

TRENDS IN THE STUDY OF PREMODERN VIETNAMESE EPIGRAPHY AS HISTORICAL SOURCES: VIETNAM AND JAPAN*

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to introduce the characteristics of and trends among Vietnamese and Japanese scholars studying premodern Vietnamese epigraphy,¹ which exists as one of the corners of the cultural world of Chinese inscriptions, a field rife with both academic and technical problems. For example, the total number of inscriptions is so great for the Nguyễn period (1802–1945) that they have all but been neglected as valuable historical sources by scholars of the era. Consequently, the task of rubbing, the confirmation of original locations, and the compilation of indices and other reference works pertaining to the period's epigraphy has been long delayed, in comparison to similar research on earlier periods whose epigraphy is far more manageable in terms of quantity. This is why the present article can provide only a limited amount of information on the Nguyễn period.

Secondly, over the past 100 years a great number of inscriptions have been destroyed or lost, not only due to the civil unrest in premodern eras, but also a lack of concern for these sources since the removal of Chinese characters and writing from the national education curriculum of the Vietnamese language.

Finally, there are economic causes. Although Vietnam was reunified in 1976, economic recovery was slow until the 1990's, causing both fiscal and technical difficulties in publishing inscription rubbings and transcriptions in academic books and journals. Since just before the turn of the century, these lastly stated difficulties are being gradually overcome with the widespread publication of the facsimile edition of inscriptions and the release of more and more transcriptions using computer technology. However, as the field is still plagued by numerous typographical errors and a shortage of information regarding original inscriptions—for example, Vietnamese scholars do not indicate where new lines begin in inscriptions—much of the works becomes unsuitable for use.

Despite the above problems, the present article will overview the history of collecting inscription source materials, then introduce the achievements and present situation in the academic study of those sources in Vietnam and in Japan, where the research can be said to be the most prolific outside of the home country.

I. HÁN NÔM EPIGRAPHICAL RESEARCH IN VIETNAM

The academic institute with the largest collection of Hán Nôm 漢喃 historical sources in Vietnam and largest body of related research is the Vietnam Academy for Hán Nôm Studies (Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm, in Vietnamese, hereafter VAHNS),² one institute of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (Viện Hàn lâm Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam, hereafter VASS) located in Hanoi. Although in the past, researchers from overseas encountered difficulties in accessing VAHNS, today it is making its source materials available to the world in a number of ways. For example, a book written by Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, a former director of VAHNS, entitled *Some problems on Vietnamese inscriptions* [TK Mạnh 2008] is an excellent introduction to the research to date on Vietnamese epigraphy.

Mạnh divides that research into three stages [TK Mạnh 2008: 10–15], the first being the collection and rubbing of individual inscriptions, checking their provenance, and collecting related information about characteristics apart from their texts (for example, measuring their size, identifying decorative patterns, etc.). The final step at this stage is to compile all the adequate information into indices. Stage two involves the task of transcribing the original text, and transliterating and translating it in modern languages (for example, into contemporary Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation and modern Vietnamese, or into the traditional translation (*kundoku* 訓読) and contemporary Japanese), while the final stage involves inscription-based

research; that is, confirmation of the distribution situation of inscriptions in both aspects of time and space, analysis of its content, and its adoption as a source material in the study of history, literature, linguistics, aesthetics, etc. The following discussion will adopt this developmental scheme reviewing trends in epigraphic research done in Vietnam and Japan.

I. 1. FIRST STAGE RESEARCH: COLLECTION, PROVENANCE, AND COMPONENTS

It was in the early years of the 20th century when the colonial French Government-General moved its capital from Saigon to Hanoi that the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (ÉFEO), one of the world's most prestigious institutes of Asian studies in the world, took the opportunity to embark on historical study as a modern academic discipline, one project being the collection and cataloging of Hán Nôm inscription rubbings. Then some 50 years later on the occasion of France's withdrawal from Indochina after its defeat at the battle of Điện Biên Phủ, ÉFEO transferred all of its Hán Nôm materials to the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, a collection comprising 20,979 rubbings from 11,651 original inscriptions.

Upon transfer, the Committee for Hán Nôm Studies (CHNS), the predecessor of VAHNS and a unit in the Vietnam Committee of Social Sciences (which would be later reorganized into VASS), was formed and began compiling a catalog of the rubbings [CHNS 1978], while continuing the task of collection, which under VAHNS got underway in earnest from the 1970's on to add 30,000 new items to the former ÉFEO collection, with the total amounting to over 50,000. From 1954 to the present, VAHNS has compiled two series of catalog [VAHNS 1986], which have not been published, and an introduction [VAHNS 1993] which contains the content of 1,919 inscription rubbings, on the occasion of its re-affiliation with ÉFEO during the 1990's. Although the collection work has continued up until the present day, no updated or fuller-scale catalogs had been compiled until the publication of the *Corpus of ancient Vietnamese inscriptions* [VAHNS, ÉFEO, and ÉPHÉ 2005–] and its *Catalogue* [VAHNS, ÉFEO, and ÉPHÉ 2007–], which will be discussed in the next section.

I. 2. SECOND STAGE RESEARCH: TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION

As previously mentioned, the relative lack of transcribing original inscrip-

tion texts for Vietnamese academic journals was due to a dearth of appropriate Chinese character print type, before the diffusion of computer software fonts and printing. Therefore, Vietnamese scholars were forced to use in their research mostly translations into modern Vietnamese and transliterations in contemporary Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation. Moreover, the arts of translation of the texts were bona fide academic pursuits at that time, within a system dividing the field into experts specializing in reading and translating original texts and scholars utilizing the translated texts as sources for their research on Vietnamese history and literature. VAHNS was the academic institution where the former group was gathered.

Today, however, those circumstances have changed, as shown by a total of five international conferences on Vietnamese studies having been convened since 1998 and quite a number of overseas historians criticizing their Vietnamese counterparts for their inability to read fully the original Hán Nôm texts, now a common practice throughout the world.

Manh [2008: 81] has classified texts of the extant Hán Nôm original inscriptions into three types.

- (a) Original inscriptions (including those re-inscribed).
- (b) Rubbings (also now including photographs).
- (c) Those included as transcriptions in source collections, local gazetteers, compilations of personal documents, etc.

Although there is no doubt that type (a) is the most valuable and reliable, (b) and (c) must also be relied upon due to the loss of so many originals. Moreover, since all the inscriptions which each scholar needs for his/her research by no means exist altogether, it is impossible to do research using only type (a) source materials.

Although they are less reliable than type (a) materials, type (b) rubbings and recent electronic photographs (given a good preservation status of the original) are also useful, being the target of the large-scale French-funded project to publish the *Corpus of ancient Vietnamese inscriptions* [VAHNS, ÉFEO, and ÉPHÉ 2005–], which has been ongoing since 2005. The aim of this project is to publish all inscription rubbings held by VAHNS and is expected to produce over 40 or 50 volumes. (As of year-end 2017, 22 volumes have been published, each containing 1,000 different rubbings, along with eight volumes of the project's *Catalogue*). The project is now at a stage where it is expected to be releasing heretofore unknown historical sources. It is regretful that in the process of the project's work it has become evident that there are a great many rubbings collected in colonial times by ÉFEO, of which the information concerning the provenance—date, administrative

division, etc.—was falsified, and that ÉFEO tended to neglect the inscriptions of the Nguyễn period due to their huge number, thus significantly underrepresenting them in comparison to those from the late Lê period.³ Although the methods used by ÉFEO in the collecting work is unknown, there is the possibility that those entrusted with the work may have had occasion to mispresent Nguyễn period inscription rubbings as those of the pre-Nguyễn period for either profit or to fill predetermined quotas, making it necessary for contemporary scholars to directly investigate all extant original inscriptions.⁴

It goes without saying that type (c) inscriptions all raise doubts about how faithfully they reproduce the content of the original inscriptions, which is also a universal problem among scholars of Chinese history, while still useful like type (b) especially for researchers overseas.

While the whole picture of inscription research under the former South Vietnam (1954–1975) regime is not clear, Cao Viên Trai is known as the editor of the publication *A series of inscriptions praising successful candidates to the palace examinations in the Lê period* [CV Trai and V Oanh 1961], a collection of inscriptions now held at the Confucian Temple of Literature (*Văn miếu* 文廟) in Hanoi. Then after unification, although not exclusively history-related, a collection of poems of the Lý and Trần periods [VAL 1977–88] was published in 1977, and CHNS released the transcribed texts and modern Vietnamese translations of 63 inscriptions in central Hanoi [CHNS 1978]. These activities were discontinued because of a downturn in the economy, but revived during the 1990's by both economic recovery and requests from foreign academic communities.

Consequently, VAHNS began to publish selected transcriptions of inscription rubbings, part of them with photographs. Two volumes were completed, the first containing inscriptions of the Chinese occupation and Lý periods [VAHNS and ÉFEO 1998], the second containing those of the Trần period [VAHNS and National Chung Cheng University 2002]. Although VAHNS had planned to publish seven volumes in total to complete the series, both problems of funding and editorship prevented the inclusion of selections from the Lê period on. It was in 2005 that a new publication project was initiated in their stead [VAHNS, ÉFEO, and ÉPHÉ 2005–; 2007–].

Besides these joint projects, individual researchers at VAHNS have engaged in the release of various collections of inscriptions in cooperation with local governments, resulting in the publication of many volumes pertaining to particular geographical regions or historical periods, including [Culture, Information, and Sport Department of Hà Tây Province 1993; Culture, Information, and Sport Department of Lạng Sơn Province 1993;

ĐK Thuân 1996; PTT Vinh, et al. 2014; TĐ Thiện and ĐK Thuân 2016]. Lately the government of Thanh Hóa province is engaged in publishing *Selected inscriptions in Thanh Hóa province* [P Báo, et al. 2012; LV Toan, et al. 2013; ĐK Thuân, et al. 2016] in cooperation with VAHNS. Furthermore, many provinces, sub-prefectures, and villages have published their own volumes of local gazetteer (Địa chí 地志/地誌), in which photos, transcribed texts, and translations of inscriptions are often included and researchers at VAHNS consulted.⁵ Outside of Vietnam, the author of this review continues to release a small but steady stream of transcribed texts of inscriptions pertaining to his special interest, engraved in various types during the early Lê period in Lam Sơn district where the Lê dynasty originated, and in Thanh Hóa province, including such materials as mausoleum inscriptions of kings, queen mothers, princesses, and princes made by royal command,⁶ tomb inscriptions of generals who had followed King Lê Thái Tổ to found the Lê dynasty, also created by royal command,⁷ and underground tomb inscriptions (aka “Box inscriptions”) being recently discovered.⁸

II. THIRD STAGE RESEARCH: STUDY AND ANALYSIS ON INSCRIPTIONS IN VIETNAM AND JAPAN

1. Vietnam

Turning to the final objective of stages one and two, one has to be somewhat disappointed about how severely limited the variety of themes and content of the epigraphical research to date are by the number and content of inscription materials. Here space limits the discussion to mainly the research coming out of VAHNS, despite the huge body of articles and books published by Vietnamese scholars.

The content of the few inscriptions which have survived since the Lý and Trần periods⁹ is overwhelmingly related to Buddhism. There are some mound and tomb inscriptions, many of which were re-inscribed. Trịnh Khắc Mạnh has classified the content of these materials [TK Mạnh 2008], while the major research trend seems to avoid historical analysis in favor of the literary study of the content of inscriptions or the esthetic research on their decorative sculpture, as exemplified by the early appearance of the first volume of a Vietnam Academy for Literature study [VAL 1977–88]. In the field of esthetics, there have also been released such series as [NĐ Nùng, et al. 1973; NĐ Nùng 1977; 1978; NT Cảnh, et al. 1993].

One of the classic works done by historians in which the inscription sources are fully cited is a book written by two professors at Hanoi Univer-

sity, Phan Huy Lê and Phan Đại Doãn [PH Lê and PD Doãn 1965].¹⁰ In addition to the official chronicles and other documentary materials, they investigated a large amount of the above-mentioned inscriptions in Lam Son district to elucidate the history of the formation of the Lê dynasty out of the war against the Ming army.

Despite the above-mentioned division of labor in Vietnamese epigraphical research, VAHNS, originally the department for collection, preservation, and translation, was already venturing into the research and analysis side by the early 1990's and today is the dominant research institute utilizing epigraphical sources.¹¹ The leader in the VAHNS research effort is none other than Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, who after successfully defending his Ph.D dissertation in the former Soviet Union in 1990, published a treatise [TK Mạnh 2008] extolling the value of inscription materials in historical study. Next there is Đinh Khắc Thuân, who after defending successfully his Ph.D dissertation in France wrote an excellent book [ĐK Thuân 2001] on the history of the Mạc dynasty which had suffered from a serious dearth of source materials compiled into book form due to its defeat by a revived Lê dynasty. Thuân has described the politico-economic system, military reforms, and diffusion of Buddhist beliefs under that regime by deftly utilizing 218 texts from some 165 inscriptions [ĐK Thuân 1996].

Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh is one more VAHNS researcher, who has studied rural society of the late Lê period by scrutinizing every inscription rubbing available for the Kinh Bắc region northeast of Hanoi (now consisting of Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang provinces), then analyzing their distribution according to various indicators, including sub-prefecture, village, age, subject category, etc. and their morphological changes [PTT Vinh 2003]. Her study also attempts to understand village society in terms of inscriptions found on public facilities, like bridges, communal buildings, marketplaces, etc. discovering that after the fall of early Lê period when the Confucian order had been vigorously imposed upon rural society from above, there began to appear various types of inscriptions that can only be categorized as “private” [PTT Vinh 2003: Conclusion].¹²

Besides her own research, Vinh is involved in the mentoring of younger researchers, including Nguyễn Thị Kim Hoa [NT Kim Hoa 2008; 2011] who studies the inscriptions of the city of Hải Phòng in the eastern part of the Northern delta, Nguyễn Kim Mãng [NK Mãng 2011; 2013] specializing in the inscriptions of Ninh Bình province in the southern part of the Northern delta, and Trần Thị Thu Hường [TT Thu Hường 2013] utilizing Vinh's research methodology in studying the Hậu thần 后神 inscriptions of Hải Dương province over time.

2. Japan

Although Japanese research into Vietnam's history began long before the outbreak of the Asia-Pacific War, no work had been done utilizing epigraphical sources. Moreover, after that War, the possibility of Japanese scholars visiting Vietnam was vitiated by the outbreak of the First Indochina War, and any research concerning or based on Vietnamese inscriptions would have to wait until the 1990's, strangely enough, just like in Vietnam proper.¹³

The pioneer in the field is Momoki Shirō 桃木至朗 who specializes in the history of the Lý-Trần period and from the 1990's on has continued his research on the politico-economic system of the two dynasties, while publishing a few articles on their epigraphy per se (including the transcribed texts of sources he has personally collected) and a Ph.D dissertation in 2011 [Momoki 2011].

In Prologue, Section 2.2 of that work, Momoki points out the many problems involved in inscription collecting and errors made in transcribing, which plague the research done in Vietnam,¹⁴ and then goes on to analyze the epigraphy of the Lý and Trần periods to point out the fact that while Lý period inscriptions are closely related to Buddhism while touching only lightly on the contemporary economy, among those from the Trần period there are more sources which deal with topics concerning economy, amounting to about 40 out of a total 60 inscriptions. Chapter 2 of the work delves into the subject of the number and scale of donations of money and land to Buddhist institutions based on the information offered by the available Trần period epigraphy, pointing to an increasing trend in the privatization and subdivision of land and a strategy for protecting family wealth. He also emphasizes the important role played by women in economic activity before the penetration of Confucian ideology into rural society. That is to say, Buddhism lost all of its former political influence and the number of Buddhist-related inscriptions sharply decreased. With the establishment of the Lê dynasty and its adoption of Zhu Xi's 朱熹 Neo-Confucianism which formed the orthodox learning and ideology underpinning the Ming dynasty, following the transition of political power from the Trần dynasty to the Hồ regime after the usurpation of the throne, the invasion and occupation of the Ming army, and a 20-year war of resistance.

The early Lê period is generally understood to have been one of the most prosperous periods of premodern Vietnam, although the research on its political history has not made much headway due to a shortage of source materials, consisting only of the official chronicles, *Total History of Great Việt* (Đại Việt Sử ký Toàn thư 大越史記全書), which lack the "biographies"

which are usually included in every ancient Chinese official history, and *General History of Great Việt* (Đại Việt Thông sử 大越通史), written by great statesman-scholar Lê Quý Đôn 黎貴惇 in the 18th century, which also suffers from insufficient “biographies” and exists only in partial form. Alongside local document materials, epigraphical sources are very valuable in trying to overcome such a historiographical drawback: for example, the various types of inscriptions erected in Lam Sơn district, etc. and the biographical accounts in Lê period inscriptions praising successful candidates in palace civil service examinations.¹⁵

This reviewer has attempted to clarify kinship relationships of the key figures in Lê period political history using various types of inscriptions in tandem with historical records pertaining to the genealogies of powerful families [Yao 2009]. It was the underground (Box) tomb inscriptions that led to the reconstruction of kinship and marital ties between royal family members and influential families [Yao 2008; 2009: Figure 10-3], helped by the fact that those who were given these inscriptions are exclusively royal daughters and their husbands from influential families. He then argues that the families of military officers and civilians alike began to have their private tomb inscriptions created under the influence of the royal family, and also had genealogies compiled based on the Confucian principles of family identity and ancestor worship [Yao 2008]. The work employing a methodology similar to the royals has yet to begin, even in Vietnam.¹⁶

The late Lê period (1533 or 1592–1789), marking the reinstatement of that dynasty in Hanoi after several decades of civil war with the rival Mạc dynasty, was characterized by both diversification of and a dramatic increase in the number of inscriptions; but, like in Vietnam, the Japanese research on the epigraphy of this period has not progressed very far. Noteworthy, however, is the work being done by Ueda Shin’ya 上田新也, a younger generation scholar, who began research on the period’s governmental structure and relations between bureaucrats and commoners as soon as the above-mentioned project [VAHNS, ÉFEO, and ÉPHÉ 2005–] got underway. He showed that around the 17th century administrative duties centering around military and fiscal affairs were assumed by the Trịnh lords, with its officials holding both titles allocated by it and those of the Lê dynasty court which had lost their substance by then, based on the careful classification of official titles and administrative terminology, such as “Khâm sai” (dispatched by King), “phụng sai” (dispatched by King’s order), etc., found in a large number of inscriptions [Ueda 2006; 2008; 2009]. He then expanded his purview to governance by Trịnh lords’ agencies and the response to them in local society, extracting from the epigraphical sources a pattern of antagonism between bureaucratic and regional elements regarding tax col-

lection duties, despite the expanding control over village society by powerful gentry [Ueda 2010a]. Finally, in a case study of a dispute between two adjacent villages on the outskirts of the capital of Hanoi recorded in the epigraphic sources, he argued that by that time rural communities had already achieved local autonomy [Ueda 2010b].

Meanwhile, another young scholar Hasuda Takashi 蓮田隆志, working on the careful reading of inscriptions in the field, has estimated the sphere of influence of the Lê court exiled from Hanoi by the Mạc dynasty from 1527 to 1592, based on the content of a rock face inscription found near Lam Son district [Hasuda 2014a]. Hasuda has also discovered the true image and achievements of General Phạm Đức, the son-in-law of the first Trịnh lord Trịnh Kiểm, based on information from his Thần đạo 神道 inscription located in his place of birth and his genealogy [Hasuda 2016], and applied that same methodology to the life of Văn Lí Công, a eunuch active in maritime trade with Japan during the 17th century [Hasuda 2005; 2014b].

Finally, Yoshikawa Kazuki 吉川和希, one of the youngest historians of Vietnam in Japan, has begun to study the process by which Chinese merchants were entering Vietnam by land routes before Vietnam's so-called "Chinese" (18th) century, first using documents and inscriptions located in Lạng Sơn province, then expanding his research to include the whole Lê period.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although few in number and lacking accumulated research, Japanese researchers are equal to their more numerous and prolific Vietnamese counterparts in terms of their treatment of the transcribed epigraphical texts, analysis of their content, and depth of study. Their most serious weakness is probably difficulties in understanding historical society and institutions within the context of contemporary Vietnamese society and institutions. For example, many Hán Nôm technical terms that appear in inscription materials do not exist in the lexicons published in China and Japan. Overcoming such a handicap will require these historiographers to turn to the methods of ethnology, like their predecessors who embarked on fieldwork to survey social norms in rural northeastern China between 1940 and 1944 (Chūgoku Nōson Kankō Chōsa 中国農村慣行調査).

Likewise, Vietnamese scholars are not without their problems. Since the formal learning of Chinese characters was removed from the education curriculum in Vietnam, there are many people, including researchers, who can read, but not write, characters, as shown by the fact that historians of-

ten rely on modern translations of the original Hán Nôm sources. On the other hand, although the research staff at VAHNS can read the original Hán Nôm sources, few publish historical analysis of them due to a lack of training in historical methodology.

Although the environment surrounding epigraphical research is gradually improving, it is difficult to pronounce that its future looks bright, as the academic exchange that does exist between overseas and Vietnamese scholars can only be frankly described as superficial. Moreover, although not covered in this review, Vietnamese epigraphy is being studied in China and Taiwan, but a quick perusal of the research published by Geng Huiling 耿慧玲 [Geng 2004], for example, shows that Chinese scholars have no knowledge of what their Vietnamese and Japanese counterparts are doing in the field, and vice versa. How can we break through such an impasse?

Vietnamese scholars hold the advantage in their geographical proximity to the rich information and their native familiarity with the customs of the local societies they themselves hail from. On the other hand, Japanese scholars hold a deep tradition of positivist historiographical rigor in Asian studies, but tend to over-rely on analogies to Chinese history due to a lack of “living” knowledge about their subject matter. Therefore, it will be the balancing out of advantages and disadvantages that will determine the future of research on Vietnamese Hán Nôm epigraphy.

NOTES

- * This essay is an enlarged version of [Yao 2012], with information furnished by Dr. Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh, a researcher at VAHNS, which augmented our understanding of the situation in Vietnam. Let me take this opportunity to express my deepest appreciation to her for her contribution. However, due to space limitations, many unpublished doctoral dissertations and master’s theses introduced by Dr. Vinh cannot be covered here.
- 1 The work on Vietnamese inscriptions written in Sanskrit, ancient Khmer, and the Cham language will not be covered here.
- 2 On the history of VAHNS, see [Oanh 2005].
- 3 Inscription rubbings collected by ÉFEO have been classified into the Chinese occupation period (pre-10th century): 1 piece; the revival of independence period (10th century): a few pieces; the Lý period (1009–1225): 23 pieces; the Trần period (1225–1400): 44 pieces; the early Lê period (1428–1527): 70 pieces; the Mạc period (1527–1677): 165 pieces; the late Lê period (1533–1789): over 5,000 pieces; the Tây Sơn period (1789–1802): approximately 300 pieces; the Nguyễn period (1802–1945): over 4,000 pieces [TK Mạnh 2008: 49]. However, as Mạnh points out, these numbers do not

reflect the actual numbers, for during the Nguyễn period alone perhaps tens of thousands of inscriptions were engraved, but have not been completely rubbed due to low evaluations of them as historical source materials. In addition, although the rubbings came from over 40 provinces of the French colonial period, most of them tended to concentrate in several provinces of Northern delta region.

- 4 According to the analysis by Nguyễn Văn Nguyên [NV Nguyên 2007], these “falsified” rubbings stop appearing after around the serial number 4000. Despite the unquestionable precision of Nguyên’s analysis we can only judge them as “doubtful”, not “falsified”, in case of the absence of originals.
- 5 Under the leadership of VAHNS’s Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh, many publications have been recently released, including [PTT Vinh, et al. 2010; 2014].
- 6 Some mausoleum inscriptions of the Lê kings and their sons had already been published during the French colonial period [Gaspardone 1935].
- 7 Only a few tomb inscriptions of generals remain. See [Yao 2001; 2002; PĐ Doãn 1976; 1985; 2005]. Yoshikawa [2014] has published the first translation of the sources with full annotation.
- 8 The release of reports on new Box inscriptions and their transcribed texts and translations by Vietnamese scholars include [H Lê 1993; 2001; PTT Vinh 1997; M Hồng 1998; NV Thành 1998; 2006; NT Thảo 2000; TV Lạng and NV Phong 1999; L Giang 2001]. After releasing a preliminary report [Yao 1999], this writer continued the research on the field and published more comprehensive reports [Yao 2014; 2015].
- 9 According to the information provided by Phạm Lê Huy [PL Huy 2016], it is likely that the oldest extant inscription in Vietnam is located Thuận Thành sub-prefecture, Bắc Ninh province and dated in 314 CE (the second year of the Jianxing Era in the reign of Western Jin dynasty Emperor Mindi 愍帝).
- 10 They used inscription source materials because of the political manipulation and distortion of the official chronicles and other documentary materials, such as the *Total History of Great Việt* (Đại Việt Sử ký Toàn thư) and the *Annal of Lam Sơn* (Lam Sơn Thực lục 藍山實錄).
- 11 The research being done at VAHNS is contained in its in-house journal *Tạp chí Hán Nôm* (Hán Nôm Review) and Annual Reports *Thông báo Hán Nôm học* (Annual Reports of Hán Nôm Studies), whose Vietnamese websites are < <http://www.hannom.org.vn/default.asp?CatID=7> > and < <http://www.hannom.org.vn/default.asp?CatID=47> > .
- 12 See also the more recent studies such as [PTT Vinh 2010; 2011; 2013; 2015].
- 13 Strictly speaking, the first published research in Japan related to Vietnamese epigraphy is that of Fujiwara Riichirō 藤原利一郎 [1976] on the civil service examination system of the early Lê period, in reference to [CV Trai and V Oanh 1961], a collection of translated sources regarding successful examinees.

- 14 In his evaluation of the projects reported in [VAHNS and ÉFEO 1998; VAHNS and National Chung Cheng University 2002], Momoki pointed out the many errors in transcription, insisting on the importance of directly inspecting the original inscriptions or rubbings [Momoki 2011: 24–25].
- 15 There are many transcribed versions of these inscriptions. Here we tentatively cite the work of Đỗ Văn Ninh [ĐVNinh 2000].
- 16 Besides these studies, there is this reviewer’s research on peasant land reclamations during the period, based on epigraphical sources [Yao 1995; 2008; 2009: Chaps. 5–7]. The latter two studies analyze the processes of land reclamation and the process of negotiations among the central government, local administrators, and the local peasantry, in an attempt to argue that the “rigidity” had already taken root in the administrative system of the extremely prosperous Lê Thánh Tông era.

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