

Imprints of Landowners in the Reclamation and Development of the Mekong Delta in Vietnam (17th-18th centuries)

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Abstract

The process of reclamation, economic development, stabilization of social institution and protection of sovereignty over the Mekong Delta of Vietnam in the 17th and 18th centuries has the contributions from many social classes, including the remarkable role of the landowners. Along with the presence of a small number of local populations, from the late 16th century and the early 17th century, Nguyen lords while expanding the territory to the South implemented many progressive policies to encourage people from different social classes to reclaim and develop the Mekong Delta, leading to the existence of landowners in this land, who thrived and affirmed their roles in the later periods. From the 18th century, together with other inhabitants, landowners in the Mekong Delta not only accelerated the reclamation and fundamentally transformed the nature of economy in the Mekong Delta, turning it into a large agriculture economy, but also shaped the civil administrative institutions and helped Nguyen lords in the protection of sovereignty over the Southern land in the 17th-18th centuries.

Keywords

Landowner, imprint, reclamation, socioeconomic, Mekong Delta, 17th-18th centuries

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Introduction

Located in the southwest of Vietnam, the Mekong Delta covers an area of 39,950 km² downstream the Mekong River system. Before Vietnamese people came for reclamation, both the Southeast region and the Mekong Delta had had traces of some ancient communities that bear characteristics of prehistoric states such as Thu Nai, Ba Ly, Stieng, etc. These states belonged to the Phu Nam empire, with frequently changing territorial borders and unclear sovereignty. After the fall of Phu Nam (around the 6th century), the silhouette of the ancient states faded, giving way to the remaining presence of some small ethnic groups such as Ma, Stieng, Chrau Jro, K'ho, etc. with nomad lifestyle that is unstable and does not bear traits of society of any countries. Also in the 6th century, a marine transgression engulfed almost all the land in the Mekong Delta, submerging the entire land in water and quickly turning it into swamps and wild forests with hardly any inhabitants. The Chinese envoy Zhou Daguan described the wilderness of this land in *The Customs of Cambodia* as follows: "Looking to the shore, all that we see are tall rattan palms, yellow sand and white reeds. It is not easy to find the entrance at a glance, so the sailors think it is difficult to find the right estuary" (Chau Dat Quang, 2006, p.130). By the late 16th and the early 17th centuries, the population was still sparse: "In Gia Dinh Prefecture and Dong Nai, at the estuaries of Can Gio, Sai Lap (Soai Rap), Cua Dai and Cua Tieu, there are only thousands of miles of thick forests" (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.345).

With the natural characteristics and history of sovereignty as stated, Vietnamese people immigrating to the Mekong Delta in the early 17th century had a large and fertile yet desolated land to reclaim and turn into agricultural land without encountering any obstacles and disputes or the distinction of nation and territory. The vastness and fertility of the Mekong Delta is completely able to satisfy the "thirst" for fields to cultivate in many areas of Dang Trong (Inner Land). The conditions needed for reclamation and concentration of rights to own and exploit a large area of land in the hands of an individual, a family or a clan in the Mekong Delta in this period can be considered boundless. It is the natural premise for landowners to gradually appear in the Mekong Delta in the 17th-18th centuries, and it is the existence of these landowners that contributed to the acceleration of reclamation and socioeconomic development in the Mekong Delta at that time.

Materials and Methods

Research works on reclamation, economic development and protection of sovereignty in the Mekong Delta in the 17th-18th centuries have so far received the attention of many scholars in Vietnam and abroad. A number of works directly related to this study have been published, including those of Le Quy Don (1977), Phan Huy Le (2017), Vu Minh Giang (2019), Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet (2016), Nguyen Phuc Nghiep (2003), Le Van Nam (1988), Nguyen Dinh Dau (1992), Nguyen Minh Tuong (1996), Phan Khoang (1967), Ta Chi Dai Tuong (1973), Tran Van Giau (2002), Son Nam (1997), Chau Dat Quang (2006), Huynh Lua (1987), Choi Byung Wook (2010), Li, Tana (1998), Woodside, A.B. (1988), McHale, F.S. (2004), Brocheux, P. (1995), Cooke. (1997), etc. From various perspectives, these works have shed light on many issues, including the assertion that in the late 16th century and early 17th century, Vietnamese people immigrated and arrived at the Southern region. By 1698, when Nguyen lords officially established their administration in this land, the immigration of people from different social classes to the Mekong Delta grew stronger. Their presence, along with the positive policies adopted by Nguyen lords formed the class of landowners in the Mekong Delta, which grew even stronger in the later periods. The emergence of landowners further quickened the reclamation in the Mekong Delta. History has proven that, in 1757, Nguyen lords almost completed the process of establishing sovereignty over the Mekong Delta, leading to the geographical boundaries of Vietnam as it is today. In relation to the role of landowners, so far, the research works we have approached only stop at giving an overview without going in depth to satisfactorily analyze and explain the contribution of the landowners, especially in terms of economic development and stabilization of political institution in the Mekong Delta. This article supplements the findings of the previous scholars by presenting a more comprehensive and insightful view of the above issues.

On the basis of various sources, especially the documents compiled in the Nguyen Dynasty such as: *Dai Nam thuc luc* (Veritable Records of the Great South), *Gia Dinh thanh thong chi* (Observations of Gia Dinh), etc., we use historical, logical and interdisciplinary/cross-disciplinary research methods to analyze, explain and evaluate the policies of Nguyen lords towards the

population in the reclamation, economic development and stabilization of social institution in the Mekong Delta in the 17th -18th centuries. The natural conditions along with historical and social conditions of the Mekong Delta, combined with reclamation policies of Nguyen lords led to the emergence and development of landowners in this land. The presence of landowners helped to quickly reclaim the unspoiled land in the Mekong Delta, turning it into a large agricultural economy that not only meets the need for food supply of the Southern region but also contributes to ensuring the food supply for the entire Dang Trong. The economic activities of landowners in the Mekong Delta reflect the mutualistic relationship between landowners and tenant farmers at that time. For mutual interest, a number of progressive factors had arisen and developed, taking the mode of agricultural production and distribution relations in the Mekong Delta to a new level. It is also the landowners who contributed to shaping the civil administrative institutions and the protection of sovereignty over the Southern land in the 17th-18th centuries. At the same time, the article also determines the role and position of the landowners compared to other social classes in the reclamation and development in the Mekong Delta

Results and Discussion

The origin of Landowners in the Mekong Delta

The Trinh-Nguyen Civil War in the 17th century pushed the people of Dang Ngoai (Outer Land) and Dang Trong (Inner Land) into a state of misery, where talents and resources were plundered to exhaustion. The increase in available taxes and the imposition of many heavy and unreasonable taxes, along with the local officials and landowners robbing properties and lands caused many families to abandon their homes and go elsewhere to live. In addition, the harshness of nature (especially in Thuan Quang region) such as storms and floods also further distressed people. In "Phu bien tap luc" (Miscellaneous Chronicles of the Pacified Frontier), Le Quy Don noted: "Across the land (referring to Thuan Hoa region), there have been droughts and hunger, lots of people are adrift and starving... soldiers and people alike are confused" (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.151). In that situation, Vietnamese people can only move South - the land which at that time was abandoned and had "almost no owners" despite being included in the territory of Chenla. Most later historical documents believe that the first Vietnamese people to reclaim Gia Dinh set foot first in Mo Xoai (Ba Ria City today), Xuyen Moc, Chau Duc (Ba Ria - Vung Tau today), then gradually moved to areas near Sai Gon such as Bien Hoa (Dong Nai) or My Tho, Tien Giang, etc. Later, the first Vietnamese population communities were established in Long Ho (present-day Vinh Long Province), as premises for the development of Dinh Vien District in 1732" (Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2016, p.47-48).

The first ones to immigrate to the Mekong Delta were poor farmers who lost their fields. Later, there were also officials, exiled criminals, fugitives, men evading their military service, Confucianism teachers, unsuccessful students, etc. After the establishment Binh Thuan Prefecture (1697), there was a wave of "people with resources" (as called by Le Quy Don in Miscellaneous Chronicles of the Pacified Frontier) who were encouraged by Nguyen lords to join the immigration and reclamation in the Mekong Delta in order to find new opportunities for economic development (Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2016, p.62). With the support of Nguyen lords, these "people with resources" recruited poor citizens from places to reclaim the land: "Nguyen lords recruited people with resources from Quang Nam, prefectures of Dien Ban, Quang Ngai and Quy Nhon to immigrate to Dong Nai and Gia Dinh Prefecture. Thanks to them, the land reclamation was speeded up" (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.345). At the same time, the fact that the government of Nguyen lords allows landowners to buy and sell slaves for the reclamation and economic development created conditions for the "people with resources" who already have ample financial potential to quickly increase the number of hired workers and recruit local residents to accelerate the reclamation: "These slaves married each other and gave birth to farmers" (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.345). With a huge labor force, landowners organized the reclamation, establishment of villages and hamlets, and economic development: "Immigrants cut down trees, removed grass and flattened the abundant and fertile land to use for accommodation and cultivation of areca palms for house construction" (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.345). This brought a new vitality to the reclamation and development in the Mekong Delta, as only this class is financially qualified to hire workers, manage the reclamation and agricultural production on a large scale (Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2016, p.63). This period also marks the emergence of landowners in the Mekong Delta.

The Chinese immigrants in the Mekong Delta is another force that contributed to the making of landowners here. Arriving about half a century later than Vietnamese people, Chinese immigrants are loyal officials and generals of the Ming Dynasty who refused to submit to the Qing Dynasty, thus brought their families and confidants to cross the sea to the South. These people were brought to Gia Dinh by Van Trinh and Van Chieu - two generals of Lord Nguyen Phuc Tan; the lord had asked the viceroy of Chenla who was stationing in Gia Dinh at that time to allow for these Chinese people to live here (Luu Van Quyet, Vo Van Sen, Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2020, p.4711). A group led by Chen Shangchuan reclaimed and settled on Pho Islet (Bien Hoa, Dong Nai Province today), and brought together more Vietnamese and Khmer people to build the rich city of Nong Nai. Another group led by Yang Yandi settled in Peam Mesar (Tien Giang Province today) and established the city of My Tho. They paid attention to "allowing people to set up hamlets, reclaim the land, build farms and use their expertise to make a living and pay taxes" (NHBND, 1962, p.140). In addition, there was also a group of Chinese people in Ha Tien led by Mo Jiu, who "did not submit to the early policies of the Great Qing and ran to the South... recruited Vietnamese people in Phu Quoc, Lung Ke (or Trung Ke, Lung Ca - réam), Can Bot (Can Vot - Kampot), Huong Uc (Vung Thom - Kompong Som), Gia Khe (Rach Gia) and Ca Mau to establish seven communes and villages..." (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2006, p.159). The presence of Mo Jiu attracted more and more people, as well as merchant ships from different places and overseas to this area. After settling down and establishing villages and hamlets in Gia Dinh, the groups of Chinese people mentioned above reclaimed a large area of land and contributed to the construction of the first administratively organized residential clusters and streets here. By owning and governing large pieces of agricultural (and commercial) land, they became the first big landowners in the Mekong Delta (Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2016, p. 66). Later, with the change of historical reality, Chinese people who are used to trading only left a small area of reclaimed land for accommodation, and sold the rest to invest in rice trading or rice-related supporting business. They became administrators of means of production and turned rice into a commodity for export, which demonstrates a clear pre-capitalist characteristic (Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2016, p.67).

In addition, Nguyen Lords' policies of recruiting immigrants for reclamation and assigning land to individual families are also a condition for landowners to appear in the Mekong Delta. Back then, the weakening Chenla sought to marry a daughter of Lord Nguyen Phuc Nguyen (1613 - 1635) in 1620 in order to have a strong support to cope with the threat from Siam. Ngoc Van, as the queen of King Chey Chettha II had certain influences on the southward territory expansion of the Nguyen lord. Through which, the lord "sent generals and troops to station in the north of Prey Nokor to the border of Champa (the area between Ham Tan District - Binh Thuan and Xuyen Moc - Ba Ria Vung Tau today) to maintain order and security and encourage Vietnamese people here to reclaim the land for their livelihoods" (Phan Khoang, 1967, p.401-402).

By the end of the 17th century, Nguyen lords encouraged the establishment of plantations as a means of reclamation; accordingly, soldiers are self-sufficient by growing food crops on the land surrounding their stations, and people are recruited for the establishment of plantations. Called militiamen, the main task of these people is concentrated agricultural production; however, when it is necessary, they also join battles as active-duty soldiers (Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2016, p.69). After many events, such as the murder of Yang Yandi (1688) and the rebel of Ang Sor - a viceroy of Chenla, the Nguyen lord sent general Mai Van Long to suppress Ang Sor and kill Huang Jin. When returning to Gia Dinh, due to climatic conditions, the army was order to stay and grow crops on the land of Mo Xoai for food supply. In 1700, returning from Chenla, general Nguyen Huu Canh led his troop to dig trenches, clear canals and plow the land to grow crops in the area of Ong Chuong Islet (Cho Moi - An Giang today). In 1705, Nguyen Cuu Van, a general stationing in Phien Tran, sent his soldiers to reclaim Cu Ne (also called Vung Gu - Tien Giang today). In 1790, as the government of Tay Son Dynasty in Gia Dinh was overthrown, Nguyen Anh ordered to establish plantations to meet the need for food supply of soldiers and to prepare logistics for the counter-attack against the Tay Son army. The fields and farms established by soldiers were owned by the State, and the harvested crops from there were put together in the state warehouse. This policy was strongly promoted by Nguyen lords in the second half of the 18th century; accordingly, "every year, each person at the plantation must pay about 360 liters of rice. Anyone who can recruit 10 people or more will be promoted to the role of foreman and does not have to serve in the army" (NHBND, 1962, p.23). "Later, due to many reasons, garrisons and stations were moved or changed location, and the plantations were sold or handed over to other officers to take over and continue to run. Over time, the Nguyen lords' policy of freedom of private property also contributed to turning them into big landowners" (Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2016, p.72). Thus, Nguyen lords'

policies of recruiting people for reclamation and establishing plantations led to the emergence of landowners in the Mekong Delta.

Imprints of Landowners in The Reclamation of The Mekong Delta

The emergence of landowners accelerated the reclamation and economic development in the Mekong Delta. In early 17th century, after the Southeast region was reclaimed, immigrants also settled down and reclaimed the area along the banks of Vam Co Tay River, north bank of Tien River and islets along the estuaries of Tien River, including the areas of Tan An, Go Cong, Cho Gao, and the islets of Minh and Bao in Tien Giang. The group of Chinese people led by Yang Yandi settled in the region of My Tho, stretching from My Tho old market to Tran Dinh, i.e. present-day Tan Li Tay (Tan Hiep) from 1679 along with the Vietnamese people here (Luu Van Quy, Vo Van Sen, Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2020, p.4710). On the south bank of Tien River in early 18th century, due to the prohibition of Nguyen lords, a number of Christians fled to Cai Mon, Cai Nhum, Soc Xoai, Ba Vat and Mo Cay. It is noteworthy that in the first half of the 18th century, settlements were formed on almost all islets, such as: Tan Hue, Gieng, Ong Chuong, May, Lam Thon islets on Tien River; or Cat and Dung islets on Hau River. In Soc Trang and Ba Thac, there were also some Vietnamese residents who came to settle and reclaim land alongside Khmer people. In the southwestern coastal area from Ha Tien to Rach Gia, Ca Mau, from the later 17th century to the early 18th century, the number of Vietnamese immigrants who settled down increased quite rapidly due to the recruitment of Mo Jiu, with 7 communes established from Kampotsom to Ca Mau, including Can Bot, Trang Ke, Huong Uc (Vinh Thom), Ha Tien, Rach Gia, Ca Mau, etc (Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2016, p.84).

On the basis of reclamation, a large area of arable land was expanded. According to Le Quy Don, in the 70s of the 18th century, the actual area of rice fields in Tan Binh District was more than 1,454 ha, in Phuoc Long District was more than 787 ha, not to mention mountain fields, mulberry fields, sugarcane fields, betel fields, fields of families and officials, etc. In Phuoc Long District, land and field area was more than 6000 plots; on the left bank of Tien River in Quy An and Quy Hoa, the land area of each was more than 5000 plots (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.140). In Vinh Long Province (including Ben Tre today), 70,000 ha of land were reclaimed. In present-day Tien Giang, the area of Tam Lach (present-day Ba Giong) had 4,000 farmers with 5,000 plots of land; Ba Lai (probably present-day Ba Rai, Cai Lay) had 4,000 farmers with 4,000 plots of land; Dinh Vien District (including Cai Lay-Cai Bet today) had 7,000 farmers with 7,000 plots of land (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.141). If the total reclaimed area of the entire Gia Dinh by the end of the 18th century was 32,000 plots with 21,000 farmers, the area which belongs to Tien Giang today accounted for 71.42% of farmers and 50% of land area in Gia Dinh (Tran Hoang Dieu, Nguyen Anh Tuan, 2005, p.378).

Nguyen lords implemented quite open regulations on the procedures for registration of reclaimed land as well as tax collection, which created many favorable conditions for the development of big landowners in the Mekong Delta. At that time, reclaimed land in one place can be registered in another, land reclaimed on plains can be declared as land on mountains. The land area can also be declared at will without actual measurement and inspection (Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2016, p.41). Landowners were also allowed to freely buy and sell field-working slaves to supplement the reclamation force beside tenant farmers and recruited immigrants: "The Nguyen Dynasty allowed people to freely occupy land, build gardens and houses, as well as to trade men and women from ethnic groups on rivers' upstream as slaves and servants" (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.345). With such policies, only big landowners have enough power and resources to carry out the reclamation in this way. Some typical examples include Do Thi De (aka Hai De) - a big landowner in Cao Lanh, Dong Thap who employed many Ma people for reclamation (PCPDT, 1996, p.181). In some villages or communes, there were "40 to 50 or 20 to 30 households depending on each locality, each has 50 to 60 farm-working slaves and 300 to 400 cattles; they plow and reap busily without any free time" (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.345).

Statistics from the government of Nguyen lords show that, by the end of the 18th century, "Tran Bien (now Bien Hoa) has over 250 hamlets with about 8000 farmers, Phien Tran (later Phien An) has over 650 hamlets with about 26000 farmers, Long Ho (later Dinh Tuong) has over 350 hamlets with about 7000 farmers. Thuoc Canh Duong, Thien Mu, Hoang Lap, and O Tat have 70 hamlets and more than 1,500 farmers" (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.151). In general, Gia Dinh Prefecture (except Ha Tien) had more than 13,200 hamlets and 42,000 farmers. Meanwhile, the total area of land reclaimed and registered for tax payment was 32,000 plots and 2,241.948 ha (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.140). Although the statistics are still sketchy, it still proves the positive results of the reclamation

achieved by forces in the Mekong Delta over two centuries, including landowners. In "Phu bien tap luc", Le Quy Don said that the policy of "recruiting people with resources from Quang Nam, Dien Ban, Quang Ngai, Quy Nhon to reclaim this fertile land and allow inhabitants to occupy the land, grow areca palms and build houses..." (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.345) allow families and clans with abundant resources and the ability to well organize the reclamation and cultivation to become landowners. "In nearly a century of formation, the landowners in the Mekong Delta turned villages and communes of no more than 20 inhabitants in early 17th century into the prosperous Gia Dinh Prefecture with an estimated population of over 200,000 people" (Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2016, p.87).

The unification and clarification of the area and administrative regulations in Gia Dinh by Nguyen lords, followed by the development of reclamation policy at state level stimulated the development of landowners in the Mekong Delta. In addition, a clear and reasonable tax regime also strongly encouraged agricultural production and pre-capitalist accumulation in the Mekong Delta. Nguyen lords proved to be very flexible in exempting agricultural land from taxes in the early period of reclamation while allowing freedom of occupation, transfer, pledge, sale, purchase and inheritance of land, which acted as a driving force for the strong accumulation and concentration of land in the Mekong Delta. In the early stage of reclamation, sufficient manpower, material and financial resources are enough for speeding land reclamation. Therefore, it is understandable that immigrants chose extensive farming to mitigate risks from natural disasters, epidemics, crop failure, etc. Farmers were allocated fields and shared the fruits of their labor with the landowners based on the yields they obtained. "Facilities and risks in production are equally divided, leading to less intense conflicts between landowners and tenant farmers. In other words, the relationship between landowners and tenant farmers is more or less mutualistic and cooperative" (Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2016, p.77). Thanks to that, the area of reclamation in the Mekong Delta kept growing: "From the sea estuary to the river upstream, all are vast rice fields which are very suitable for growing sticky rice and ordinary rice that produce white, even and flavorful rice grains" (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.345).

Imprints of Landowners in Socioeconomic Development

The acumen in production and business helped landowners in the Mekong Delta identify the preferential natural conditions of the new land. Also, the positive policies of Nguyen lords that encourages the ownership and reclamation of land created conditions for the reclamation to rapidly develop. From here, agricultural products were produced in large quantities, and the commodity economy also thrived accordingly. According to Litana, rice from the South became a commodity sold everywhere as early as the beginning of the 18th century (Li, Tana, 1998, p.123). After reclaiming the Mekong Delta, landowners here proceeded to plant various crops, with a focus on rice cultivation. First, rice is grown at the foot of mountains; when the reclaimed area is expanded and the population increases, rice is grown in low-lying and muddy areas (Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2016, p.102). The land is fertile, so despite using rudimentary agricultural tools, high productivity is still achieved, as in districts of Quy An and Quy Hoa (possibly An Hoa islet), where 60 liters of rice seed produces 6000 liters of rice; or in Dinh Vien district, where 60 liters of rice seed produces 18000 liters of rice. With a vast area of land and a dense system of rivers and creeks, the landowners not only thought about cultivating on rice field as the only way of making profits; they also diversified the crops both to take advantage of the land and to serve their lives. From there, the "gardening economy" was born. In the Mekong Delta during this period, there had been large orchards: "In Vinh Thanh Town, residents specialize in gardening and working on the fields; they all have their own fortune, and the town is considered a rich and crowded place", "on the Nhut Ban sand reef (An Hoa islet), cotton, yam, mulberry and ramie are grown" (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2006, p.150). In the lowlands along rivers and creeks, ditches are dug out and the land is raised to build gardens of areca palms, coconut trees, fruit trees and vegetables. My Long is famous for areca palm gardens that are as dense as forests which produce many large fruits and account for one fifth of the total arable land area here. In many other villages, gardens account for over 50% of total land area (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2006, p.65). In Hoc Mon, Ba Diem, Kien Dang and Kien Hung districts (present-day Tien Giang), "areca gardens are luxuriant. Every household has both fresh and dried areca nuts, which are piled up in the yards and are sold to near and far away places" (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2006, p.65). For the forestside area, people grow wax trees to collect the wax; every year, about 6,528 kg of wax are used as tribute to Nguyen lords. Thanks to the favorable natural conditions, aquamarine products are also preferred commodities in the market. Shrimp and fish from Tieu

estuary in Dong Thap Muoi are very large, "the fish and shrimp are large, tasty and abundant. Locals often soft-boil the fish then dry them for sale" (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2006, p.69).

The development of commodity production created momentum for trade growth; thus, the agricultural economy in the Mekong Delta made great progress in the 18th century, with the establishment of many towns and busy trading points, such as My Tho market town, Bai Xau port, Ha Tien port, etc. These trading ports played an important role in the circulation of goods in the region as well as in international trade. In particular, My Tho market town served as the center to coordinate trading activities of the entire Mekong Delta: "... private ownership of land has promoted the strong development of commodity economy and rapidly changed the economic situation in Dong Nai - Gia Dinh" (Huynh Lua, 1987, p.59). The strong development of the commodity economy has impacts on "private land ownership, especially the concentration of land in the hands of big landowners helps them hold a large number of agricultural products. Those products are brought to the market" (Le Van Nam, 1988, p.54).

With many intersections of waterways, roads, ports, administrative units, etc., a network of markets is also formed and developed along trading ports and towns as soon as people came to settle in the Mekong Delta. Many markets were established very early and quite busy, such as the markets of My Tho, Luong Phu (Cho Gao), Cai Be, Song Tranh, Thanh Son (Cai Lay), etc., which belonged to Dinh Tuong Town. Among which, Luong Phu Market (commonly known as Cho Gao) was established by the landowner Tran Van Nguyet in the 18th century (Nguyen Phuc Nghiep, 2017), and was famous for rice trading. As described by Trinh Hoai Duc, it has "busy stalls; on the east side is Ben Chua where merchant ships gather for selling and buying rice" (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2006, p.242). My Tho Market is the largest and very prosperous commercial center. Trinh Hoai Duc said: "My Tho Market is located in the south. Here, there are roofed houses with carved columns, high pavillions and lots of ships and boats coming from rivers and the sea, creating a very prosperous scene..." (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2006, p.55).

With the domination of private land ownership in the Mekong Delta, along with the concentration of land in the hands of landowners, this social class was able to hold a large volume of agricultural products. Rice, areca and many other agricultural products are brought to the market and become commodities. Many historical documents said that, since the 18th century, rice trading between the Mekong Delta and Dang Trong as well as other countries had been an important, if not the main trading activity here. Grains and rices from the Mekong Delta were the main source of food supply for Thuan Quang region. Merchants often traveled from the Central region on large ships, then anchored at sea estuaries or large trading ports and markets, changed to smaller boats to go deeper into the Mekong Delta to buy rice, then transported it to sell in Phu Xuan - Thuan Hoa. Le Quy Don wrote: "Gia Dinh has a lot of rice... every year, in lunar November and December, people grind and pound rice grains into rice and sell it for money to spend in festivals and celebrations. Often, rice and grains are transported to Phu Xuan capital in exchange for fabrics and goods from China" (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2006, p.441). According to the author Le Van Nam, there had been more and more merchant ships transporting rice from Gia Dinh to Phu Xuan: in 1768, there were 341 ships; by 1774, there were over 1,000 ships. If a ship carries 20 to 30 tons of rice on average, the total amount must be up to thousands of tons (Le Van Nam, 2000, p.61).

Not only serving domestic needs, rice from the Mekong Delta was also exported to foreign markets, especially China. In June 1789, Nguyen Anh allowed Chinese merchants to buy rice in Gia Dinh; in exchange, they brought iron, cast iron and sulfur - raw materials for making weapons - to sell there (NHBND, 1998, p.29). Le Quy Don said: "In Gia Dinh Prefecture, rice is countless. It is normal to see Chinese merchants visiting the place to buy and sell, and they all praise the goods quality here" (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.258). According to author Nguyen Phuc Nghiep, annually, about 12,000 tons of rice were sold abroad through Chinese merchants (Nguyen Phuc Nghiep, 2017). According to another document, in Saigon, about 30 Chinese merchant ships with a total tonnage of about 6,500 tons come to trade annually; and when leaving the ports, these merchant ships carry mainly rice (Le Van Nam, 2000, p.31). Landowners are the ones who benefit the most from the rice sold. With the profit obtained, they continue to invest in the reclamation and expansion of arable land, and acquire small and scattered land areas to form large estates. With the reclamation and harvesting going in circle, landowners in the Mekong Delta quickly expanded the land area of their ownership and became big landowners holding thousands of hectares of land.

The commodity economy even changed the traditional social power structure through the recognition of land ownership of women. This came from the recognition of private land ownership and the freedom of purchase, exchange and inheritance of land: "In the 18th century,

women can also become landowners. By the 19th century, the list of "female landowners" keeps growing, accounting for 10-15% of landowners in Tien Giang (depending on each region), in which, there are those who own hundreds, even thousands of hectares of land" (Nguyen Phuc Nghiep, 2003, p.227).

With clear elements of collaboration and mutual benefits in relations of production and the ownership of means of production by landowners in the Mekong Delta in the 17th and 18th centuries, pre-capitalist elements emerged (Nguyen Dinh Dau, 1992, p.57). For the first time in the history of Dai Viet, there is a rice granary that can completely satisfy the "thirst" for food supply of the entire Dang Trong. As the author Huynh Lua said: "Very early on, the Mekong Delta has been a large rice granary with rice production in excess of the local need. In addition to meeting the need for food supply of local residents, the rice produced here is also sold to other parts of the country, mainly to the outer regions of Dang Trong, especially Thuan Hoa" (Huynh Lua, 1987, p.84). The fact that rice is exported has shown the change in the mode of production applied by landowners in the Mekong Delta. They switched from self-sufficiency to high-level production of goods - a distinct pre-capitalist trait: "The organization and collaboration in production, in other words, the relations of production between landowners and farmers, landlords (commonly used by people in the Mekong Delta) and tenant farmers, due to the emergence of relationship of interest and the development of some pre-capitalist factors, have brought both mode of production and relation of distribution in the agricultural economy of Dai Viet to a new level with many progressive elements" (Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet, 2016, p.142).

The reclamation and development of the Mekong Delta also took place along with the establishment of villages and communes as well as the residential administrative institutions. Many hamlet and villages were established by landowners and big landowners in the Mekong Delta after the process of inhabiting and reclaiming the land. In the late 18th century, there were more and more big landowners in the Mekong Delta. In recognition of the contributions and credits in the establishment of villages and reclamation of land, some landowners' names are used by people for landmarks in the region; some others are worshipped as founders of villages. Some notable cases include: Binh Phuc Nhut hamlet, established by the landowner Tran Van Sung in 1743; Binh Tri hamlet, established by Tran Van Dong in 1743; Dieu Hoa hamlet in My Tho, Chau Thanh established by Nguyen Van Truoc; Binh Nguyen hamlet (now Nhi Binh) established by Nguyen Van Lu (Tran Hoang Dieu, Nguyen Anh Tuan, 2005, p.375); Hoa Thuan Hamlet (now in Cai Lay, Tien Giang) established by Le Phuoc Tang, a landowner from the Central region who came to reclaim the land in around mid-18th century; Kim Son hamlet (now belongs to Chau Thanh, Tien Giang) established by Le Cong Giam from the Central region; Binh Cach hamlet (now Tan Binh Thanh commune, Cho Gao district) established by Tran Van Khung (Nguyen Phuc Nghiep, 2003, p.68); Le Van Hieu reclaimed the land in Rach Tra Lot (now Hoa Khanh commune, Cai Be district), then moved for reclamation in Long Hung hamlet (now Chau Thanh district); Pham Dang Dinh from Quang Ngai to Son Quy (Go Cong) to reclaim the land and become a rich landowners in the region (Tran Hoang Dieu, Nguyen Anh Tuan, 2005, p.381).

Thus, landowners had contributed to changing the unspoiled Mekong Delta into a strong agricultural commodity region, which not only satisfies the need for food supply of the entire Dang Trong, but also contributes to the economic prosperity of the neighboring countries. The economic activities of landowners in the Mekong Delta helped Nguyen lords establish an effective relationship between agricultural production and business, as well as connect landowners who hold a lot of land and fields, tenant farmers and merchants in order for agricultural products of the Mekong Delta to be circulated in the market. It is also landowners who helped to form residential administrative institution on the new land.

Conclusion

After two centuries of efforts and active policies on reclamation of Nguyen lords, landowners and other inhabitants gave the Mekong Delta a whole new appearance. The policies that allow and encourage the reclamation of unspoiled land in the form of private ownership prescribed by Nguyen lords in the Mekong Delta in the 18th century created conditions for the rapid development of privately-owned land and fields, accounting for an overwhelming proportion of the entire reclaimed area. Moreover, the land and fields of landowners accounted for a high proportion in the total area of privately-owned land from very early. Thanks to the acumen in identifying the favorable location and natural conditions of the new land, as well as the policies that encourage and protect the right to own land for cultivation of Nguyen lords, the reclamation

in the Mekong Delta quickly expanded, agricultural production soon grew, leading to the formation of a developed commodity economy with an abundant market for agricultural products. The development of trade accelerated the development of monetary relations and contributed to a fundamental transformation of the nature of the economy in the Mekong Delta. For the first time, rice, areca and some other commodities from the Mekong Delta are presented throughout Thuan Quang region and exported. In addition, landowners also made important contributions in creating the sociocultural appearance, administrative and sociopolitical institutions with the distinct, rich and diverse imprints of the Southern land. Also, it is this social class, along with other inhabitants that made important contributions to the defense of the country, standing by Nguyen lords' side against the scrutiny and invasion of foreign powers, and becoming a solid support for Nguyen lords to consolidate power in the Mekong Delta in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Based on the research findings, we believe that, the emergence and development of landowners in the Mekong Delta in the 17th-18th centuries has many progressive characteristics, which are proved by their role in the land reclamation, socioeconomic development, security and defense in the area. This period also witnessed the mutualistic and collaborative relationship for mutual development between tenant farmers and landowners, which accelerated the reclamation in the Mekong Delta and turned the land into a fertile plain and a large rice granary of the country in history as well as in present.

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