

From the policy of “Ngu binh u nong” in the monarchy period to the military farm model during the 1956-1960 period in North Vietnam

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Abstract:

Currently, Vietnam has become deeply integrated into the global economy and new requirements for economic development and defence consolidation have emerged. Economy and defence are closely related, specifically, the stronger the economy, the stronger the defence potential. Military forces involved in production have not only economic significance but also national defence significance. In fact, military units and enterprises make substantial contributions to the economic development of the country. This article studies the military art of Vietnam from the times of the monarchy to modern history. While previous studies on Vietnamese military art have examined the policy of “Ngu binh u nong”¹, this study further clarifies Vietnam's military policy throughout the nation's history. This work suggests that the ancestors' policy of “Ngu binh u nong” was inherited and developed by the Communist Party of Vietnam not only as military organization, but as a strategy of economic development that combines with national defence, a national governance policy, as well as a national defence strategy for Vietnam.

Keywords: military farm, “Ngu binh u nong”, Northern Vietnam.

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1. Introduction

In the history of nation building and defence, the Vietnamese people have experienced many major struggles with other countries ranging from the victory over the Southern Han invaders (938), the two defeats against the Song (981 and 1075-1077), the three victories over the Yuan - Mongol army (1258, 1285 and 1287-1288), and the Ming invaders (1418-1427) to the August Revolution (1945), the Indochina War (1945-1954), and the American War (1954-1975). There have been several studies on Vietnam's military art to “explain” why such a small nation, without a decent army, could fight and defeat any invaders at all. Among

them are studies on the policy of “Ngu binh u nong” during the monarchy period [1-9]. The authors/researchers of those works analysed the content of “Ngu binh u nong”, including how to recruit soldiers and how to organize (divide sessions, practice time), as well as pointing out the impacts of the policy implementation of “Ngu binh u nong” for dynasties. However, studies are relatively limited on military participation in real estate in modern history or the inheritance of the policy of “Ngu binh u nong” in the monarchy with the strategy of economic development combined with national defence [10-11]. In this study, the author analyses not only the policy of “Ngu binh u nong” during the monarchy period, but also its employment as

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¹as “soldiers billeted in farms” or “servicemen billeted in farms”.

a military farm model and a strategic combination between economic development and national defence of Vietnam in modern times. Based on documents from the National Archives Centre III, this article analyses the model of military farms in the North after 1954 to determine the inheritance and development of the country's political and national defence policies from the “Ngu binh u nong” strategy. This is a prominent contribution of research as it analyses contents that previous studies scarcely mention.

2. “Ngu binh u nong” in the monarchy period

“Ngu binh u nong” means sending “soldiers” to work in local agriculture for a definite period; it is a policy that combined building military forces with agricultural production in the monarchy period, most notably under the Ly - Tran - the early Le (XV century).

Under the Dinh (968-980) and Anterior Le (980-1009), Dinh Tien Hoang and Le Dai Hanh both instituted military service for all young men. But only from the Ly dynasty onwards were there clear records of the implementation of the “Ngu binh u nong” in military regulations. The book *Viet su tieu an* (Model cases from Viet history) records the use of troops by King Ly Thanh Tong as follows: “Soldiers of the Ly dynasty... once a month, were called to service; after their service expired, they returned to their hometown to work in the fields, without a salary” [12]. In *Lich trieu hien chuong loai chi* (Categorized records of the institutions of successive dynasties), historian Phan Huy Chu noted the following about army organization of the Ly and Tran dynasties: In the Ly and Tran dynasties, military titles were somewhat more detailed... There were official guards in the citadel, other troops remained unchanged: in time of peace, they returned to work in the fields, in time of war, they were called to service. Therefore, the number of soldiers was always assured without spending too much on them, and so they were even more eager

to fight against the enemy. The victories over the Champa army and the Song army (Ly Thai Tong defeated the Champa army, Nhan Tong defeated the Song army), and two victories over the Yuan army (Tran Nhan Tong) is enough to tell the power of these dynasties [13].

Regarding the supplies for soldiers under feudal dynasties, historian Phan Huy Chu wrote: “During the Ly dynasty... local soldiers had no salary. They were in service for a certain period, and were sent home when this period ended to cultivate crops and supported themselves. The Tran dynasty followed the military regulations of the Ly dynasty... soldiers shifted between military service and working in the fields in order to save money... It was generally the same in the early Le and from the time of Hong Duc, this would not change” [13].

Thus, it can be understood that under the Ly dynasty the army force was divided into two types: the imperial army (also known as the internal army, the army in the capital, the royal army) and the local army (also known as the external army). There were also militia forces (“huong binh” in the plains and “tho binh” in the mountains).

Regarding the method of recruiting and organizing soldiers, to manage the country, the royal court conducted civil status registration and personnel inventory according to which military ranks and soldier recruitment were determined. Specifically, under the Ly dynasty and at the beginning of spring, commune officials had to report the civil status of their communes by declaring the number of people and grouping them into the following classes: the king's relatives (ton that), civil mandarins, military mandarins, soldiers, miscellaneous officials (tap luu), man in adulthood, aged 16 or 18 or older depending on the time of each monarch (hoang nam), old man (long lao), the disabled, and the displaced [7]. The royal court strictly controlled the number of young men in the country because it was this human resource that would carry out military service.

By controlling the number of people in the country, the royal court stipulated that all people who reached adulthood must carry out military service. According to *Lich trieu hien chuong loai chi* (Categorised records of the institutions of successive dynasties): “It was regulated that those who were elected would be sent to the army, those who were underqualified would have their names recorded in the book. They would be called out when needed and the length of service may not be fixed” [13]. If it was a time of peace, the royal court selected just a few soldiers to add to the army to guard and practice. The remaining soldiers were registered in the military book and would be called to join the army when needed. Following the policy of “Ngu binh u nong”, the royal court sent most of the soldiers to work in the fields and only a small number of them were separated from agricultural production.

During the Ly dynasty, the royal army soldiers were given 10 bundles of rice each year. On the 7th day of the first month, on Khai Ha ceremony, each soldier was given three “tien” (money unit) and a piece of cloth... But the local army do not have a salary, they only did their service in rotation. At the end of their service period, they could go home to cultivate, grow their own crops and support themselves [13].

With the policy of “Ngu binh u nong”, the royal army was responsible for protecting the capital and the king and received a salary, while the vast majority of soldiers - from those who guarded the citadel gates to the local troops - took turns with some being on guard duty and training for a certain period of time and others being assigned to agricultural production.

In the Tran dynasty, the royal court continued the policy of sending soldiers to work in the fields. “The Tran dynasty, following the Ly dynasty's military regulations, royal guards were given annual

allowances, the amount of which is unknown. As for the remaining soldiers, they took turns to work in the fields, self-supported”. During the reign of the early Le, “after Le Thai To finished pacifying the country, he divided the land to the army soldiers. They were divided into five sessions, one stayed in regular service and the other four worked in the fields. So the military regulations in the early Le followed that of the Ly and Tran dynasties, not providing allowance for all soldiers. From the time of Hong Duc, these regulations remained unchanged” [13].

Continuing the policy of soldiers participating in agricultural production, the Mac dynasty carried out “loc dien”² and provided fields for local soldiers to cultivate. At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, when the Nguyen - Tay Son war took place, the policy of “Ngu binh u nong” was applied by Nguyen Anh and often mobilised troops for agricultural production in periods when they did not have to fight to create food sources. King Gia Long often ordered his troops to reclaim land, make new fields, and set up food production camps to both supply food for troops and store food.

It can be said that, under the monarchy, “Ngu binh u nong” was both a military organization and a military line. “Ngu binh u nong” became a military and defence strategy implemented by all dynasties. Although each dynasty had its own ideas, developments, and unique characteristics when implementing the “Ngu binh u nong” policy to suit the historical conditions of each dynasty, in general, military service was required for all young men and troops took turns to participate in agricultural production or all troops participated in agricultural production when not fighting an

²The fields which were granted to soldiers based on their accomplishments and contributions.

enemy. Taking its conception from the Dinh and - Anterior Le and being developed into a military system from the Ly dynasties, the “Ngu binh u nong” policy continued to be inherited and perfected by the following dynasties. Its core concept was to combine national defence with economic development; with national defence protecting the economy and economic development supporting national defence. “Ngu binh u nong” was not only a military organization but also “a policy of governing the country and a plan to defend the country” [7] applied by Vietnamese monarchy dynasties.

In 1858, the French - Spanish coalition attacked the Da Nang estuary, opening the way for Western colonial rule in Vietnam. In 1884, the Nguyen dynasty had to sign the Treaty of Patenotre with France, recognizing the French protectorate. From 1884-1930, Vietnam had many individuals and parties were born to fight against French protection, most notably the establishment of the Communist Party of Vietnam (February 1930).

3. Military farm model in North Vietnam during 1956-1960 period

In modern history, under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam³ (1930-1945), the August Revolution was successful and on September 2nd, 1945, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was born. However, on September 23rd, 1945, the French returned to Vietnam. From here, Vietnam began a 9-year-long resistance war, the Indochina War (1945-1954) and ended with the Dien Bien Phu victory on May 7th, 1954. The Geneva Agreement (July 21, 1954) was then signed, ending in the Indochina War. Since 1954, the country’s situation has significantly changed: the North was at peace again and the South

continued the national and democratic revolution to complete the cause of national reunification.

After the liberation day, the North had a very large army that had participated in the 9-year resistance war against the French. To reduce the “burden” on the country after the war, the military force was reorganized to reduce the number of soldiers. Moreover, in peacetime, there is no need for such a large army. The Party Central Committee then decided to transfer a part of the army force to do production tasks, build military farms, and “advance troops to the mountains and forests, reclaim and build farms, forming new economic zones, contributing to the cause of border construction, national defence and realization of the Party's ethnic policy” [14].

In July 1956, the Ministry of National Defence assigned the General Military Commission to establish the Department of Military Farm to start researching, investigating, and surveying the land in preparation to deploy the construction of the military farm. The military farm was built according to the model of a state-owned farm. At the beginning of 1957, the Department of Military Farm built four pilot farms: Yen Giang farm (Thanh Hoa province), Son Ha farm (Ninh Binh province), An Khanh farm (Ha Dong), and Ba Vi farm (Son Tay). From 1958, the General Military Commission transferred most troops to production. By 1960, the Department of Military Farm had built 35 military farms and one salt field (Quynh Hoan), four fishing teams (Dong Hoi, Cua Hoi, Lach Quan, Ninh Co), one blast furnace, and 58 processing facilities [15]. The locations for construction of military farms were mainly in the midland and mountainous areas, and mostly in the northwest, Viet Bac, and Zone IV, including areas along the western border and along the coast stretching from the northwest to Vinh Linh (Quang Tri). These farms

³In 1951, changed to Vietnam Labour Party.

were distributed along the 59th and 21st roads in the southeast - northwest direction, in line with the nation's economic, social, political, and national defence strategies⁴.

Regarding the transfer of troops to production, in 1957, the General Military Commission sent about 2,000 troops [16] to reclaim land and build four pilot military farms in Thanh Hoa, Ninh Binh, Ha Dong, and Son Tay. In 1958, the transfer of troops to production was further promoted. Instead of moving small squads as in 1957, in 1958, the General Military Commission moved the whole unit to production. The General Military Commission assigned four Military regions (including Northwest Military region, Viet Bac Military region, Huu Ngan Military region, and IV Military region) and three Divisions (305, 330 and 338) to direct the transfer of soldiers to production team and the building of military farms. In total, 17 regiments and equivalent units as well as 14 battalions and equivalent units were transferred. By the end of 1958, the number of people transferred to production was 26,831, an increase of more than 10 times compared to 1957 [17]. By the end of 1959, the General Military Commission had transferred 31,182 soldiers⁵ of which about 4,000 were officers [17]. In 1960, the General Military

Commission transferred 2,300 more soldiers. After three years of transferring troops to production (1958-1960), the General Military Commission had organized and sent 29,605 soldiers to reclaim and build military farms⁶ [18].

Regarding production, the military farm was organised according to the model of a state-owned farm. Military farms were under the management of the Ministry of National Defence. The military force that moved to production kept the number of that unit. Regarding organization, military farms kept the model of an army unit, that is, regiment, battalion, company, platoon, and squad. Companies and platoons are production units. They were divided into still smaller groups of about 10-15 people. Soldiers who switch to production not only had to continue their education and train professional skills in production, but also had to attend military training every year according to the regulations for reserve troops [16]. This military force regularly attended Party meetings (12 times a year), continued education (officers 26 days a year, soldiers 13 days), trained in expertise and farming techniques, and had to regularly attend military training. According to [19], Article 6 of "Some necessary regimes for transferring soldiers to production" specifically stipulates that: "the required learning activities are arranged weekly and monthly outside production hours, focusing on political and professional training...; party meetings are arranged in the last Saturday afternoon of the month, 4 hours a month, taken from two evenings, are for Party group activities; 6 hours per week, in the early morning, noon or evening, for learning; other activities such as listening to news, policies, professional training, trade unions, youth labour unions, clubs..., are arranged in the evenings;

⁴In the Northwest area, military farms were concentrated in Yen Bai, Son La and Lai Chau provinces (including present-day Dien Bien province) along the Vietnam - Laos border. In the Viet Bac area, military farms were concentrated in Tuyen Quang and Thai Nguyen provinces. In the coastal area, there were Rang Dong farm (Nam Dinh) and Binh Minh farm (Ninh Binh). In the Military Zone IV area, military farms were concentrated in the provinces of Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, and Vinh Linh (Quang Tri) along the Vietnam - Laos border. The military farms were in the area along the roads 59 and 21, concentrated in Phu Tho, Hoa Binh, Son Tay and Ha Dong.

⁵The Northwest area had about 5,000 soldiers; Viet Bac about 2,000 soldiers; Phu Tho about 4,000 soldiers; Hoa Binh and Son Tay about 5,000 soldiers, the upper part of Thanh Hoa about 5,500 soldiers, the upland of Nghe An about 5,000 soldiers, the border line about 2,000 soldiers, the coastal area about 2,000 soldiers, and other areas...

⁶The number of soldiers who switched to production decreased in 1959 because the General Military Commission brought several soldiers back to the army [18].

30 minutes per day for reading newspaper after dinner; political studies can be conducted in production hours but not as a regular basis”.

The leadership apparatus of each military farm consisted of a government organization and a Party organization. The party leads politically and the government directs administratively. Regarding administrative organization, the Board of Directors of the farm included the Director and Deputy Director who directly directed all aspects of production. Assisting the Board of Directors, there were specialized departments such as: Cultivation Department, Animal Husbandry Department, Basic Construction Department, Financial Planning Department, Administration Department, and Labour and Salary Department. In terms of Party organization, the Party Committee was the highest governing body of the farm. Each farm has a Party Committee attached to the Military Zone or Division under which there was also a Battalion Party Committee and cell. Besides, the farm also had mass organizations such as Trade Union, Youth Union..., which were directly led by the Party Committee.

Military farms also switched to the model of state-owned farms, shifting the military regime to workers' mode and no longer holding the model of a military unit. On October 1st, 1960, the Ministry of State-owned Farm was established, merging three types of agricultural production: military farms, state farms, and Southern agricultural production federations. Since then, military farms were no longer under the management of the Ministry of National Defence but directly under the Ministry of Agriculture and their production and business followed the state-owned farms⁷. Military farms

⁷In January 1961, after being handed over to the Ministry of Agriculture, 35 military farms were rearranged to 29 state-owned farms.

also changed to the model of state-owned farms, no longer army units, and military soldiers became workers.

4. Discussion

It can be said that throughout the nation's history, “Ngu binh u nong” was still a “policy of national governance and a strategy of national defence.” In each historical period, the way of “sending soldiers to agricultural production” had different variations, but its essence was basically the same. Soldiers were “hidden” in production activities and directly involved in production. They were both soldiers and producers (farmers). Basically, the military farms in the twentieth century were also a form of “sending soldiers to agriculture production” from the monarchy period. In the monarchy period, the military forces were sent to agricultural production in rotations while in modern history, they switched to agricultural production. The concept of “Ngu binh u nong” in the monarchy or the military farms in North Vietnam in the years 1955-1960 both have great significance.

Firstly, “Ngu binh u nong” and the military farm are a combination of economic development and national defence. Military and economic issues have always been a problem for every government. The policy of “Ngu binh u nong”, as well as the military farms, are a harmonious combination between national defence and economic development between military and economy. Under the monarchy, from a defence perspective, the government maintains a large army “sent” in agriculture. Although the army was so large, the royal court did not have to bear the burden of supplying food to the army. Thanks to the policy of “Ngu binh u nong”, the soldiers were sent to the locality for rotational agricultural production to be self-sufficient. From an economic perspective,

if the government must maintain a powerful army, the need for food production and storage is equally important. The country also needs a huge human resource to develop production and make the country rich and strong. Thanks to the policy of “Ngu binh u nong”, the royal court always had a human resource that was regularly involved in production. Thus, they could have a powerful and large army while production was maintained.

The establishment of military farms in the North after 1955 was also a combination of national defence and economic development. A large army was sent to reclaim land and build military farms, which are agricultural production facilities owned by the State. Military farms were not only economic bases for agricultural production, but also national defence establishments of the North. The military farm network stretched from the Northwest to Vinh Linh with a large army force. The Northwest region had six farms with 5,482 soldiers, being located along the Vietnam - Laos border. The Viet Bac region had five farms located to the east and south of the base area with 1,287 soldiers. Son Tay, Phu Tho, Hoa Binh, Ha Dong, Ha Nam, and Ninh Binh regions had seven farms located along road 59 and road 21 in the southeast - northwest direction with 6,055 soldiers. Thanh Hoa had two farms along the southwest border of Vietnam - Laos with 3,362 soldiers. Military Region IV had seven farms from Phu Quy to the front line with 4,465 soldiers [17]. The military farms became a “fortress” to protect the socialist North.

Secondly, “Ngu binh u nong” helps reduce the burden of “raising troops” in peacetime. Building a powerful military force is very necessary and indispensable for every government, especially in wartime when the government must mobilize a large army force. Then, all human and material resources were mobilized to prepare for the

resistance war. But in peacetime, a large army becomes “pressure” for the government. Therefore, the question is: How can a government maintain a large and powerful army and at the same time reduce the burden of raising the army and develop the economy in peacetime? Adopting the policy of “Ngu binh u nong”, which is sending troops to alternate agricultural production as in the monarchy period or building military farms, transferring the army to do production tasks in the North during the years 1955-1960, both can help reducing the economic burden on the government. With soldiers directly engaged in production and self-sufficient in food, the government reduces the pressure of raising troops.

Thirdly, it is more flexible to switch from peacetime to wartime when needed, and vice versa, the army can be actively involved in production and economic development during peacetime. With the policy of “Ngu binh u nong”, the royal court could quickly switch from peacetime to wartime condition when needed. When the country had to fight a war, those troops sent to the countryside for production were mobilized back to the army to participate in the fight against the enemy. It was proved in history. For example, under the Ly dynasty, in peacetime, the royal court only provided food to support internal troops (the imperial army). Compared to the standing army that was sent to agricultural production, the number of these internal soldiers was quite small. But in the resistance war against the Song, Ly Thuong Kiet mobilized about 100,000 soldiers from the military force sent from agriculture to fight against Song’s army. Not to mention, the military force stayed to protect the capital, the border area, and other key positions. During the Tran dynasty, military forces were mobilized back into the army when there was a war against Yuan - Mongol’s

army. During the second resistance war against the Yuan (in 1285), the royal court mobilized more than 20,000 soldiers. In the early Le, when there was a war, the royal court mobilized 26,000-30,000 soldiers [7].

In the 20th century, when the Indochina War ended, and the North was at peace again, the Party and State sent a large army to participate in agricultural production on military farms. These military farms then were both economic and a national defence bases with both combat and producing functions, i.e., a fighting force in place with the ability to provide logistics on the spot. After The United States of America decided to escalate its military intervention in South Vietnam, farm workers, including soldiers who turned to production, were sent back to the battlefields of the south to fight. This was reflected in the change in the labour force. During 1955-1960, the labour force of military farms was mainly male soldiers, but, since 1961, because male soldiers on military farms were sent to the southern battlefield, female workers made up the majority. By 1968, female workers in military farms accounted for a high proportion: female workers of Viet Lam farm accounted for 63.5% of the total number of employees; Thang Muoi farm, 66.1%; Nghia Lo farm, 72.7%; Xuan Mai farm, 63.2%; Ba Vi farm, 61.4%; Van Linh farm, 61.2%; and An Khanh farm, 60%⁸. This also means that more and more male workers on the farms were being sent to the battlefield in the South. During the decade of 1965-1975, tens of thousands of farm workers were sent to the battlefields of the South. More

⁸The percentage of female workers in state-owned farms in general is increasingly high. In 1960, the female labour rate was 18.8%; in 1961 was 29.4%; in 1962 was 32.8%; in 1963 was 34.1%; in 1964 was 36.5%; in 1965 was 40%; in 1966/1967 was 47.2%; In 1968/1969 was 52.6% and in 1970 was 53.2% [20, 21].

than 10,000 officials and farm workers joined the army, accounting for 1/6 of the force of officials and workers and nearly half of the youth force on the farm [15]. Every year, the young men in state-owned farms participated in recruitment campaigns. In peacetime, they were farm workers, but when the country was at war, they became warriors in the battlefield.

Fourthly, the Vietnamese army is a people's army, an army of the people. Under the monarchy, the royal court made all young men soldiers, and the army was hidden among the people (peasants). In the new era - Ho Chi Minh era, this character was more evident. The powerful, "invincible and victorious" military force was formed initially from the people's self-defence force and the people's guerrilla groups and gradually developed into a force of three armies: the main army, the local army, and the militia and self-defence force. The August Revolution (1945) was a victory of the people who rose to seize power. After 1945, the People's Army force became more and more mature and strong. With the motto "resistance war, national construction", "every citizen is a soldier, every village is a fortress", the Vietnamese people continued to defeat the French colonialists and then the American imperialists, making the General offensive and uprising in the spring of 1975. The country was independent and reunified.

The Party always associated the task of building socialism with defending socialism, and the task of national building with national defence, which means that economic development was in combination with national defence. In March 1976, the Politburo issued a *Resolution on the issue of sending troops to do the task of economic construction*: "In the coming time, we must combine military service with labour service throughout the country... On the other hand, in the

context that our country's economy, which was already poor and backward, has been severely damaged by 30 years of continuous war, and all our human and material resources are now mobilized to restore and develop the country's economy, to heal the wounds of war and build a rich and strong country, it is even more an essential and urgent requirement that the army does the task of economic development for the country" [22].

Many economic groups under the Ministry of Defence were formed like the 15th Army in the Central Highlands and the 16th Army in the Southeast. While carrying out strategic economic tasks in combination with national defence in the current period, many national defence economic zones were established and performed three functions: combat, production, and work. In the monarchy, the royal court implemented the policy of "Ngu binh u nong", requiring military service for all young men and sending soldiers to agricultural production in rotations. Later, in modern history, the Party advocated building a people's army and all young men had to serve in the military in which the task of economic development was combined. In the 21st century, "Soldiers sent to agricultural production" is the image of soldiers engaged in economic activities.

5. Conclusions

Currently, Vietnam has become deeply integrated into the global economy and new requirements for economic development and defence consolidation have emerged. Economy and defence are closely related, specifically, the stronger the economy, the stronger the defence potential. Military forces involved in production have not only economic significance but also national defence significance. In fact, military units and enterprises make substantial contributions

to the economic development of the country. For example, many military units have developed into spearhead economic sectors, and many military enterprises have become leading brands of the current economy such as: Military Industry - Telecommunications Group (Viettel), General Saigon Newport Company, Vietnam Helicopter Corporation, and Military Commercial Joint Stock Bank (MB) to name a few.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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