBJECT OF SPECIAL RESEARCH

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Vetyukov A.V. *Mech, sokryty v glubine vod (voennaya traditsiya srednevekovogo Vietnama)* [The Sword Hidden in the Depth of Waters: The Military Tradition of Medieval Vietnam]. SPb.: Evrazija, 2018. 320 P. ISBN 978-5-8071-0386-4.

**Abstract.** The article is a review of the book V.A. Vetyukov. “The Sword Hidden in the Depth of Waters: The Military Tradition of Medieval Vietnam”. The author has summarized the results of his long-term research-work on the traditional Vietnamese army in the Later Le period (1428–1787). The base of the research are Vietnamese sources; first of all, “Records of military establishments” “A classified description of the establishments of past dynasties” (the part “A classified description of the establishments of past dynasties” by Phan Huy Chu (1782–1840); research literature and the author’s field research during his stay in Vietnam and the neighboring countries. In its comprehensive coverage and detailed description, the book is superior to all the works that had been published on the topic not only in Russian and Western, but also in Vietnamese historiography (first of all, the last two parts of the book). At the same time, some conclusions deserve discussions, in particular those on the army structure and its history. In any case, the book is very useful and can serve the base for further research-work, educational literature and lecture series.

**Keywords:** military history, medieval Vietnam, army structure, folk martial arts, the Later Le dynasty.

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**For citation:** Fedorin A.L. (2022) Military History of Medieval Vietnam as a Subject of Special Research. *Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 6 (3): 86–92.

Received: July 27, 2022

Accepted: August 25, 2022

The book by Vladimir Alexandrovich Vetyukov is the result of his long-term hard work which he began when still a student. Every moment its reader feels clearly that the work is not a mere attempt to throw light on an understudied issue with great possibilities of presentation of the new matter, but also the result of the author's own interest and personal dedication, being a significant part of his life. Being a specialist in the same period of Vietnam's history as V.A. Vetyukov (the Later Le Dynasty), I have never seen the works (also, by Vietnamese authors) where the addressed issues were considered so thoroughly and deeply. First of all, it concerns the fourth and fifth parts of the book, which are dedicated to weapons, tactics and strategy, branches of service and their interaction, the description of some battles (to confirm the conclusions), martial arts of Vietnam. In fact, nearly all the data are either new or understudied, but they are described quite systematically and in detail.

The importance of the work is its ability to give rise to many additional questions, the desire to discuss, to make some theses clearer or to question them. I will try to do this (as far as the first three parts are concerned).

The author mainly used one part of the Vietnamese historical encyclopedia which was written by Pham Huy Chu in the 19th century. The references show that he rarely addresses texts of chronicles. At the same time, the descriptions of military actions and the situation in the army belong to the most favorite subjects of medieval historiographers, and they could give a lot of information either to supplement or sometimes to refute the author's opinion. But he follows Phan Huy Chu, who bases nearly solely on regulatory documents of that time and believes that the matters should have stood in strict accordance with the governors' orders.

One of the author's key theses is as follows: Vietnam's governors always desired to create the united national army, but in difficult times some military leaders used to part it into detachments thus significantly decreasing its defense potential. I cannot agree with him. In my opinion, on the contrary, through the most part of the country's history the Vietnamese army essentially consisted of modest professional armed forces of local military leaders (Phan Huy Chu writes too little about them), which were, in fact, enforced and supplemented with the militia of ordinary community members (this Vietnamese historian writes a lot about them). There was Duong Dinh Nghe (931) with his numerous "adopted children" (*con nuôi*), twelve *sứ quân* (965–967), who mostly retained their armies under the Dinh dynasty (968–980), Le Dai Hanh (980–1005), who with this purpose distributed his lands between his numerous sons, the Tran dynasty and so called "residents of Quoc Oai" or «residents of Khoai Chau» under the Later Li dynasty (1009–1225). The leaders of such detachments possessed large territories and could maintain a private army with their support. Mostly, they were not slaves, after war they returned to agriculture, as the author writes (p. 33). They were true professionals free of taxes and duties, who constantly engaged in military training, made and improved weapons, cared for elephants and warhorses. A special case of such army units was the metropolitan troops (Guards) under the country's governors. Usually, the troops were recruited from the ruler's locals (in the place of origin of the dynasty or the ruling house) and had every advantage and worthy content. These were the frameworks for training future junior and senior commanders. They were a significant military

force, being well coordinated and united. They had something to lose; therefore, they could not leave the battlefield and fought to the end. In terms of quantity, they were not many, but sufficient enough to fulfil all the usual tasks of the armed forces (fight against the rebels, criminals, pirates, to repulse raids of the neighbors, Cham among them, and to restrain mountaineers). In cases of huge military actions (resistance to the Chinese in the north, campaigns to the south, first against Cham, then the Nguyen) those army units were replenished by community members liable for call-up. They were divided into unequal groups and went over as subordinates to the same professional detachments, where they performed either an auxiliary role or were a mere cannon-fodder during assaults of enemies' fortifications and positions.

The system of private military units got the greatest development under the Tran dynasty (1226–1400), when the significant part of the Red (Hong) River Delta was divided into the domains of military leaders, who were the relations of the dynasty. In the end, due to high combat readiness of the army Dai Viet managed to overcome the Mongol invasion and to stop the victorious march of the Yuan army to the south. Numerous participants of those battles (members of those units) are called slaves in the documents, but they were real wise military leaders who are still revered in Vietnam. Some streets in Hanoi bear their names.

After the revolt of 1400 guided by Le Quy Ly, when military leaders-relations had been mostly killed the country's army consisted of separate regional units of professionals ceased to exist. The new governor of the country decided to establish quite a new army based on overall recruitment of a part of community members according to all the Neo-Confucian principles. Such an army had been created, but its combat readiness could not be compared with the combat readiness of the prior army. The events of 1407 showed that during six months the country had been conquered by the troops of the Ming dynasty and became a Chinese province.

Le Loi, the founder of the Later Le dynasty, took the sad experience of his predecessor into consideration, and his troops which in the end, in 1427, forced the Ming to leave Vietnam, were formed on the base of separate regional units, like under the Tran dynasty. Under him there appeared the army regionalism within the country: since then, military professionals at all the levels were almost exclusively natives of the southern provinces of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An. This situation was quite natural. Chinese fortresses were conquered by soldiers from the south, but there was a significant number of soldiers from the north among their defenders. During twenty years the latter had adapted to the Chinese governance and did not want to change anything in their life. Indeed, a relatively small number of the Chinese left Dai Viet after the truce, to a great surprise of Xuanzong (1425–1436), a Ming emperor. This mutual mistrust of the southerners and northerners lasted for many years. In the end, military professionals could be only southerners, but northerners could be recruited as a militia in large campaigns. In fact, there were no military leaders of middle and high level among them. Besides, this situation was also justified from the economic point of view. The south was poor of cultivated lands and abundant of population. In the conditions of the after-war depopulation the South was more advantageous to use for recruiting, leaving the role of the chief supplier of taxes and duties to the Red River Delta. In compensation the population of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An were exempt from poll-tax and from a significant part of ground-rent (one *mau* of land in the south was thrice as much as one *mau* of land in the north, but the rent was equal). Here, without much damage to state economy it was allowed to create landlords' estates, the practical base for future new military units.

Under the next emperors of the Later Le the situation was the same up to the rule of Le Thanh Tong (1460–1497). The witness of the unpunished murders of his brothers Le Nhan Tong and Le Nghi Dan, having been designed and realized by those all-powerful military leaders, he once again tried (though not so radically as Le Quy Ly) to create the army of a new type. It is noteworthy that all his military successes (the utter defeat of Champa in the south and the conquest of its territory, the mighty campaigns to the west, when the troops of Dai Viet reached Burma frontier), were achieved when the military reforms had not been completed yet, so, the combat readiness of his new army had not been tested. But soon after the death of that emperor things returned to the usual.

Up to the first quarter of the 18th century, when the power in Dai Viet passed into the hands of *chua* Trinh Cuong, the situation was the same, but his reforms launched in 1722 destructed everything. According to his decree, all the private military units were liquidated. Instead, a standing army was created; it consisted of recruits from all the provinces (not only from the southern ones); unfortunate communities were to feed them having allocated plots for the purpose. Besides, for the first time the centralized system of personnel training was created and the exams for military ranks were introduced. All the pretenders who answered requirements (both from the south and from the north) could take the examinations. That reform was fatal for the armed forces of that time, as showed lasting civil wars having been broken in 1739. Downsized Guards, as usual consisted of southerners, having lost a number of its advantages showed its weakness in real battles, while a significant number of recruited soldiers and officers from natives of the delta went over to the rebels. The power of *chua* from the Trinh dynasty was under mortal threat and nearly fell. It managed to maintain due to incredible efforts, having created the army of quite a new type, again with the support of the loyal regional elites, but not only southern, but also northern ones. That army, despite the author's opinion (p. 72), was extremely strong. It managed not only to suppress all numerous rebellions within its territories, but also to realize the age-old dream of the North to conquer the main domains of the Nguyen of South Vietnam and even to rout the Tay Son troops, who were forced to recognize their submission to the Later Le dynasty. The efficiency of the administrative structure created by the Trinh with its support on regional elites of the entire country who got unprecedented authority in the field, required a strong central power, able to construct a relevant system of containment and counterbalance. In 1782, when after the death of *chua* Trinh Sam that power disappeared, the country, in fact, broke up into separate hostile domains and was an easy pray for the southern Tay Son. This is a short description of military history of medieval Vietnam, as I see its reflection in chronicles. However, in general, this description is not contrary to the conceptions of the author, but only amplifies and embellish his book.

Also, the author's conclusions about fortifications give rise to questions. Investigated medieval texts show that the Vietnamese were not very competent about them. They could neither build really inaccessible fortifications, nor defend them, nor take fortresses of enemies by assault. Up to the mid-17th century there was no Vietnamese fortress known (capital Thang Long among them), which could endure the siege for more than a day. Also, it concerns fortresses in mountains on the Chinese frontier, where it could have been possible to impede a few passages for Chinese troops for a time, but it never occurred. Fortress Da Bang, which under Le Quy Ly was fondly built by the entire country as the defense center against the Ming inevitable invasion, was taken in the first assault. They even did not attempt to defend the fortresses of the eastern (Thang Long) and western capitals of that time. The earliest noteworthy fortifications, which played a significant role during numerous wars, appeared in Vietnam as early as in the 17th century. This is the famous Dong Hoi wall, an

insurmountable obstacle for the troops of *chua* Trinh in the course of their campaigns against the Nguyen of South Vietnam, according to some data was built with the use of designs offered by western advisers. The first really inaccessible fortresses (Quy Nhon, which emperor Gia Long could conquer when he had routed the Tay Son in the north, or Gia Dinh (Saigon), where the rebel Le Van Khoi held the line for a long time) had been constructed according to the designs by French specialists.

The same can be said about the skill to conquer fortresses of the foreign enemy, first of all Chinese ones. Great Vietnamese military leader Ly Thuong Kiet who lived in the period of the Later Ly dynasty, thought over, in details, his campaign to South China, but bumped into a quite insignificant fortress Yongzhou, which he assaulted for more than forty days. In the end the fortress had been conquered, but all the plans were upset, and the Vietnamese troops had to return. For Le Loi, the founder of the Later Le dynasty, the fortresses built in Vietnam by occupational troops of the Ming dynasty were a real headache. Despite numerical superiority of the Vietnamese troops and their lasting standing at the walls, they never took the capital Thang Long. Even at the future emperor's native land, the Thanh Hoa province, the chief fortress was never conquered. Its defenders, like those of most other Chinese fortifications, left it voluntarily after the truce at the end of 1427. The same with the fortress in Nghe An, which was besieged for a long time and was left by the defenders having got the order from the capital. Numerous fortresses of the Ming which had already been controlled did not fall but were ceded due to the "heartfelt" correspondence of Nguyen Trai with their defenders.

Also, I would like to rehabilitate the court Guards, so called "arrogant soldiers" who were fallen upon by Phan Huy Chu followed by the author of the book; both accused them of robbery, oppression of civilians, and cowardice in the battlefield (p. 115). The Guards system based on recruiting of hereditary servicemen even for ordinary posts, from the southern provinces of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An (they guarded *chua* and the emperor) was introduced by emperor Le Thai To, who mistrusted the subjugated elites of North Vietnam and feared them. Throughout its existence the Guard coped with its task remaining a strong and reliable support of the throne. In fact, Guards did not communicate with the capital's residents; they even spoke different languages (up to now the dialect of Thanh Hoa province greatly differs from the capital's mode of speech) and were very arrogant to them. Their conditions were especially advantageous: good financial support, tax-free lands for their families at home, hereditary posts, great perspective for career development; they were envied not only by local common people, but also by ordinary soldiers, because the Guard rarely took part in military actions, only in the presence of emperor or *chua*. They were hated because their functions were those of gendarmes, domestic and foreign intelligence and counter espionage with their illegal arrests, tortures etc. The Guards became dangerous to the throne, if the power encroached on their advantages, made attempt to reduce either their salaries or their number, or the place at the court, or to force them to fight. There were three great riots.

I do not think that the author's attempt to use his own transcription (not transliteration, as he writes on p. 29) of Vietnamese names, terms and toponyms was successful. The very statement "I heard it when staying in Vietnam" is not convincing, if it does not belong to a professional philologist-phonetician. But the use of the system based first of all on transliterations, as it is usual for other works, allows any Vietnamist to understand the syllable without the original text and differ between «ch» and «tr», «s» and «x», «d» and «gi» etc. In any case, if you have chosen any of such systems, you must strictly adhere to it. There are no reasonable explanations for the separate writing of toponyms. At any rate, I have seen such phenomenon for the first time.

The same may be said about the suggestion to call the governors of Dai Viet “kings” relying on the system which existed in the period of the Holy Roman Empire (p. 27). The Far-Eastern Empire unlike the Roman one is first of all a form of government, state ideology, which the Vietnamese copied in details from China. But the author suggests to borrow the Chinese names of Dai Viet governors. Indeed, the term «Annan guowang», or Vietnamese «An Nam quốc vương» may be considered an approximate analogue of a European king. But that “Chinese title” emerged in 1174 and not all the Vietnamese emperors bore it. Thus, for the Yuan only Tran Thai Tong, the first emperor of the Tran dynasty, was Annan guowang. The rest representatives of the dynasty did not get such a title, because the traitor Tran Ich Tac was the first who had got it, then followed by his successors. The Mac emperors (the author obstinately calls them “usurpers”, though this definition was dropped in Vietnamese historiography long ago) got the hereditary office of governor-*dutunshi* (second rank, second class) from the Chinese. They considered Dai Viet one of the provinces of the Celestial Empire and called it Annam. Having returned to Than Long in 1593, the Later Le emperors could get the same office (not a higher one) from the Ming So, in my opinion, it would be better to award the governors of Dai Viet the title used by themselves and known to their subjects, but not that accepted by their geographical neighbors. I see no logic in the statement that emperor Quang Trung “got the king’s title” (p. 238), because that title was *hoang de*.

Several errors in the text are distressing. They do not impact its content and sense, but can lead to groundless doubts in the competence or accuracy.

Hry is not “ten” (p. 23), but “five”, as the character (伍) shows. In the text below the term’s interpretation is correct.

Van Don is not “coastline” (p. 30), but an island in the sea separated from the land with a narrow strait.

Tran Quoc Tuan (Hung Dao Dai Vuong or Tran Hung Dao) was hardly ever born in 1223 (p. 37) or in 1226 (p. 274), because his father Tran Lieu, the elder brother of emperor Tran Thai Tong, was born in 1211.

Military leader Le Loi could not get the temple name of Le Thai To (p. 53), because every ruler’s temple name is a posthumous one.

In 1533 the representatives of the Le dynasty (or rather the Trinh and Nguyen dynasties, the emperor being the only representative of the Le dynasty) found their shelter not in Thanh Hoa province (p. 59), but in one of the provinces (now Xam Neua) of Laos. They could settle in Thanh Hoa as early as in 1539.

In 1593 it was emperor Le The Tong, who entered the capital, not “a prince from the Le dynasty” (p. 59).

Nguyen Quoc Trinh was killed in 1674, not in 1673 (p. 64), and he had never been a judge. At that time, he was Minister of Public Works and Chancellor Pham Cong Tru’s right-hand man.

Che Bong Nga was the ruler of the Champa, not a prince (p. 84).

For example, it is hardly justified to consider Ngo Si Lien the author of “Complete Annals of Đại Việt” (p. 302). He wrote but one chapter (the 10th chapter of Complete Annals). The chronicle in its canonical version was brought to 1675, while the mentioned historiographer died in the 15th century.

Some references could not be found in the Bibliography: [Познер 1994], p. 265; [Trần Trọng Kim 2000], p. 237, 262; [Our military traditions, 1979], p. 176, 249, 253, 259, 260; [Bình thư yếu lược... 1977], p. 174; [Столтон 1801], p. 335; [Phan Huy Le...], p. 83.

However, these are minor comments. They cannot affect the final high assessment of the book. I can only wish the author to continue his research-work in this most interesting sphere. At the same time in his work, he should pay more attention to chronicles, the main sources containing plenty of facts (not mentioned, so far) for military issues, such as poisoned arrows, oiled (with the otter grease) war kites set on fire and flied towards the hostile fortifications, artillery duels between the enemies in 17th century and so on. We are looking forward to new published works.