



HISTORY, RELIGION AND CULTURE

DOI: 10.54631/VS.2022.64-114863

RE-CONSIDERING THE COUP D'ÉTAT OF 1370

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Abstract. In Vietnam's history virtually every new dynasty existed or emerged as the transition of power through the female line. Tran Thu Do, de-facto the founder of the Tran dynasty, attempted to construct such a system of power succession in the scope of a ruling family (intra-kin marriages, new emperors' appointments long before their fathers' deaths, widowed empresses being sent to nunneries) which could have excluded such an opportunity. The system peacefully existed longer than a century, and crashed. The analysis of the "Complete Annals of Dai Viet" and Chinese chronicles shows that the Coup of 1370 was the crucial event in that process. All the chronicles consider it to be supposedly a successful repulse of the attempt to seize power by the Duong House, strange to the Tran dynasty. However, that was the starting point of the final crash of Tran Thu Do's system and the result was the fall of the dynasty.

Keywords: Vietnam's medieval history, the Tran dynasty, the system of power succession in far-eastern empires in Middle Ages, the coup d'état of 1370 in Vietnam.

For citation: Fedorin, A. L. (2022). Re-considering the Coup d'État of 1370. *Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 6 (4): 42–50.

Received: October 21, 2022

Received in revised form: October 31, 2022

Accepted: November 15, 2022

Introduction

This article is an attempt to analyze the essence of the coup d'état of 1370 in Vietnam as the launching of final crash of a special power succession system which existed under the Tran dynasty (1225-1400), whose mission it was to maintain it in the scope of the ruling House and to prove that the event essentially preconditioned that dynasty's fall thirty years later. It is noteworthy that in the traditional and current historiography these events are always treated definitely, like an attempt of the usurper having no relation to the Tran dynasty, to seize power in the country, but it was successfully repulsed by legal representatives of the ruling House (see, for example: [Khâm định..., т. 1: 622-625;

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Lịch sử Việt Nam..., t. 2: 429; Polnaya akademicheskaya istoriya..., т. 2: 143]). I do not know any researches written with the aim to understand the essence of the event and to find who was the real usurper in that situation.

The chief method of the research is the use of the full existing information and the discovery of “secondary” details, which made it possible to doubt the generally accepted viewpoint on those events, as well as the direct comparison of the data of the Vietnamese and Chinese sources. Virtually all the facts in this article are taken from “Complete Annals of Dai Viet”. Special notes only are given to the information from other sources or from research-works.

The Tran dynasty succession system

In Vietnam virtually every new dynasty coming to power was a victory of the female ruling line over the male one. Perhaps, the only exclusion is the founder of the Late Ly dynasty (1009-1225) Ly Cong Uan (Ly Thai To, ruled in 1009-1028), who, being the palace guard's commander unceremoniously kicked out the juvenile member of his guard and took his place. In this connection, medieval historiographers had to invent the whole theory justifying his actions, pour buckets of mud on his predecessor's father and to find half a dozen “signs” of rising this man to power, by grace of Heaven.

A classic example of coming to power through the female line was also the seizure of the throne by the Tran dynasty. The authorship of the usurping power plan, particularly, its final part, is attributed to Tran Thu Do, a seemingly distant relative, a second uncle of Tran Canh, the future first ruler of the dynasty. Nevertheless, from 1224 up to his death in 1264, Tran Thu Do was de-facto the ruler of the country. We will not touch concrete dramatic events in Dai Viet with regards to the plan (they used to be described in details). It is noteworthy that Tran Thu Do's and his relatives' obvious and indisputable success in the process of the power seizure, on the one hand, certainly, pleased him, but on the other, it made him think that in the course of time descendants of the Tran dynasty could experience the same from other female lines nearby. So, he decided to construct such a system of power succession in the scope of his dynasty which could completely exclude the like opportunities. This system, the subject matter of Ta Chi Dai Truong's article [Tạ Chí Đại Trường 2009], consisted of the following three main theses:

— henceforth, all the important representatives of the dynasty (first and foremost emperors and their children) were to officially marry but in the scope of their House. The children of these marriages were to be considered the only true members of the Tran House, with all the ensuing consequences, rights and privileges. Thus, potentially dangerous for the throne places of the emperor's father- and son-in-law always belonged to his relatives through the male line; whatever the events, the power could not leave the House;

— to avoid the second threat, a potential opportunity of coups in a troubled period following the active emperor's death, under the Tran dynasty a new practice had been introduced, and the official successor took the throne immediately upon reaching adulthood, but his father or predecessor was proclaimed the Supreme emperor having retained all his powers up to his death or voluntary renunciation of them (the case of Emperor Tran Nhan Tong);

— finally, the Supreme emperor's widow (if she was still alive) was obliged, according to the system, to become a Buddhist nun.

All these three rules were strictly observed for about a century, but as early as in the 14th century the perfect Tran dynasty succession system, designed and realized by Tran Thu Do, began to falter, and finally crashed. It began under the Emperor Tran Minh Tong (ruled in 1314-1329), who, despite his relatively young age (34 years old), decided not to wait for the sons of his elder wife (and a cousin) Empress Hien Tu, but appointed ten-year old Tran Vuong his successor and later the emperor (Emperor Tran Hien Tong), who was not even his elder son. His mother Le Huan Nhuong did not belong to the Tran House and to correct that defect, Tran Vuong's "chief" mother was proclaimed the Empress Hien Tu. Nevertheless, for the first time at the horizon of Vietnam's history began to loom the figure of Le Quy Ly, a favorite who had not been born yet; Le Huan Nhuong was his paternal aunt.

Emperor Tran Hien Tong ruled in 1329-1341; meanwhile Empress Hien Tu gave birth to two sons, and after the emperor's death for the first time in the history of the Tran dynasty the power was transferred not vertically (i.e., from one generation to another), but horizontally (from one brother to another), to return it to a representative of the main line. Empress Hien Tu's younger son, 5-year-old Tran Hao was proclaimed the emperor (Tran Du Tong), because for some reason Tran Minh Tong considered his elder brother Tran Nguyen Duc to be "wild and violent". This appointment was almost imperceptible for the state: Tran Minh Tong, as usual, dealt with the affairs of the state up to his death in 1357.

Tran Minh Tong's wife's and the active emperor's mother's Supreme Empress Hien Tu's refusal to become a Buddhist nun after her husband's death, like all her predecessors did, contributed to the crash of general principles of government created by Tran Thu Do and the delegation of power in the scope of the dynasty. Living in the palace, supposedly on the Supreme emperor's last request, she engaged in the power-struggle in the country and played one of the key roles in the events which happened a little later.

In 1369, when 33-year-old Tran Du Tong got a fatal disease, the matter of succession to the throne was to be urgently solved. Empress Hien Tu had done that in the strict compliance with the traditions, founded by Tran Thu Do. To retain the power transfer through the chief line and vertically, she decided to transfer it to Tran Nguyen Duc's (already dead by that time) elder son, Tran Du Tong's elder brother. Doing that she gained the support of the dying emperor, who had proclaimed his will on his deathbed. The new appointed emperor, whom Vietnamese historical documents call Duong Nhat Le, and Chinese ones know him as Tran Nhat Kien, in reality was, probably, called Tran Nhat Le (?-1370). He was an adult man and even had children of his own, at least, one child. His mother was a former homeless actress, who occasionally found herself in the emperor's son's harem, not on political reasons. He had no alternative support of "the female line"; therefore, the choice of such a candidate, who owed everything to his grandmother, made the latter's positions very strong to maintain control over the emperor's court. Nevertheless, also, in this case they tried and maintained the power configuration prescribed with the Tran House traditions, in the compliance with the former samples: in 1369 the new emperor was made the husband of one of his paternal uncles' daughter; the uncle's name was Tran Phu (future emperor Tran Nghe Tong), having proclaimed her the Empress at once, thus having given at least formal opportunities to become the second person in the state to her father, i.e., "the omnipotent father-in-law". And let us not forget that Tran Phu's "chief" mother had already been appointed the empress Hien Tu, which made his positions more fortified. However,

for some time the post of the second person of the state was occupied by Tran Nguyen Trac , the eldest of Tran Minh Tong's living sons . Somewhat later Tran Phu took his place.

The description of the further events in Dai Viet in 1369-1370, according to official Vietnamese sources is extremely contradictory and inconsistent, which makes to think on some deliberate corruptions. Here is a short version of the events contained in the chronicles.

The official version of the coup and its inconsistencies

The new emperor was not Tran Nguyen Duc's native son . His mother found herself in the emperor's son's harem being already pregnant from a simple actor Duong Khuong, therefore, he had no rights for the throne. At the very beginning of 1370 Duong Nhat Le poisoned Empress Hien Tu, not to share the power with anybody. After that he began behave unseemly concentrating on drinking, theatre and even desired to change his family name back to Duong (?!). The Tran House relatives with Tran Nguyen Trac, the eldest of Tran Minh Tong's living sons at the head in the ninth lunar month of 1370 decided to rise the army for the purpose of overthrowing the usurper and to bring the power back to their family, but did not manage to make the coup d'état, and all the participants of the plot had been executed. In the tenth lunar month Tran Phu, "the omnipotent father-in-law", fled from the capital to mountains, then came to Thanh Hoa province , where all his survived relatives and allies gathered around him. The rebels managed secretly attract commanders of all the troops Tran Ngho Lang, and Tran Kinh (another Tran Minh Tong's son, future emperor Tran Due Tong), and in the eleventh lunar month they began their offensive on the capital. Having lost the army's support, Duong Nhat Le went down without a fight having met in person the attacking troops. He was demoted to Hon Duc-cong and could live in the capital, but the emperor was Tran Phu, the rebels' leader. Soon Duong Nhat Le trapped Tran Ngho Lang, his former commander-in-chief, and killed him to revenge his treachery. For some reason he was executed together with his infant son.

Now, let us try to observe dubious and inexplicable places of the version.

1. The data are generally known, but at the same time, the fact that Duong Nhat Le was not Tran Nguyen Duc's native son seems very dubious. In Dai Viet only the emperor had an official harem with strict rules, carefully guarded, with the eunuchs, who fixed all his visits. Also, Tran Nguyen Duc's relationship with Duong Nhat Le's mother could have begun prior to her coming to the harem. Also, even the baby's mother cannot exactly know who the father was. In any case the future emperor of Dai Viet was born, grown and educated in the family of one of the eldest sons of the Supreme emperor, always feeling his being the heir through the chief line, preparing to his future mission, obviously with no suspicion that someday he could be blamed in the absence of family relationships with the dynasty. And the only answer to the rhetorical question from the commentary by Ngo Si Lien: "Didn't [Duong] Nhat Le , an actor's son, know that he was not [Tran Nguyen] Duc's son?" is this: "No, he did not!"

In Vietnam's history there were many cases, when active emperors were suspected that their high-ranked fathers had had no relation to their birth. For example, Tran Nhan Tong , who was born on the eleventh day of the eleventh lunar month of 1258, though his mother became Tran Thanh Tong's official wife only in the eighth lunar month of the same year. Or Le Nhan Tong (ruled in 1442-1459), whose mother also came to Le Thai Tong's harem, supposedly being already pregnant [Fedorin 2020: 130-132]. Nothing could interfere with their rising to emperors. Also, they avoided direct suspicions and gossips during their lifetime. It is likely that the proclaiming Duong Nhat Le

actor Duong Khuong's son is a deliberate lie of the victors with the target to attach a bit of legitimacy to "the palace coup" of 1370, while there were no other motives to overthrow Duong Nhat Le. His nomination to the post of the emperor was quite appropriate with both the will of his late predecessor and absolutely all the norms and rituals of the Imperial Law.

2. The statement that Duong Nhat Le poisoned Empress Hien Tu is no less dubious. It is noteworthy that the authors of Vietnamese chronicles usually describe such events most thoroughly, paying them special attention. In the chapters devoted to the Tran dynasty ruling they are as follows: Ly Hue Tong's death, Phe De's death, Tran Thuan Tong's death, Tran Quoc Chan's death, which are described in all the details on the pages of the chronicles. But in the above-mentioned case the story is condensed in one sentence. It is not clear, how Duong Nhat Le poisoned the Empress and what the reason was. Even if Empress Hien Tu, as the chronicle mentions, soon was sorry about her choice in favor of Duong Nhat Le, she still was the main support and hope for him in conditions when he was opposed by omnipotent relatives, dissatisfied with his appointment. Future Tran Nghe Tong and his adherents were rather interested in the Empress' death, because the disappearance of such an authoritative and well-experienced opponent, virtually holding power, gave them freedom of action, what the furthering events showed. And to lay the blame on the man, who would never be able to answer the charges, was the usual practice of that time. For instance, it is sufficient to mention that the blame for Emperor Le Tuong Duc death (ruled in 1510-1516) was laid, in correspondence with the Chinese on the rebel Tran Cao, though it was well known that he perished by his own uncle Trinh Duy San's hand. However, there are no direct evidence that the Empress was killed by future plotters from the circle of her relatives, either. By the way, being an elderly person, she could die natural death, which was given out to be a poisoning. In any case, the version of her death as a result of Duong Nhat Le's actions seems to be the least probable.

3. In order to find concrete reasons which made Tran Phu rebel, essentially the first person in the state after the emperor, when Empress Hien Tu and his predecessor Tran Nguyen Trac had died, we will take the text of his poem addressed to Tran Kinh, his brother, the commander of all the troops in the country, with the request to support him. This document is especially interesting, while its form (a poem) interferes with (even excludes) any later intrusions, which makes it the most authentic part of the narration.

- Being of the highest rank, I am rudely slandered, and I had to leave my post,
- I have hidden myself, overcoming mountain ranges and leaving for the mountains to Barbarians.
- Seven tombs. Thinking of the past, I shed tears for thousand times,
- Ten thousand li. I have put my hand on my heart, and my temples have grown grey.
- Let us shatter the vicious moves of [the Kingdom of] Wu and keep safe the Tan dynasty's Fatherland,
- Let us rejoice the Liu and see the Hanh dynasty's civilization again,
- Sir, you must remember the deeds of [Emperor Tran] Minh Tong,
- Let us reconquer the sacred capital and fix the day of the return!

What conclusions does the text suggest? First of all, Tran Phu was obviously charged with some crimes ("rudely slandered"). Most likely, this was his connection with the plotters with his elder brother Tran Nguyen Trac at the head and his participation in the attempt of the coup d'état, but most

probably the charge of killing Empress Hien Tu, the evidence of the lines below. “The vicious moves of Wu” mean, of course, an event from Chinese history, Empress Wu Zetian attempt to take away power from the Tan (dynasty) and to create own Zhou dynasty [Istoriya Kitaya..., т. 3: 239-263], and the words “let us rejoice the Liu” means another event of the kind, an attempt of Empress Lu Hou to take away power from the Han dynasty (the Lu House) [Istoriya Kitaya..., т. 2: 240-241]. At last, “the deeds of Minh Tong” are, certainly, Tran Quoc Chan, Empress Hien Tu father’s ban and death in 1328. Thus, the appeal concentrates on the confrontation with Empress Hien Tu (dead by that time!) and no bad words of the active emperor. Not a word about his hypothetic kinship with the actor Duong Khuong. In my opinion, the tendency of Tran Phu’s actions is obvious. In this poem he suggests to oppose not Duong Nhat Le, but the chief line of the dynasty as a whole, the hateful Supreme Empress being its embodiment and at the same time his step-mother.

4. The version of the chronicles evidence that Tran Phu fled from the capital in order to return (with his relatives’ assistance) the power from the hands of “the usurper”, who did not belong to the imperial House. In this case he should have logically left for his Motherland, the Thien Truong province (now Nam Dinh city and its suburbs), or for the Motherland of his ancestors in Yen Sinh (now Dong Trieu of the Quang Ninh province). That was the place of family lands of the dynasty’s relatives, where they recruited the guards from the local population who defended the dynasty and had significant advantages being fellows-countrymen of the emperor, ready to stand to the end guarding them. But Tran Phu was not quite sure that all those people would support him. Therefore, first, he fled to the mountains (then Gia Hung in the area of the current Son La province). However, it was possible to find shelter there, but not allies to withstand the existing power. Then he moved to Thanh Hoa province, to his mother’s native village-*huong* Dai Lai. Thirty years later, Le Quy Ly built his own capital by that place. It means that launching his struggle for the throne he did not support on the Tran family (later several its representatives joined him), but on his mother’s family, but unfortunately the chronicles give no information about it. Thus, future emperor Tran Nghe Tong seized power not because all the Tran took his side, but because they mostly refused to support Duong Nhat Le keeping de-facto neutrality and observing the development of the situation.

5. The version of Vietnamese chronicles of the events of 1370 contradicts the version of all the Chinese sources. According to them Tran Phu (or Tran Thuc Minh, called so in Chinese chronicles) is a villain-usurper, having killed the ruler, who got the power legally. It is noteworthy that usually Chinese sources are not basic for us when studying internal political processes in Vietnam. As a rule, the Chinese were not interested in those processes; in their conclusions and actions they were guided first of all by their pragmatic interests and, if it suited them, they easily believed and agreed with any point of view of which the authorities of their southern tributary informed them without even trying either to re-test it or making it more precise. But the events of 1370 are a special case. The thing is that they occurred just in the moment when the Tran dynasty was quite successfully finishing the establishment of traditional tributary relations with the Ming dynasty, which came to power in China. During that process the circumstances were quite beneficial for the Vietnamese party. The thing is that the Juan dynasty did not acknowledge emperors of the Tran dynasty to be the legal rulers of Dai Viet. Under them that country had a very modest, if not the last, place among the tributaries of the Celestial Empire, its ambassadors were let to the capital but in the last resort, the tribute was taken just on the border. In this connection, unlike the situation during the transfer of the power from the Southern Song dynasty to the Juan dynasty, the Trans did not doubt having resolved to acknowledge new Chinese authorities; they were (among) the first tributers of the Zhonguo to

have acknowledged them (as early as in 1368). The founder of the Ming dynasty Zhu Yuanzhang highly appreciated that behavior of his southern neighbor and no later as in 1369 he sent his embassy to Thang Long together with Vietnamese ambassadors returning to the South. His embassy's heads were a courtier-reader *sidu* Zhang Yining and keeper of archives (*dianbu*) Niu Liang, to hand emperor Tran Du Tong (Tran Nhat Khue in Chinese chronicles) the edict of his appointment the ruler of Annam and the gilded silver seal. But when the Chinese embassy arrived, Tran Du Tong had already died. Tran Nhat Kien (Duong Nhat Le) who had taken the throne, tried to persuade the ambassadors to hand all those attributes of power to him, but as the edict was nominal, they refused. Niu Liang was forced back for a new edict, Zhang Yining waiting for him with the seal and gifts in Thang Long. Thus, he was a witness of all the events of 1370 and gave a true and detailed information of them to the Chinese emperor [Minh thực lục, ch. 43: 847-848; ch. 51: 1006-1007]. By and large, proceeding from pragmatic interests of China the Ming dynasty did not care who was or would be the ruler of Dai Viet, because the situation could not influence the two countries' relations, being at the same time so scandalous, that Zhu Yuanzhang categorically refused to acknowledge Tran Phu's power and give investiture to him, which virtually levelled all the achievements of the latest Vietnamese diplomacy; moreover, the prospect was threatened with active attempt of China to interfere with the domestic affairs of the state, even by the intrusion of victorious Chinese armies, which had lately united the entire country [Ibid., ch. 72: 1327]. This problem was to be solved in 1372, when after but two years of direct rule Tran Nghe Tong had to hastily give up (formally) the power having become the Supreme emperor, but having transferred the throne not vertically (to his son), but horizontally (supposedly to another line) to his younger brother Tran Kinh (emperor Tran Due Tong), which satisfied the Mings who needed no confrontation at that time [Ibid., ch. 88: 1566]. Up to his death in 1395 Tran Nghe Tong was the omnipotent ruler of Dai Viet, and the Chinese knew that well, sometimes even addressing him directly notwithstanding diplomatic protocol, but later they categorically refused to send a delegation for the ritual of commemoration of the departed emperor in order to make this the lesson for everybody who dared to come to power using such illegal methods as Tran Nghe Tong did [Ibid., ch. 244: 3547].

6. It is worth to note Tran Phu's attitude to his defeated adversary after the victory. It is known that at the final stage Tran Nhat Kien rejected the armed resistance to the rebels and voluntarily went towards the advancing armies. If he were a real usurper, who acted in the interest of another family, he would have been immediately and most severely executed. However, Tran Phu met him as a close relative ("Today the affairs have turned out otherwise than we expected, haven't they?"), allowed him to retain his high noble title (*Hon Duc Cong*), which could belong but to the emperor's close relative, and even allowed him to stay on in the capital. Nobody reminded the dethroned emperor of the mass murder of his Tran relatives with his uncle Tran Nguyen Trac at the head after the recent unsuccessful revolt. Indeed, Tran Nhat Kien was hastily executed charged with a criminal offence, but at the same time they killed his innocent juvenile son, who in the future certainly could have been the chief claimant to the throne being the elder great-grand-son of Tran Minh Tong through the main line. The execution of those unfortunate people was typical; they were neither quartered nor beheaded, but were beaten to death with sticks. Moreover, they both were buried, and the place of their tombs was known. This is the evidence that also in this case they were treated like close relatives. It is very likely that the version of the out-of-family origin of that hapless ruler emerged later, after his death, in order to justify Tran Phu's actions both in the face of the country's population (the issue of the legitimacy of the supreme power in Vietnam used to be a

sensitive one), and in front of the vexed China of the Mings , which was well informed of the true underlying cause of the events, and there should have been found a more or less suitable justification for it.

Conclusion

Much of the above-said allows to state that the authenticity and correct interpretation of a significant part of the events of 1369 - 1370 in Vietnamese chronicles are dubious (history is always written by winners), and it is very likely the attempt to justify Tran Phu, the winner in the bitter fight for power, whose actions from the standpoint of neo-Confucian morale were not righteous at all. Also, it equally concerns the origin of Tran Nhat Kien, who was suspected of being supposedly a son of a modest actor and of his absolutely senseless desire to be named after Duong , being both the cause of Empress Hien Tu's death, and the forces serving the support for the future emperor Tran Nghe Tong in his seizure of the throne.

In any case, the events of 1370 meant the final and decisive crash of the system of internal marriages in the Tran dynasty, carefully constructed by Tran Thu Do and existed more than a century. Already in 1371 Tran Nghe Tong appointed Le Quy Ly, his relative through the maternal line (his mother's nephew) the head of the country's administration, which earlier under the Tran dynasty had been unthinkable, having shown who really stands behind the plotters, who carried out the coup a year ago. To insert Le Quy Ly into the system of intra-kin relations of the dynast , he got Tran Minh Tong's daughter for his wife, princess Huy Ninh . Earlier she had been married to Tran Nhan Vinh, a relative of the imperial family, who in various versions was either killed at the very unsuccessful attempt to overthrow Tran Nhat Kien in 1370, or just banned to free the princess for a new marriage and for giving birth to babies. That was the marriage which had brought the birth of the future emperor Le Han Thuong (Ho Cang), therefore, the crucial one for the transfer of power in 1400 through the female line, so feared by Tran Thu Do .

Soon Tran Nghe Tong awarded the title of the Supreme Empress to his mother Le Thuan Nhuong: for the first time this post ceased to belong to representatives of the Tran House. Tran Thu Do's system definitely crashed and the Tran dynasty crashed soon afterwards. The power in the country was seized by the Ho dynasty founded by Le Quy Ly (1400-1407).

The coup of 1370 is acknowledged the victory of the Tran House united forces over Duong Nhat Le, the imposter, who tried to usurp the dynasty's power. However, the analysis of the existing historical documents makes think that the assessment is most likely false. Moreover, that event, vice versa, put an end to a special system of transfer authorities in the scope of the House, which existed for nearly hundred and fifty years and was the first, but decisive step in the way, where the Trans completely lost their ruling position, at least thirty years later.

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