

Some features on Tra Lu village (Nam Dinh) in the early nineteenth century as seen from Tra Lu land register

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Abstract. Tra Lu, a relatively well-known village in North Vietnam's coastal delta, the history of which is associated with many great events in national history, was formed in the waste land reclamation and sea encroachment at the end of the Le Dynasty. It was the place where Western priests first set foot on Vietnamese land to evangelize. It was the last guerilla base of Phan Ba Vanh's insurgent army, which suffered great damages when the uprising failed at the beginning of the 19th century. Soon after that the people of Tra Lu actively participated in the land reclamation to form the present-day districts of Tien Hai (Thai Binh), Kim Son (Ninh Binh), and Giao Thuy (Nam Dinh).

Unlike the land registers of other villages, that of Tra Lu (1829) reflects not only the picture of its land but also its formation, natural and social changes contributing to clarifying some historical issues of Vietnam. While the documents on medieval Tra Lu are scarce owing to its natural, social changes and special historical situations, Tra Lu land register is of great value.

1. Tra Lu land register

In Vietnamese society, natural resources and land management has been one of the first important tasks of the ruling authorities. Land registers, land records came into being for that reason. Despite different names, they basically were official documents on borderlines, areas and types of land ownership of villages, made with careful measurements and approved by authorities, serving as a basis for State land management and tax collection [1, p.116]. For history

researchers, land registers are valuable sources of documents on various aspects of Vietnam's traditional countryside with a focus on land and agricultural economy.

Soon after its foundation the Nguyen Dynasty realized the importance of land registration. In 1803 King Gia Long had a series of large scale land registers made in the North of Vietnam previously ruled by the Trinh Lord [2, p.538]. The work was basically completed in the 4th year of Gia Long's reign (1805). In the 9th year of Gia Long's reign, land registration was carried out from Quang Binh further south to the end of Central Vietnam.

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Tra Lu was formed in the process of land reclamation and sea encroachment in Giao Thuy of Nam Son Ha province under the Le dynasty (late 15th century). In the early 19th century Tra Lu was a village consisting of 3 hamlets (North, Centre and East) belonging to Giao Thuy district, Thien Truong, Nam Dinh province. It had many books of land records made in Quang Trung, Gia Long times, the land register in the 10th year of Minh Menh (1829), royal decree in the 9th year of Duy Tan (1915)... [3, p.11-13]. However, only the 10th year of Minh Menh land register remains now.

Tra Lu land register, with the symbol of F41 now lies in land register section of National Archives Centre I. It was written in fine old Chinese characters consisting of 27 pages of texts and 5 pages of signatures and seals by authorities of all levels from the village notables to the Minister of Finance.

Made in the early years of the 19th century, Tra Lu land register was not included in the two land registrations in north Vietnam in 1803 and 1831. As stated in the introduction, Tra Lu land registration was started in the 4th year of Gia Long's reign and was not completed until the 13th year of Gia Long's reign when their lawsuit over disputed land with the villages of Hoanh Nha, Cat Xuyen, Chuy Khe, Lang Lang and An Phu was settled. Based on the inventory of land, claimed in records in 8th year of Minh Menh's reign (1827), Tra Lu land register was completed on March 22nd Minh Menh's 10th year (1829).

It was also noted that at the end of the land register were the words "submitted for archives". It was defined in the 4th year of Gia Long's reign that each village's land register had to be made into 3 copies (Giap, At, Binh

which means 1, 2, 3 or A, B, C) submitted to the Ministry of Finance for the official seal, dated with pages inter-stamped. The first copy was kept in the Ministry as archives, the second and the third copies went to the province and the village as archives respectively. In the 7th year of Minh Menh's reign (1826) it was supplemented that after completed and approved by the Ministry of Finance, the first copy of the land register was kept at the Ministry with the words "for archives". The second copy was sent back to the province and the third to the village, both being with the Ministerial seal and the words "returned for archives" [4, p.79-81]. Although made in 1805, Tra Lu land register complied with the supplementary regulations in 1826.

In short, owing to the land dispute with the neighbouring villages, Tra Lu spent a long time to make its land register: started in the 4th year of Gia Long's reign (1805), based on the measurements made in the 8th year of Minh Menh's reign (1827) the register was completed in the 10th year of Minh Menh's reign (1829). However, it was not sealed for submission until a year later (1830). This is Tra Lu's only land register made during the two dynasties of Gia Long and Minh Menh.

The Tra Lu land register found in the National Archives Centre I was the Binh (3rd) copy, which is rather strange because usually the Giap (1st) or the At (2nd) copy is kept here. The Binh copy must have been kept locally before it was collected and put into the Central Archives.

The Tra Lu land register conformed to the format and procedures defined by the Nguyen dynasty. Basically it consists of 3 parts. The introduction states for whom, by whom and why the land register was made. The main part shows the total area of land

and lists types of land in the village. The last part indicates the year of completion, signatures by dignitaries and seals by state managerial institutions.

A further study of the records and structures of the Tra Lu land register shows the following important points:

In the main part of the land register, added to the records of land types (ranging from public land, Pagodas' building land, Than Quang pagoda's cult-portion fields, housing land (including gardens and ponds), cemetery, parts of rivers and canals) were records of blown-off land and deficient area of land. In addition to the description of land which includes areas, types, crops and borderlines there were notes of land in shortage such as "blown-off land: 322 maus (3600 sq.m each) 2 saos (360 sq.m each) 14 thuocs (old Vietnamese yard-measure) 4 tacs (one tenth of the old Vietnamese yard-measure)." or "in the 3rd year of Gia Long dynasty there were 20 maus, 13 thuoc of land in shortage".

This discrepancy was due to the fact that the register was made based on the measurements in the 8th year of Minh Menh (1827) but during the course of action they were compared with those in the 3rd year of Gia Long (1804).

2. Some socio-economic characteristics and landscapes of Tra Lu as seen from its land register

2.1. Overview of data

According to the 10th Minh Menh year Tra Lu land register, the village's total area of all land types, public and private, written in the

introduction was 1550.5.1.0.0⁽¹⁾. The list of land types showed:

1. Public land: 814.7.2.1.0
2. Pagodas' building land: 16.2.0.0.0
3. Than Quang pagoda's cult-portion fields: 39.0.1.4.0
4. Housing land, gardens and ponds: 608.5.12.5.0
5. Cemeteries: 100.9.2.0.0
6. Blown-off land: 328.2.0.8.0
7. Land in shortage: 4.0.13.6.0

As can be seen here, not all types of land listed were included in the land area total written at the beginning of the register, which was the land area taxed by the State [5, p.44]. This means, at the time, the taxed land in Tra Lu was 1550.5.1.0.0, while the real figure of land total including cemetery, rivers canals and roads was bigger.

The records and notes on blown-off land reflected land transformation under the natural effects in the region. Geographically, Tra Lu was silt-deposited with high-lying land and low-lying land alternation, a sign of incomplete depositing process. At the turn of 20th century, on the fields of Tra Lu there was a network of 25 rivers and canals of which Cat Xuyen river, Tra river, Ma river, Red river and Ninh Co river were more important to the formation and development of village. This river network served as both irrigation and traffic system marking the prosperity of the water way transportation and trade of Tra Lu.

Dike breaches blew off much of people's property, even human lives. After such disasters many people left for other places. An example of this was a storm in 1618 which broke the seaside dike and the village was

⁽¹⁾ In this writing, mau, sao, thuoc, tac are abbreviated 0.0.0.0.0. Therefore, 1550.5.1.0.0 is the abbreviation of 1550 mau, 5 sao, 1 thuoc.

flooded in salt water for a long time, every household suffered loss of property, crops and human life. The survivors emigrated to different localities⁽²⁾. Still in the memories of local people were dike breaches in So river and Mom Ro at the end of Hanh Thien hamlet in late 19th century, which left the land of An Cu hamlet uncultivated. Landslides and silt deposits were frequent in Tra Lu. "In Tu Duc 9th year of Binh Thin (year of Dragon), Bui Chu dike broke and the whole district was flooded except some dunes in Thai Bang and Cuu Cot where people could only stayed on wooden and bamboo floors and traveled in rafts" [3, p.84]. At the turn of the 19th century when Ngo Dong river dike broke, Tra Lu land was blown off to Hoanh Nha (currently Giao Tien, Giao Thuy). This led to a more-than-ten-year land dispute between Tra Lu and its neighbouring villages interrupting Tra Lu land registration. After the dispute settlement in 1814, the blown-off land belonged to Hoanh Nha.

It was shown in the register that there was a big change in land area which decreased by 30%. It was realized that the total of blown-off public land and land in shortage was equal to the blown-off land total (328.2.0.8.0 + 4.0.13.6.0 = 332.2.14.4.0). So was the land in shortage exactly the blown-off land? The recorded figure cannot be seen in reality nowadays⁽³⁾.

In terms of structure, Tra Lu land was nearly equal to fields:

Table 1. Field - land structure in Tra Lu in Minh Menh year 10

	Fields	Land	Total
Area	869.9.3.5.0	680.5.12.5.0	1550.5.1.0.0
Rate %	56.1	43.9	100

Land here refers to land for houses, gardens and ponds. It could be understood that this land was reclaimed collectively, owned by the community and distributed to individuals for farming as the land was very fertile. The people of Tra Lu not only built houses on this land but also grew rice and vegetables on it. Rice growing was then so popular that at the end of the 19th century a lot of land was allowed to change into private owned fields which were rare at the time. This explained why the rate of land was as high as 43.9% while fields in the Red river delta held an important position [6, p. 28]. The high rate of land in Tra Lu compared with that in the delta showed that the history of land reclamation and village formation as well as the riverside and seaside position of the village had a strong effect on its land-field structure.

2.2. Features of land ownership

The main feature is that there was no private ownership to the fields in Tra Lu at that time. 93.6 percent of the fields was public owned, 6.4 percent was set aside for religious practice (1.8% was pagodas' field, 4.6% was Than Quang pagoda's field). According to the register, 4.6% of the fields were registered as private owned but in fact it belonged to pagodas and was used by the community for the purpose of worship. This field was taxed with a lower rate than village owned land.

⁽²⁾ Words of mouth by the Vu family line in hamlet 11, Xuan Bac village (former Northern Tra Lu).

⁽³⁾ In the total of 4.0.13.6.0 in shortage, there were 2 pieces of village-owned land in Bay Mau with an area of 0.0.13.0.0 and in Con Thuong with 0.0.2.0.0; a piece of private owned field (of Than Quang) with an area of 3.9.13.6.0.

The absolutely public owned land was due to the formation of the village. One common feature of seaside villages in Thai Binh and Nam Dinh was the high rate of public land because these villages were formed with collective land reclamation. At the beginning of the 19th century the private-owned field in the whole country accounted for 82.92% of the total and public field 17.8% [7]. In the area (currently Nam Dinh) public land still played an important role in people's life [8, p .439]. The rates of public land were different in parts of the province. Tra Lu was in the area of high public land rate. Moreover, it was surrounded with rivers so the land often changed owing to changes of river currents. Private ownership of land did not develop because of land instability.

In the 30s and 40s of the 20th century the rate of public land in Tra Lu was still very high. Tra Lu, with a total area of public land of 960 mau 4 sao, was then divided into 4

villages: Dong (Eastern), Bac (Northern), Trung (Central) and Doai (Western) Tra Lu with areas of public land of 86 mau [9], 391 mau [10], 302 mau [11] and 181 mau [12] respectively. According to the data in the 9th year of Duy Tan (1916):

Dong hamlet had 86 mau of field and 95 mau of land, Bac hamlet had 449 mau of field and 285 mau of land, Trung hamlet had 302 mau of field and 282 mau of land, Doai hamlet had 180 mau of field and 153 mau of land [3, p.12].

This partly showed the long existing public ownership of land in this area. It could be concluded that the way the village was formed led to the public ownership of land and the natural conditions and land instability prolonged this kind of land ownership.

It's noteworthy that Tra Lu only had public owned fields and fields for religious practice.

Table 2. Tra Lu's field structure in Minh Menh year 10.

Type of fields	Total	Fields for religious practice		
		Pagoda sites	Than Quang Pagoda fields	Public fields
Area	869.9.3.5.0	16.2.0.0.0	39.0.1.4.0	817.7.2.1.0
Rate %	100	1.8	4.6	93.6

As can be seen from the table, apart from 93.6% of public field, the rest of the village's fields was set aside for religious practice. This reflected religious life of the local people. Usually pagodas' fields were donated by people. Tra Lu land register didn't show where these fields were from but according to their documents at the beginning of 20th century, some of the village owned fields were set aside for religious practice⁽⁴⁾.

The fields for religious practice listed in the register were of two separate types: Pagoda housing land and cult-portion fields of Than Quang Pagoda. 'Than Quang pagoda situated in Nghia Dung village worships Khong Lo Monk, many fields were donated to it, whose annual proceeds were to cover the worshipping expenses' [3, p. 12]. That a great amount of land owned by Than Quang Pagoda (now in Hanh Thien, Xuan Hong, Xuan Truong) belongs to another village in the same district reflects the great status and influence of the pagoda in the area. In deed,

⁽⁴⁾ Out of 302 mau of public fields in Tra Lu Trung 66 mau were set aside for the purpose. In Tra Lu Dong, 5 mau 3 sao out of 86 mau were for this purpose.

Tra Lu land was tilled by people in neighboring villages. It's regretted that it's impossible to specify whether Than Quang pagoda's fields were donated by Tra Lu people or neighbouring villagers.

2.3. Fertility of soil and crops

It was shown in the register that fields in Tra Lu fell into 3 classes: 1, 2, 3.

Table 3. Quality of fields in Minh Menh year 10

Field class	Area	Rate %
Class 1	257.1.7.6.0	29.5
Class 2	398.4.4.5.0	46
Class 3	214.3.6.4.0	24.5
Total	869.9.3.5.0	100

First class fields accounted for nearly 30%, half of the fields were of second class and third class fields one quarter. Tra Lu's fields at the time were more fertile the Thai Binh's fields⁽⁵⁾.

According to the land register, fields in Tra Lu were of two types: summer fields and autumn fields⁽⁶⁾, the latter doubled the former. It was recognized that summer fields were equal or more than autumn fields. From Nghe An upward there were half summer fields and half autumn fields. From Quang

⁽⁵⁾ First class fields in Thai Binh accounted for 17.97%, second class 27.66%, third class 53.49% [5, pg.15].

⁽⁶⁾ It was remarked by the Nguyen Dynasty in 1826 that times of crops were not the same. There were 5 kinds of field: summer fields, summer-autumn fields, dry summer fields, autumn fields and dry fields. Crops on summer fields were grown in winter and harvested in summer. Crops on autumn fields were grown in summer and harvested in winter. Crops on summer-autumn fields were harvested in summer and autumn. Only dry summer fields and dry fields were high and poor, crops on the former were harvested in March, April and May, those on the latter were harvested in October and November, crop growing depends on the weather [5, p.49].

Binh downward, summer fields outnumbered autumn ones. In comparison, crop times on Tra Lu fields were rather unusual. However, at present only one crop can be grown on this land. In Tra Lu villagers' mind, in early 20th century, Tra Lu land was silt-deposited by the Red river and Ninh Co River and therefore very fertile but only summer fields were cultivated and autumn fields were flooded. After the August Revolution, thanks to good irrigation two crops could be grown on this land. Though large in area, autumn fields were not productive. Agricultural production here was restricted.

Table 4. Fields classified by crops

Crop	Summer fields	Autumn fields	Others	Total
Area	319.6.7.4.0	540.6.6.5.0	9.6.4.6.0	869.9.3.5.0
Rate%	36.7	62.1	1.2	100

2.4. Sceneries in Tra Lu

Tra Lu's boundary described in the first part of the land register was the basis to imagine the relative administrative land border of the village in the early 19th century. It bordered on 16 villages; Tra Khe, Quan Cong, Hoanh Vuc, Lac Nghiep, Chuy Khe, Lang Lang, Cat Xuyen, An Phu, Van Loc, An Cu, Hoanh Quan, Nhat Hy, Phu Nhai, Ngoc Tinh, Hoanh Nha, Thuy Nhai. Anything could be used to mark the boundary: field banks, old trees, roadside bushes, dikes, rivers and canals... The reason why Tra Lu bordered on so many villages is that the first land reclaimers only chose fertile, high-lying pieces of land to settle down, regardless of their distances to one another. That is also the reason why Tra Lu land stretches down to Giao Thuy and Hai Hau now. The late comers

had no choices and settled down on lower-lying and less fertile pieces of land left behind Tra Lu people. This explains the unusual shape of Tra Lu with its land alternating with other villages. For example, while the people of Tra Lu were looking for more fertile, far-off land, their fishing lake⁽⁷⁾ lying amid Tra Lu Dong, Tra Lu Trung and Tra Lu Bac was occupied by the people of Thuy Nhai. Being low, the land was ignored by Thuy Nhai people and the people of Thuong Mieu⁽⁸⁾ came to do the fishing. Later Thuy Nhai people came back to settle down and formed Thuy Nhai Ha hamlet, the present day Phu Nhai village. It's not known when this change took place but in 1926 Phu Nhai existed as a village⁽⁹⁾, with other villages of An Cu, Bui Chu, Ha Linh, Hoanh Quan, Lien Thuy, Luc Thuy, Phu An, Thuy Nhai, Thuy Nhai Trung, Thuong Phuc, Trung Le, Trung Linh, Xuan Bang, Xuan Hy Thuong of Thuy Nhai, Xuan Truong, Nam Dinh [13, p.90].

Another document, the will written in 1875 by Mai Dinh Huyen and Mai Thi Phuong of Tra Lu Bac⁽¹⁰⁾ shows that most of the area total of land, gardens and ponds divided among their children lay in An Cu (now of Xuan Vinh, Xuan Truong). In reality,

⁽⁷⁾ Despite centuries long development, the trace of low-lying land can still be seen on the site where Phu Nhai church now stands (Xuan Phuong now). This feature is represented in the name Thuy Nhai (Thuy: water, Nhai: (river)bank); Phu Nhai (Phu: rich, Nhai: (river)bank).

⁽⁸⁾ Now of Xuan Thanh village, Xuan Truong district.

⁽⁹⁾ *Sketches of family trees of all Phu Nhai* compiled by Priest Dinh Xuan Bach, published in Sai Gon in 1972 for internal use, on page 152 read "Phu Nhai was a village in Hong Duc year (1469) under Le Thanh Tong dynasty, the decree to establish the village can now be found in the family line of Mr. Bach, Mr Hai Dong in Xuan Hoa village (Thai Binh).

⁽¹⁰⁾ The will written on October 8th Tu Duc year 28 (1875) by Mr Mai Dinh Huyen and Mrs Mai Thi Phuong is now kept by Mr Mai Van Ly of Chau Doai, Xuan Bac, Xuan Truong, Nam Dinh.

however, the fields of An Cu now lie in Xuan Bac, next to the Mais' former land. The alternation of land (saw teeth pattern) in Tra Lu and An Cu led to frequent exchanges of land. In 1920, 1.7 mau of field far from Tra Lu could be changed for 1.4 mau of field near An Cu.

The water surface of Tra Lu was also reflected in the land register. In reality water surface was not included in the land area total. Listed in the register were the 36 out of 43 fields through which 49 sections of rivers and canals ran. This showed the interlacing network of canals winding through Tra Lu fields. Therefore there were many bridges in the village [3, p. 27].

The land register showed not only the land picture in Tra Lu in Minh Menh dynasty but also the land situation before that. At the end of the Le dynasty there were landslides on the west bank of Ngo Dong river and more than 300 mau of land of Tra Lu was blown off, land deposited on the other bank (of Hoanh Nha). At the beginning of Gia Long dynasty, Tra Lu's lawsuit over the disputed land against Hoanh Nha failed. The land of Tra Lu in late Le dynasty and early Gia Long, therefore, must have included more than 300 mau of blown-off land mentioned above⁽¹¹⁾. In addition, the land register also compared the measurements with those made in Gia Long year 3.

It is still wondered why the land was measured and the register completed in the "hottest" years of Tra Lu's history (1827-1830), when the village was seriously destroyed and its people suffered death and separation as recorded in many documents. The social life status of Tra Lu years after the

⁽¹¹⁾ As recorded in Minh Menh year 10 land register the village's blown-off land totaled 322 mau, 2 sao, 14 thuoc and 4 tac

failure of Phan Ba Vanh's uprising is still an unanswered question. It is difficult to explain thoroughly the amazing vitality of Tra Lu in late 19th century.

In the making of Tra Lu land register, errors could not be avoided in terms of both figures and discrepancies between the state statistics and reality due to not only measurement techniques but also false claims as pointed out in some documents. However, the value of Tra Lu land register in its people's economical, cultural and social life in early 19th century cannot be denied especially when documents on the village before 1827 are really scarce.

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