

Waters of Quảng Yên and Policies on Protection of Sea and Islands under King Minh Mạng's Reign through some Sino-Nôm Documents

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Abstract: The waters of Quảng Yên belong to the Gulf of Tonkin, adjacent to the East Sea (also known as the South China Sea), and held an important position economically, militarily, and politically for the Đại Việt nation. International and Vietnamese historians have pointed out that, very early on, this place was home to an international trading port system, acting as a trade gateway between Đại Việt and northern countries such as Japan and China and southern countries such as Champa, Chenla, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia. But by the Nguyễn Dynasty, the situation had changed a lot. In this article, we rely on documents from historical books such as *Đại Nam thực lục* (大南寔錄, - Chronicle of Đại Nam), *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* (大南一統志- Đại Nam Comprehensive Encyclopaedia), and *Châu bản triều Nguyễn* (阮朝硃本- Official Documents of Nguyễn Dynasty), to present some of the status and policies of King Minh Mạng in exploiting and protecting the waters of Quảng Yên.

Keywords: Minh Mạng, Quảng Yên, sea and islands, pirates.

Subject classification: Sino-Nôm

1. Introduction

The waters of the Quảng Yên sea are located in the Gulf of Tonkin, stretching southwards from Vạn Ninh through districts of Tiên Yên, Vân Đồn, Hoành Bồ, Yên Hưng, and Hoa Phong¹ (now Cát Bà island district, Hải Phòng), including many islands. Because of their small size, the pirates there often hid, plundered merchant ships, and bought smuggled goods.

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¹ Hoa Phong: a district name. In the 1st year of Thiệu Trị (1847), the Nguyễn court issued an order to abstain from the use of some words, in which the word Hoa was the name of the king's mother - Queen Mother Hồ Thị Hoa. Therefore, Hoa Phong district changed to Nghiêu Phong.

Quảng Yên used to be the area bordering China's Qing Dynasty. Throughout history, the land had many different names. According to historian Đặng Xuân Bảng, "... during the Lý Dynasty, it was Vĩnh Yên province, during the Trần Dynasty it was Hải Đông province, during the period Ming Dynasty invaded Vietnam, it was Tĩnh An province, during the Lê Dynasty it was An Bang, then later it was called An Quảng" (Đặng Xuân Bảng, 1997, p.427).

At the beginning of the Nguyễn Dynasty, after the unification of the country, King Gia Long divided the country into 14 provinces, 47 prefects, 187 districts, and 40 towns. These included trấn Quảng Yên (Quảng Yên province), the prefect of Hải Đông; the three districts Hoàn Bồ, Yên Hưng, and Hoa Phong; and the three towns of Vạn Ninh, Tiên Yên, and Vân Đồn (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2007, Vol. 1, pp.501-502). In the third year of Minh Mạng (1822), it was changed to trấn Quảng Yên. In the 12th year of Minh Mạng (1831), it became tỉnh Quảng Yên (Quảng Yên province), while the prefects and districts remained the same as before. In the 15th year of Minh Mạng (1834), Hải Đông prefect was changed to Hải Ninh prefect. In the 17th year of Minh Mạng (1836), the districts of Hoàn Bồ and Tiên Yên were merged to become the Sơn Định prefect.

King Minh Mạng recognised the role of the sea and islands and the important position and complicated situation of the waters of Quảng Yên. He promulgated drastic viewpoints and policies to stabilise and safeguard the sea and islands of the country.

2. Waters of Quảng Yên during Minh Mạng period

Historically, the Northeast sea of Vietnam was lying on two sea trade routes: "The route running along the coast of Southeast Asia (i.e. *Tây Dương châu lộ*), originating from the southern trade ports of China such as Guangzhou, Fujian, Hainan; running through the sea of "*Giao Châu*" to Champa and Chân Lạp into the Gulf of Siam; through Malacca and then towards Southwest Asia. Meanwhile, the maritime route along the islands of Southeast Asian countries (i.e., *Đông Dương châu lộ* - Indochina maritime trading route) established important positions in the chain of island ports stretching from north to south, namely, from the Philippines of today to Indonesia, Malaysia, and finally the Strait of Malacca" (Dương Văn Huy, 2011).

According to the author of *Vân Đồn - Thương cảng quốc tế của Việt Nam* (Vân Đồn - Vietnam's International Trading Port), in the Lý Dynasty, there was an international trading port of Vân Đồn. That trading port was also the diplomatic gateway of Đại Việt nation (Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2014, p.122). In the Trần Dynasty, King Trần Dụ Tông decided to change the site of Vân Đồn to Vân Đồn town and placed officials to strengthen control and also to protect foreign economic activities in this important trading port. Vân Đồn became a special economic zone with a system of ports, settlements, administrative centres, control points for ships and goods, tax collection, and defence bases (Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2014, pp.150-151). In the dynasties of the Later Lê, the Mạc, and Lê Trung hưng (i.e., Revival Lê Dynasty), Vân Đồn continued to be an important trading port of Vietnam (Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2014, p.254).

By the Nguyễn Dynasty, the Northeast island port area only served exchange and trade relations with the trading ports of Southern China and some neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia (Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2014, p.278).

Under the Minh Mạng's reign (1820-1840), historical documents rarely mentioned commercial activities in this sea, but mainly focused on the building of forts, the performing of manoeuvres, and patrols to quell the sea invaders. Chàng Sơn was originally a part of the Vân Đồn trading port system, but in this period became the den of pirates. In the report of the Governor of Hải Yên, Nguyễn Công Trứ, presented to the king, there was a passage that read: "...on the left and right of Chàng Sơn, there are Đông Chàng, Tây Chàng, Nam Chàng, and Đàm Chàng helping each other, a strip on the other side in the east with high mountains, dense trees, a river in the middle called Thông Đông River, a low and flat low mountain range in the southwest, the bottom being wide and flat, the soil being fertile; Qing Dynasty people often gathering there with more than 500 houses. For years now, Quảng Yên has been thought to be an unreachable place and now becomes a den of robbers" (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2007, Vol. 5, p.380).

2.1. Activities of Qing Dynasty people

Quảng Yên waters border China's waters, including many scattered large and small islands. In addition, many merchant ships passing by this area were often harassed by pirates. In *Chronicle of Đại Nam*, under King Minh Mạng's reign (1820-1840) the situation of the Qing Dynasty pirates was - together with the pacifying policy of the Nguyễn court and local mandarins - mentioned nearly 20 times.

In the eighth year of Minh Mạng's reign (1827), the sea aggressor Bagongyong (芭公用) met with more than fifty large boats to pillage Tiên Yên. Đức Chính, the then *Thiêm sự Bộ Hình* (i.e., Vice Minister of Justice), resigned as a mandarin and visited his home village. He then gathered the locals to join the royal troops to fight the enemy. Bagongyong and 14 of the enemy troops were beheaded, 16 were captured, and a lot of boats and weapons were seized (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2006, Vol. 4, p.56).

Under the reign of King Minh Mạng, piracy became a prominent issue in terms of both frequency and danger in the Quảng Yên region. For example, the case of Li Gongtong (李公同), a Cantonese who was originally a party of Baichi Huangqizhong. In 1826, he went to Tiên Yên province, was convicted, and then fled in 1827. He then met with a few fishing boats in the sea at Chân Châu commune to rob ships at sea. The Defence Command Governor, Lê Huy Tích, sent boats with troops to capture and kill a few of those pirates and captured two boats, while the rest managed to escape. In 1828, when Li Gongtong held a meeting of pirates to rob in Nghệ An waters, he was pursued by the royal military and hid in Chàng Sơn mountain in Quảng Yên.

Also in 1828, 500 robbers from Dongxing town of Qinzhou, China under the Qing Dynasty, came to rob Vạn Ninh post, were routed by local troops and had to flee (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2007, Vol. 2, p.743).

The Qing people often gathered in groups and crossed the sea to the waters of Quảng Yên for fishing or for a livelihood, but took advantage of any emerging weaknesses to rob merchant boats. The official document dated the ninth day of the 11th month of the seventh year of Minh Mạng's reign (1826) was written by the general governor on the capture of a boat of the Qing people that crossed the territorial waters: "...Commander Nguyễn Đức Hợp brought his crew there to interrogate, and saw that the boat owners, including Zhangxingbang, Lisanhe and Lindinghua (i.e., 張興邦, 李參和, and 林廷華), brought betel nut and presented that their boat had come here to collect firewood. The commander immediately sent soldiers to search [... and] seize all kinds of iron spears, tridents, and wooden spears, and forced these boats to be unloaded" (Official Documents of Nguyễn Dynasty, Minh Mạng's reign, Vol. 20, sheet No. 60, p.2)². However, after investigating, the town officials found that the boat owners were all from Qinzhou, Lianzhou, China under the Qing Dynasty, crossing the border which was a prohibited crime, but there was not enough proof that they committed robbery, so they were punished with strokes and released to return home.

In the tenth year of Minh Mạng's reign (1829), according to the Bắc Thành mandarin, Phan Văn Túy in Quảng Yên reported in an emergency dispatch that on the 17th of the previous month, 15 enemy boats suddenly appeared and harassed people and boats, and warships and troops were immediately dispatched to exterminate them (Official Documents of Nguyễn Dynasty, Minh Mạng's reign, Vol. 029, sheet No. 235, p.2)³.

In addition to plundering trading boats, trading opium, and illegally buying rice from coastal residents, the Qing clans also killed each other and fought for rights. In the case of Chengui (陳貴), a Qing national who worked as a fisherman, in the ninth year of Minh Mạng (1828), it was revealed that he had merit in capturing pirate Li Gongtong and handed him over to the military commander of Quảng Yên town. In the tenth year of Minh Mạng's reign (1829), Chengui asked for permission to call the fishing boats to gather together to quell the piracy, but was refused by King Minh Mạng. If he caught pirates and handed them over to local officials, he would be rewarded. But in 1831, Chengui, upon illegally assembling many Qing fishing boats parked in Cát Bà waters - carrying weapons, defrauding, and plundering the people - was arrested by the sea patrol and charged with beheading.

The Qing group who crossed the Qing territorial waters to the waters of Quảng Yên often comprised two guilds, Hà Cỗ (i.e., Hugu) and Khai Vĩ (i.e., Kai-wei). They often hid at the foot of Đông Sơn mountain in Quan Lạn commune and Chàng Sơn island in the same part of Vân Đồn sea. They came back home every April and encroached upon the waters of Quảng Yên every August, sometimes with as many as 760 people including both men and women and with as many as more than 70 boats.

² Original Chinese characters: ... 該名將兵船就處譏問見彼等船戶張興邦李參和林廷華等將芙蓉就言彼等艚往採柴木該名即使兵丁就勘刷獲火藥並刷伊山腳收獲鐵鎗釘巴木鎗柄各項併捉彼等艚解納

³ Original Chinese characters: ... 據北城潘文翠奏稱轉據廣安馳報月前拾柒日忽有匪船拾五艘圍擾人船當經派出兵船勦捕。

In the 21st year of Minh Mạng (1840), 40 fishing boats from Hegu guild of the Qing people, led by Fengsihe (i.e., 馮四合) and Fengguangli (i.e., 馮廣利), came to park at Hoa Phong estuary, applied for a fishing licence, and pledged that if they met pirates, they would help catch to them. Because of the inherent contradictions between these two guilds, when Fengguangli went to the sea to fish and met Xianchengde (i.e., 洗成德) of Kai-wei guild, he and his people surrounded, killed, and threw the body of Xianchengde into the sea. Military officers of the Nguyễn Dynasty arrested Fengguangli and sentenced him to death. Then, because of the enmity, the Hegu guild made a declaration on the arrival of any fishing boats from Kai-wei guild in the waters of Quảng Yên: “Regarding the exploration of the Qing people’s fishing boats led by Xiandaxing (洗大興, son of 洗成德 - Xianchengde), Hường Hóa village reported that more than 10 small fishing boats of Kai-wei guild were parking in Chàng Sơn, please send someone to call them to the provincial authority for questioning” (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2007, Vol. 5, p.778).

The Qing people crossed the ocean to the waters of Quảng Yên of Vietnam under the pretence of fishing, but actually took advantage of the opportunity to collude with the native people to do deceitful things, or for the sake of interests between groups initiated enmity and disputes. Meanwhile, the Huế court was far away, and had to focus on quelling the peasant rebellions, so at this stage, piracy became a problem, affecting security, politics, and commerce of this sea.

2.2. Activities of remnants of rebels against Nguyễn Dynasty

In the early 19th century, after many years of civil war, Nguyễn Ánh unified the country and established the Nguyễn Dynasty. The country entered a new phase. However, the economy was in a recession, farmers lost their land, the labour regime was harsh, the bureaucracy from central to local was cumbersome, coupled with corruption, frequent natural disasters, and epidemics, poverty, and hunger. So, right from the early years of the establishment of the dynasty, peasant uprisings broke out, especially in the North. According to the historian Nguyễn Thế Anh, “The peasant uprisings occurred most frequently in Tonkin region, an overpopulated region always threatened by floods. Here, public opinion was still attached to the Lê Dynasty. Peasant uprisings took on a political nuance when there were leaders who took control of the starving masses, either to attempt to restore the Lê Dynasty, or simply to oppose a regime they did not accept” (Nguyễn Thế Anh, 2008, p.252).

Under King Minh Mạng’s reign, peasant uprisings broke out everywhere from the mountains to the plains, from the north to the south, most notably the uprising of Phan Bá Vành. According to the *Chronicle of Đại Nam*, this uprising broke out in the seventh year of Minh Mạng’s reign (1826). However, the scholar Phan Quang, based on many sources, believed that the uprising started earlier than that. He cited the document *Hành Thiện xã chí* (Annal of Hành Thiện Commune): “In the tenth year of Gia Long’s reign (1811), Phan Bá Vành was an insurgent in Hải Dương region, famous for being an outstanding talented man” (Phan Quang,

1986, p.88). The area of operation of the insurgents, at first, was mainly in the coastal area of Giao Thủy district and some neighbouring communes, then gradually spread to *Núi Voi* (Elephant Mountain), An Lão district (Hải Phòng province). By 1826, the insurgents were active in Tiên Minh and Nghi Dương areas, associated with many insurgent groups operating sporadically in the localities. In 1827, the insurgent army was defeated by the imperial army led by Trương Phúc Đăng. Vũ Đức Cát⁴, a general under Phan Bá Vành, brought a part of the insurgents to the waters of Quảng Yên to hide. The *Chronicle of Đại Nam* recorded this event, noting: “... Trương Phúc Đăng’s army arrived at Trà Lý, the insurgents heard the news and then disbanded. Vũ Đức Cát escaped to the U Nang part of the waters of Quảng Yên. Trương Phúc Đăng then brought his troops back and authorised the *Thống quân thập cơ Tiền quân* (i.e., the Commander of the frontline army) Phạm Văn Lý to lead the warship to patrol and arrest him. Not long after, Vũ Đức Cát and his son Vũ Đình Đình and dozens of people sneaked back, were caught by the people of Đông Hào commune (Giao Thủy district) and handed over to the imperial army led by Phạm Văn Lý” (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2007, Vol. 2, p.480).

The peasant uprisings were suppressed by the imperial army, and some of the survivors chose the islands in the waters of Quảng Yên as a place to hide. Nguyễn Sùng once joined Đặng Trần Siêu’s insurgent army⁵ (Phan Quang, 1986, pp.51-52) and brought his troops to the coastal area of Quảng Yên to hide after the uprising was quelled. The *Chronicle of Đại Nam* was written that: “...The insurgent hiding in Bắc Thành was Nguyễn Sùng (the puppet party of Đặng Trần Siêu’s enemy falsely claimed to be the chief of the frontline army cum the land and marine army) hiding in Quảng Yên county. The prefect leader of Vạn Ninh, Phan Thiên Thạch brought his troops to patrol and captured Nguyễn Sùng who was brought back to the fortress and killed” (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2007, Vol. 2, p.640).

Also according to *Chronicle of Đại Nam*, from 1830 to 1832, insurgent Nguyễn Bảo many times gathered boats to cause trouble in the waters of Quảng Yên, which bordered the Qing Dynasty’s sea, particularly focusing on plundering merchants. In 1832, Nguyễn Bảo colluded with the Qing pirate Zhongyafa (鍾阿發) to set up a den in Chàng Sơn (in Vân Đồn). In September 1832, Nguyễn Bảo again had a meeting with more than 10 boats of Qing thugs in Vụng Cát, Chân Châu commune, Hoa Phong district. When chased by the imperial military, they set fire to people’s houses, and robbed all the guns and weapons in the garrison before fleeing. After many escapes, in 1833, Nguyễn Bảo and boats of Qing pirates Wuyasan (吳亞三) and Panyabo (潘亞撥) were operating in the waters of Hoa Phong

⁴ Vũ Đức Cát used to be an official of the Nguyễn Dynasty, and he was *Thủ ngự sứ* (守御使 (Defend)守御使 - the position of martial mandarin commanding the naval posts to defend the island border) of Ba Lạt, from Man Trung commune (now in Nam Hải commune, Tiên Hải district, Thái Bình province).

⁵ Đặng Trần Siêu and Vũ Đình Lục were the leaders of the biggest uprising in the Northern Delta under King Gia Long’s reign. The insurgents operated in a large area, setting up bases in the mountains of Sơn Âm, Mỹ Lương. It was not until 1824 that this uprising was really quelled.

and Vân Đồn, but were caught by *Thổ lại mục* (i.e., chief grassroots mandarin) in Vạn Ninh, Phan Huy Bích and his militiamen.

3. Policy of Nguyễn Dynasty

King Minh Mạng was aware of the role of the sea and islands and the navy in national security, so he emphasised, “Our country’s terrain is in the coastal zone, which is based on the navy’s forte. The previous Lê Dynasty had no defence against naval battles, so much so that it was defeated. Tây Sơn, after winning the country, also despised and refused to perform naval exercises for marines. Our imperial navy went into a battle and immediately defeated the enemy, with an illustrious reputation, also because of that. Now, despite the peaceful period of time, the marines cannot be underestimated. Naval exercises should be performed frequently for marines to become more proficient and then sea patrol is carried out regularly to quell piracy, that’s killing two birds with one stone. Therefore, now I order Commander of Vũ Lâm army Nguyễn Lương Huy, and the deputy commander of Internal waters navy Đoàn Dưỡng, to deploy soldiers, train the marines and gunners, and deploy large warships to sail to the territorial waters from the North to Quảng Yên. They shall rehearse military exercises and patrol all the isles and deep-lying places, so that they shall well familiarise themselves with all the waterways, places to go and stop, and fully understand the situation of the sea surface, and if they encounter pirates lurking anywhere they shall fight and arrest them depending on the situation” (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2007, Vol. 3, p.136).

At the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century, the Nguyễn Lords paid due attention to the naval force in Cochinchina. Nguyễn Ánh inherited and took advantage of Western techniques and means to develop naval forces and won the final victory to establish the Nguyễn Dynasty. However, after that, no attention was paid to developing this force as before: “The records related to the boat building work of the Vietnamese in the early 19th century often mention small boats serving the commercial activities or royal needs rather than large warships to supply the army” (Phạm Văn Thủy, 2011, p.519).

Under the reign of King Minh Mạng, patrolling and manoeuvring the sea from north to south still took place every year, with the policy of letting the military officers and soldiers know the characteristics and position of each island, so that when an incident happened, the imperial army and the militia forces of the coastal provinces could be deployed in order to firmly safeguard the country’s sovereignty over the sea and islands.

3.1. Forces, means, and methods of patrolling at sea

Since he first ascended the throne, King Minh Mạng still maintained regular sea patrols with the imperial naval forces in the Imperial City and the military in the coastal provinces.

Boats from the Imperial City were sent to patrol the sea, usually in the north from Quảng Bình to Quảng Yên, in the south from Quảng Nam to Bình Thuận. The report of the Ministry of Defence on 30 February of the 19th year of Minh Mạng's reign (1838) on sending boats to patrol the north and south seas showed that, to the south, a Thanh Hải (淸海) boat, two Tuần Hải (巡海) boats, two Ô boats; two guards, six squads, and more than 270 soldiers were deployed; to the north, Định Hải (定海) and Tuần Hải boats, two Ô boats, and a security guard coordinating with other marines and infantry forces with a strength of more than 220 soldiers were deployed (Lê Tiến Công, 2017, p.164).

In 1838, the king ordered Phòng Hải (防海) garrisons to be set up in Thuận An, as a central marine patrol and protection unit. Regarding this content, *Chronicle of Đại Nam* was written: "Setting up Phòng Hải garrisons in Thuận An, the Thừa Thiên local government selected and enlisted more than 190 healthy people living along the coast for the navy. From Cự Lại to Trung Đồng with 28 communes, villages, and hamlets, it is obligatory to make sure that more than 1,200 men are enlisted and grouped into four teams each with a chief commander, a deputy commander, two senior captains, two captains in charge of foreign affairs and three teams (who are local residents), all together seven teams, called *Phòng Hải* (i.e., marines guards). A deputy commander is charged with looking after the mandarins' ranks within the hierarchy, depending on the province and the county, and the military personnel are exempt. Every year in January, selected guards are sent to patrol at sea. In the fall, they are withdrawn, leaving the three squads of old ranks stationed at the mouth of the sea, as reserves in case of dispatching. The four newly deployed squads are allowed to go home for rest, with half a year to work in the army and half a year to earn a living. The sea patrol programmes and the way the patrol boats sail are predefined" (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2007, Vol. 5, p.339).

Regarding the patrol method, the Ministry of Defence submitted its proposal for the king to approve: Every year, the boats in the Imperial City sent to patrol were divided into two groups of South and North, each containing four or five ships divided into two sub-groups to conduct two phases of patrol which were three or five days apart so that patrol boats on the sea were always able to communicate with each other. If they encountered enemy ships, they immediately chased and seized them; during the day they shot guns, at night they lit up sky-rockets as flare signals calling other boats to come to the rescue. Depending on the situation of the tidal waves and the location, appropriate patrol boats were used accordingly. As for the provinces, every year in February, they send boats to patrol those sea areas as per their given management functions and responsibilities. At the contiguous places between the two provinces, the local authorities set up landmarks on the coast for delimitation. Boats sent from the Imperial City or by the province, when passing through any seaport boundary, must obtain the signature of the seaport keeper for inspection. When on patrol, boats must be equipped with guns, ammunition, weapons, stone ammunition, underwater combat gear, binoculars, and food.

Regarding ways and means, the king asked to build boats dedicated to patrolling, neither too big nor small like the Ô boats or Lê boats - light, fast, and convenient: “In the Imperial City, copper-coated boats to patrol the sea (four *trượng* four *thước* one *tấc*⁶, approx 18.5m) in length, and one *trượng* four *tấc*, approx 4.36m in width) are built. The coastal provinces build big boats according to the given designs, two boats for each province, three or four boats for those provinces in charge of large sea areas, all called cruisers” (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2007, Vol. 5, pp.340-341). For the coastal provinces, they regularly sent boats to patrol the sea, not relying on the Navy Department in the Imperial City. In the event that a province encountered a sea enemy, due to circumstances, the army in the Imperial City did not arrive in time, it was necessary to mobilise the troops and warships of the neighbouring provinces and the boats of the people to intercept and arrest the enemy.

Quảng Yên was a province adjacent to China. Although the area was small and endowed with many islands, the fishing boats of the Qing people took advantage of this terrain, sneaking here to gather and waiting for slackened vigilance to rob merchant boats, or organise the trading of smuggled opium and rice. Therefore, in addition to the military forces of the province, Quảng Yên officials regularly recruited healthy locals to form the First Patrol Team and the Second Patrol Team, sent to the outposts to assist in the guarding. But because the situation with the pirates was getting more complicated, especially in the Chàng Sơn area, in 1840, Quảng Yên province’s mandarins recruited 100 more soldiers for the Third Patrol Team and the Fourth Patrol Team sent to station in Tây Chàng.

In 1832, Nguyễn Công Trứ was entrusted by King Minh Mạng with the position of Governor General of Hải Yên, which was responsible for guarding and stabilising the border area and the Northeast sea. In his royal decree dated 14 November the 19th year of Minh Mạng’s reign (1838), the king pointed out, “... I hereby order Nguyễn Công Trứ to immediately deploy warships and troops and rapidly advance to Chàng Sơn, places where the Qing bandits gathered and docked their boats. Our army has to do their best to arrest and kill all those bandits so that they would not cause any problems nor encroach upon our territorial waters for good and all. This must be done first, considering the situation, after careful calculations, then set up fortresses and garrisons, and send people for defence, so that one-time efforts made can result in ease and peace forever. Do not fail my mandate and expectations. If you do not do it and delay, you cannot avoid committing serious crimes, and you will be punished according to military law” (Official Documents of Nguyễn Dynasty, Minh Mạng’s reign, Vol. 073, sheet No. 248, p.2)⁷.

⁶ Vietnamese ancient unit of length, in Nguyễn Dynasty, the court orderd that one *trượng* (丈) is equivalent to 4.2m, one *thước* (尺) is equivalent to 0.42m, one *tấc* (釐) is equivalent to 0.04m.

⁷ Original Chinese characters:...茲著阮公著當如何督率兵船疾速前進務將撞山一帶凡清匪嘯聚停泊諸處所大加搜捕擒斬無遺使彼永遠不後站洋滋事此為先著隨即歷觀形勢籌辦善後事宜設立屯堡砲臺分派防守以為一勞永佚之計方為不負委任若全無施展遲迴[]事則軍政恭嚴斷難辭重咎矣.

Therefore, throughout his time in power, Nguyễn Công Trứ always took the initiative and made great efforts in building fortresses and garrisons, destroying the enemy's strongholds, reclaiming wasteland and ensuring decent lives of soldiers and people on the islands.

3.2. *Viewpoint on sovereignty and measures to protect sea and islands under Minh Mạng's reign*

3.2.1. King Minh Mạng's viewpoint on sovereignty over sea

According to *Chronicle of Đại Nam*, in 1832 the provincial mandarin of Quinzhou sent a letter to Quảng Yên province saying that, because of the troubles and harassment caused by pirates, the Qing merchant Chenjinfu (陳金發) volunteered to spend his own money and effort to go to the sea to hunt for pirates, and at the same time, asked permission to hunt for pirates regardless of territorial waters or boundaries. Regarding this issue, the king said: "Even though our country's waters are adjacent to those of the Qing Dynasty, the delimitation has been firmly established. How can it be 'regardless of territorial waters or boundaries'? If the enemy is to be captured, then both sides send their own troops and ships to intercept and arrest them within their own territorial waters, then where will the enemy hide? Why should we consider encroaching upon each other's territorial waters and boundaries?" (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2007, Vol. 3, p.370).

From this episode, it can be seen that King Minh Mạng asserted that the territorial waters, specifically the boundary of Vietnam with China, were clearly defined, which neither side could encroach upon. So, the provincial officials would solve any incidents that happened within the province by themselves without having to ask for orders or permissions, without delay in solving the problems, and without creating loopholes in the safeguarding and maintaining of order on the sea.

3.2.2. Measures to protect sea and islands under reign of King Minh Mạng

- Building fortresses and garrisons

Quảng Yên was a border area both on land and at sea, consisting of many large and small islands located on a large area, which made the patrolling and maintaining of order difficult. In 1829, King Minh Mạng issued a decree for the *Bộ Hộ* (戶部 - Ministry of Finance) and the *Bộ Binh* (兵部 - Ministry of Defence): "The coastal land of Hải Dương and Quảng Yên belongs to Bắc Thành county, most of which are lagoons for pirates to hide in, and Đồ Sơn in Hải Dương is even more important. I once ordered the courtiers to choose the land to set up a fort, that is, to eliminate the enemy and leave the people alone. Then, because the arrest of the enemy was temporarily delayed, it was stopped again. Now those two towns have increased the number of boats, enough for patrolling, so I order the courtiers to send people to survey the Đồ Sơn strip, to the effect that the troops will be

stationed wherever good for setting up a fortress to protect the coast. In Quảng Yên, proposals on the possible locations to set up an outpost should be submitted on the same occasion” (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2007, Vol. 2, p.874). Quảng Yên set up many outposts to patrol and guard the coast, river mouths, and islands. In addition to forts like Cẩm Phả, Đông Tôn, Tri Xuyên, Vị Lại, Bắc Nham, and Định Lập in Vạn Ninh province, the provincial authorities would like to set up Yên Khoái fort near Hoa Phong sea mouth and Minh Châu fortress in Vân Đồn. All of these important places were under the control of military officers and grassroots mandarins.

In 1839, Nguyễn Công Trứ submitted his proposal to set up more outposts in key positions such as Tĩnh Hải fort in Vạng village (Vân Đồn), Thiếp Hải fortress in Vĩnh Thực commune (Vạn Ninh), and Ninh Hải fortress in Xuân Áng commune (Hoa Phong). Considering the positions and roles of the three outposts in patrol work, in April of the same year, the Ministry of Defence agreed to keep Tĩnh Hải and Ninh Hải forts, while Thiếp Hải fortress proposed to be set up in Vĩnh Thực commune, being near the residential area and not far from the other two forts, was then approved to be set up at Thiếp Hải seaport.

- Exploiting and protecting the sea and islands

Nguyễn Công Trứ was an effective servant of King Minh Mạng, “an official capable of quelling rebellions and pacifying security” (Vũ Đức Liêm, 2019). He had great merit in reclaiming land, establishing the two districts of Kim Sơn and Tiền Hải and the two cantons of Hoàng Thụ and Ninh Nhất during the time of working as a mandarin in charge of farms. When holding the position of Governor-General of Hải Yên, he brought into play his talent in reclaiming wasteland on the islands, in order to ensure the decent lives of soldiers and residents. He and the district mandarins sent soldiers to Quảng Yên and Hải Dương provinces to reclaim wasteland in the communes of Lư Khê, Vị Dương (Yên Hưng district) and An Phong (Hoa Phong district). The results were that 3,500 *mẫu*⁸ (approx. 17.395km²) of wasteland were reclaimed, and 2,740 *trượng* (approx. 11.508km) of dykes were built against salt water.

In 1838, Nguyễn Công Trứ personally went to Chàng Sơn to examine the terrain and found that this island was far from the mainland, where Qing boats and pirates often hid. The island area was several square miles and the land could be cultivated; moreover, on the island, there was fresh water. In addition to building forts and setting up guard posts, he advocated providing farming tools for soldiers stationed on the forts to reclaim arable land and cultivate crops with enough food supplies for their own consumption. By 1840, the provincial mandarins recruited strong people from inside and outside the province, and four marine patrol teams were set up on the island. The state provided these militiamen

⁸ Vietnamese ancient unit of area. In Nguyễn Dynasty, the court orderd that one *mẫu* (畝) is equivalent to 4.970m² since 1810.

with farming equipment to cultivate on the island, and when the land became cultivated fields they would be allocated to militiamen for ownership as a private inheritance.

The patrol at sea still took place regularly, but “So far, most of the mandarins who go to capture the enemy are not effective. The cowards often do not dare to go far out to sea, or some people dare to go out to sea but they do not want to try hard to hunt for the enemy. There are also people who seek meritorious deeds and expect to be rewarded, by means of evil acts. This cheating does no good” (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2007, Vol. 5, p.37). In 1839, two Qing fishing boats of Kai-wei and Hegu captured 17 bandits and killed 50 bandits and cut off their ears, and surrendered them to the army camp along with the seized weapons and boats. They claimed to be engaged in fishing and trading; and were affected by the robbers so they joined forces to catch robbers, asked to be allowed to fish in Vietnam’s waters and asked to pay taxes. But the court did not accept it for the reason that it could not control nor trust the Qing boats to travel on the sea. The court did not want to create a dangerous situation on Chàng Sơn island, hence only allowing them to bring their family to build a home and a village in a coastal place adjacent to the local people of the province.

To these subjects, King Minh Mạng had an edict: “If someone is currently living in the Qing state has registered his/her citizenship there, he/she should be allowed to stay in that county, it is not necessary to force them to come. If someone who is really unattached and volunteered to be a citizen of our country, he shall immediately follow the advice of the Ministry and bring his family to live with him. The bows of their boats must be painted with colours and engraved with characters for easy identification. Only then will they be allowed to fish for a living and forever be border residents. If with this warning they are still waiting and hanging about, appearing explicitly obedient but implicitly disobedient, then it is true that they are deliberately making trouble for usurpation of our territorial waters. This is clear that the law cannot tolerate enemies. Should that happen, we had to send our troops and boats to attack and destroy them all, and it can’t be said that the court hated or disliked them” (Official Documents of Nguyễn Dynasty, Minh Mạng’s reign, Vol. 077, sheet No. 154, p.2)⁹.

The Qing fishing boats returned home in April and came back in August every year, and it was difficult to govern them, and it was difficult to distinguish whether they were fishermen or bandits or had dark political intentions, so King Minh Mạng, as well as his courtiers and county administrators (Nguyễn Công Trứ in particular for example), always upheld vigilance. In April 1839, Nguyễn Công Trứ brought troops and boats to Chàng Sơn,

⁹ Original Chinese characters: ...係現居清國已登民藉者任其留在彼轄不必強之使來倘何名確無牽累情願投來我國為氓者即宜遵依部議[]眷來居船頭各行塗色刻字以便誌認方咱其隨便功魚生理永作邊氓若既經此次告示尚爾遲迴觀望陰違陽順必是故意站洋滋事顯係匪類法所難容則派出大隊兵船大加勦滅盡數駢誅毋謂朝廷耆殺不愛.

captured and killed four enemies, recruited 180 people, established Hường Hóa village, divided into four border villages of East, West, South, North, appointed villages chiefs and village headmen to govern those administrative entities who were affiliated to Vân Đồn province administration.

The view of the Nguyễn court concerning the boats of the Qing people was that, if they encroached upon our territorial waters, if there was evidence of robbery or weapons in their boats, they would be considered illegal, arrested or even killed if resistance or repeat offence were confirmed. For the locals, the exchange of goods with the Qing people was for their own benefits, so it was strictly forbidden to trade with them, and those engaged in the exchange of goods as such were also arrested and punished according to the law. If local officials covered up those violations, they would be arrested and punished as well.

4. Conclusion

Quảng Ninh sea belongs to the Northeast region of Vietnam, located on the maritime route from Northeast to Southeast Asia. After gaining independence and self-reliance, the Quảng Yên sea was a gateway for trade, diplomatic, and religious exchanges between the Đại Việt and other countries in the region. A trading port system gradually emerged in this place, the most prominent of which was the international Vân Đồn trading port. This trading port flourished under the Trần Dynasty. Throughout the Later Lê, Mạc, and Revival Lê Dynasties, Vân Đồn was still an important seaport of Vietnam. But until the Nguyễn Dynasty, due to the moving of the capital city to Huế, which reduced the role of the North Citadel, Vân Đồn was only a point on the maritime trade route from the southern provinces of China to a number of ports along the length of Đại Nam, mainly to the Northern region.

During the reign of King Minh Mạng, investments in ways and means, drills, exercises, and manoeuvres were still made for the navy for the main purpose of maintaining sovereignty and security at sea, especially in the Northeast sea. Commercial activities were less mentioned in the past. However, King Minh Mạng himself also had to admit that generally, the naval forces of the Nguyễn Dynasty at that time were not battle-hardened, mostly ineffective and cowardly.

Based on the documents of the historians of the Nguyễn Dynasty, the islands of Vân Đồn and Quảng Yên, because of their remoteness and adjacency with the Qing Dynasty's territorial waters, being sparsely populated and not strictly managed, were taken advantage of by pirates, and becoming hiding places for the remnants of dissidents and pirates.

The problem became more complicated when the Qing fishing boats encroached upon Vietnam territorial waters to fish, taking advantage of the opportunity to smuggle or plunder the merchant ships. Under such circumstances, Nguyễn Công Trứ, with his ability to quell rebellions and reclaim wasteland to establish residential quarters, was

assigned the position of Governor of Hải Yên with many wishes, including quelling piracy and protecting the sea and islands in the border regions of the country. Together with the army of Quảng Yên province, Nguyễn Công Trứ applied measures to design and build more fortifications in important places, recruit militiamen, and reclaim wasteland to ensure food security for soldiers and residents on the island, fight pirates, and manage trading boats of the Qing people. But in reality, the imperial army could only suppress the remnants of the peasant uprisings and drive away but not completely stop piracy operations. This was also what made King Minh Mạng pay due attention to and develop many laws on sea management as well as replenish many military weapons to deal with the complexity in the management of the Quảng Yên sea as mentioned in the official documents of this time. Hopefully, in the near future, the law and actual military power at sea under King Minh Mạng's reign will be further clarified.

Note: Translator: Lương Quang Luyện. Language editor: Etienne Mahler.

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