

VINH TE CANAL IN THE SOUTHWESTERN FRONTIER DEFENSE STRATEGY OF NGUYEN DYNASTY IN THE PERIOD 1824 - 1867

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Received:	29/11/2022	The Southwestern border was a newly discovered land during the Nguyen dynasty, therefore the need for protection and development became an important issue in the process of defending the country and affirming Vietnam's sovereignty against foreign invaders. In order to solve these problems, the Nguyen dynasty established the Vinh Te canal as an effective solution. Using historical, logical, and interdisciplinary methods, the research findings shed light on the strategic factors of the Vinh Te canal in the defense work on the southwestern border region during the Nguyen dynasty. This article clearly represents the birth of the Vinh Te canal while also thoroughly analyzing its role, effect, and value in promoting national defense resources to meet the Nguyen dynasty's national defense strategy on the southwestern border in the period 1824-1867. This research result contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the value of canals in the Nguyen dynasty's defense policy on the southwestern border region in the nineteenth century.
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KÊNH VĨNH TẾ TRONG CHIẾN LƯỢC QUỐC PHÒNG BIÊN GIỚI TÂY NAM CỦA NHÀ NGUYỄN THỜI KÌ 1824 – 1867

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 29/11/2022	Dưới triều Nguyễn, biên giới Tây Nam là vùng đất mới khai phá nên yêu cầu bảo vệ và phát triển trở thành vấn đề quan trọng trong tiến trình giữ nước và khẳng định chủ quyền của Việt Nam trước các thế lực ngoại xâm. Nhằm giải quyết những thách thức đó, kênh Vĩnh Tế ra đời như một giải pháp hữu hiệu đã được triều Nguyễn tiến hành. Mục đích của bài viết này là khôi phục lại diện mạo của kênh Vĩnh Tế như một phần quan trọng trong công cuộc bảo vệ và phát triển vùng biên giới Tây Nam của triều Nguyễn. Thông qua các phương pháp nghiên cứu chính là lịch sử, logic và liên ngành, kết quả nghiên cứu làm sáng tỏ các yếu tố chiến lược của kênh Vĩnh Tế trong công cuộc quốc phòng trên vùng biên giới Tây Nam dưới triều Nguyễn. Bài viết này trình bày rõ quá trình ra đời của kênh Vĩnh Tế, đồng thời đi sâu phân tích vai trò, tác dụng và giá trị của con kênh này trong việc phát huy các nguồn lực bảo vệ đất nước, đáp ứng chiến lược quốc phòng trên vùng biên giới Tây Nam của triều Nguyễn (1824 – 1867). Kết quả nghiên cứu này góp phần nhận thức toàn diện hơn về giá trị các kênh đào trong chính sách quốc phòng của triều Nguyễn trên vùng biên giới Tây Nam trong thế kỉ XIX.
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1. Introduction

Since the founding of the Nguyen dynasty (1802), the Nguyen kings had embarked on a national defense strategy in the Southern lands. The most prominent activity can be mentioned is the birth of a canal system parallel to the Chenla border. In particular, Vinh Te canal is considered a work with important strategic roles and significance in the defense of the southwestern border under the Nguyen dynasty. Vinh Te canal was regarded as a magnificent work bearing the bold imprint of the Nguyen dynasty's army and people. This work represents Vietnam's creative labor and status in international relations in mainland Southeast Asia at the time. Due to Vinh Te canal's strategic location and significance in 19th century politics, economics, relationships, and defense, it was written in numerous historical works of the Nguyen dynasty and has continued to be studied so now.

The book Gia Dinh Thanh Thong Chi by Trinh Hoai Duc is the earliest piece of writing to make reference to Vinh Te canal. Trinh Hoai Duc noted in the "Vinh Te Ha" section: "18th Gia Long period, Year of the Rabbit (1819), measuring straight with a length of 44,412 meters from the moat to the right behind Chau Doc fort to the west across the Nao Khau Ca Am to Ky Tho, Vinh Te canal was given that appellation" [1]. According to Trinh Hoai Duc [1], Vinh Te canal had had a very important role: "Since then, both the people's trade and the national border strategy had enjoyed enormous convenience" [1]. As Gia Dinh Thanh Thong Chi, a record of the Vinh Te canal with equivalent content can be found in the Dai Nam Nhat Thong Chi series of the National History of the Nguyen dynasty. This book series continues to affirm the role of the Vinh Te canal in defense and trade in Chau Doc - Ha Tien area [2]. In addition to the contents reflected on the Vinh Te canal in the above books, the Dai Nam Thuc Luc series of the National History of the Nguyen dynasty had more specific records on the time of canal digging, the king's edicts and the local mandarin's documents. The Vinh Te canal, in particular, has been captured in six enormous episodes of Dai Nam Thuc Luc. The dense events about the Vinh Te canal was recored from 1819 to 1824, during which the canal was dug [3], [4]. From 1824 to 1846, Dai Nam Thuc Luc continued to document further information about the establishment of translation stations, the development of infrastructure, and the conflict between the Nguyen army with Chenla and Siam armies [4] - [7]. Dai Nam Thuc Luc has provided original historical documents with rich content about the Vinh Te canal. It can be said that three history books mentioned above are original documents reflecting the history of the Vinh Te canal under the Nguyen dynasty, basically meeting the research content of this topic.

From these original sources, so far, there have been many authors with specific works related to the Vinh Te canal such as: author Son Nam with "History of Southern Reclamatio" [9]; especially, Nguyen Van Hau with "Thoai Ngoc Hau and the exploring of Hau Giang region" [10] presented and raised his views on the history of birth and the role of the Vinh Te canal. In the past 10 years, in Vietnam, there has also been many authors who continued to research the Vinh Te canal. According to Duong The Hien, in the Nguyen dynasty period 1802 – 1867, the Vinh Te canal was the most important waterway in Vietnam's southwestern border [11]. Meanwhile, H. Thuy [12] stated that this was the canal that affirmed the country's sovereignty under the Nguyen dynasty [12]. Nguyen Huu Hiep also claimed that "the Vinh Te canal not only helps ensure border security, but also stabilizes people's livelihood in border areas" [13]. In another opinion, Nguyen Quoc said that "the Vinh Te canal has created an important irrigation system in the remote region, contributing to the development of agriculture, transportation, trade, serving the people's life as well as protecting the southwestern border area" [14]. In addition, Dino described the Vinh Te canal as "a giant military moat stretching to protect the southwestern national border" contributing to the creation of "an important defense system, preventing blocking and repelling the entire enemy army to the other side of the border, preserving every inch of the sacred land of the Fatherland" [15].

Thus, the research process on the Vinh Te canal based on the Nguyen dynasty sources has been conducted by some researchers to basically outline the history, appearance and role of the

Vinh Te canal in the southwestern border region. However, up to present, there has not been any systematic and comprehensive research and analysis on this canal with its strategic position and role in terms of politics, economy, relations and national defense in the process of power interaction among the three countries Vietnam - Chenla - Siam in the early 19th century. Therefore, the content of this article focuses on analyzing and evaluating the role and great impact of the Vinh Te canal on the above mentioned fields in order to contribute to clarifying the merits of the Nguyen dynasty in national defense.

2. Research methods

We use a variety of research methods to explore this topic, including historical method, logical method, and interdisciplinary method.

By historical method, we reconstruct the birth process and historical changes related to the Vinh Te canal on the basis of studying and collecting historical documents about this canal. This is an important step in analyzing and evaluating the role and strategic significance of the Vinh Te canal in the Nguyen dynasty's southwestern border defense posture. This research was carried out in the period between 1824, when the Vinh Te canal was built, and 1867, when the Nguyen dynasty lost control of the Southwest region to French colonialists.

By logical method, we analyze and evaluate the impact of the Vinh Te canal in the fields of economy, politics, diplomacy and defense in order to draw out the role and strategic significance of this canal in the Nguyen dynasty's southwestern border defense posture from 1824 to 1867.

By interdisciplinary method, we analyze and evaluate the role and strategic significance of the Vinh Te canal based on the impact of geographical conditions, regional relationships, cultural and political factors of Vietnam, Chenla, Siam to achieve the goal of the subject.

We have tried to apply the above methods reasonably in the subject to ensure the historical science of this topic.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. *The Nguyen Dynasty's strategic vision for the development and protection of the Southwestern border region*

From the time of the Nguyen Lords, the land of Tam Phong Long (the land lying between the Tien river and Hau river at the north) was officially merged into Dai Viet territory in 1757 under the reign of Lord Nguyen Phuc Khoat. In order to manage the new land effectively, General Nguyen Cu Trinh asked Lord Nguyen to establish here three sects: Chau Doc, Tan Chau, Dong Khau and put under the management of Long Ho mansion. In order to have a quick and effective response in border protection, Nguyen Cu Trinh moved the headquarters of Long Ho mansion from An Binh Dong (Cai Be) to Tam Bao (Long Ho) [3, pp.166-167]. With the military activities of the Nguyen Lords, we easily recognized the great role of An Giang land in defending the border with Chenla, preventing the invasion of Siamese troops in the Southwest.

Since 1802, triangular relations among Vietnam - Chenla - Siam had new changes. For Siam, the Nguyen dynasty also proved to be flexible and peaceable [16]. Therefore, basically until about the first decade of the nineteenth century, Chenla was still under the strongly influenced by Siam. In 1806, Ang Chan II (Nac Ong Chan) was made king of Chenla by Siam. But then, due to being overly imposed by Siam, Ang Chan II decided to rely on the Nguyen dynasty to relieve the pressure from the Siam. Up to this point, the Nguyen dynasty acted as a counterbalance to the Siamese court in its influence over Chenla and sparked a conflict between Vietnam and Siam in the issue of Chenla in the Southern region.

The Southwest is a newly discovered land, and the border area is adjacent to Chenla and Siam, so it has an important geostrategic position in terms of defense. As a result, security and defense work in border areas was very concerned by the Nguyen dynasty. With a system of natural rivers and canals interlaced, the Nguyen dynasty gradually established a defensive posture based on

waterways on the southwestern border region. From the accumulated experience of water treatment and irrigation in the Nguyen lords' reign, the Nguyen dynasty considered the implementation of large and synchronous water treatment works to bring into full play the defense potential of this important border area. King Gia Long identified: "The frontier of Chau Doc and Ha Tien is no less than Bac Thanh" [3, p.946]. In 1816, the governor of Vinh Thanh Luu Phuoc Tuong told King Gia Long about the construction of Chau Doc citadel. The king looked at the map of Chau Doc Tan Cuong and said that: "If this country opens the waterway to Ha Tien, the two paths of agriculture and commerce will benefit. In the future, the more people come to live, the more land will expand, it will become a big town" [3, p.960]. Thus, King Gia Long soon had the idea of digging a canal connecting Chau Doc with Ha Tien [11]. When the Dong Xuyen canal (i.e. Thoai Ha canal) was completed in 1818, the king was very happy and saw the talent of General Nguyen Van Thoai, so he ordered Nguyen Van Thoai to continue directing the digging of a new canal – the Vinh Te canal.

Thus, since the completion of Chau Doc citadel (1816), King Nguyen thought of digging a canal to create development and defense basis for this land. After much thought, taking advantage "during the times of heaven, advantage, and humanity", in September 1819, the king issued a decree to dig the Vinh Te canal.

With the ancestors' creativity in defense thought, the Nguyen dynasty showed a breakthrough in the way of defending the frontier that had never been seen before. That was to set up a canal system parallel to the Chenla border line to serve the national defense. This is considered a very unique and creative breakthrough during the first three generations of the Nguyen dynasty from Gia Long, Minh Minh to Thieu Tri with three famous works: the Thoai Ha canal (1818), the Vinh Te canal (1819 - 1824), and the Vinh An canal (1843 - 1844). The establishment of this canal system not only alleviates traffic congestion between the Mekong River and the Southwest Sea, but also strengthens the defense system along the southwestern border region.

The Vinh Te canal, in particular, played an important strategic role and represents a great step in the process of perfecting the Nguyen Dynasty's southwestern border defense system prior to the French colonialists' invasion in 1867.

3.2. The construction of the Vinh Te canal (1819-1824)

After digging the Thoai Ha canal, in 1819, Nguyen Van Thoai was entrusted by King Gia Long to realize the idea of creating a waterway connecting Chau Doc with Ha Tien to strengthen and develop the border area with Chenla. The army of the Nguyen Dynasty, along with the Vietnamese, Chenla and Champa people started the extremely difficult work of digging canals. Dai Nam Thuc Luc was recorded in the 18th Gia Long year (1819): "King Gia Long dug a canal from Chau Doc to Ha Tien. It was named the Vinh Te canal. At the same time, King (Gia Long) decreed the people of Vinh Thanh that: "Digging this canal is very arduous. State planning and border strategy are of great importance. Although you are struggling at the moment, it will really benefit forever. Therefore, we should tell each other not to be afraid of hardship". King Gia Long issued another decree to King Chenla that: The Chenla's border is adjacent to Vinh Thanh (Vietnam). At that present, digging this canal is not only beneficial for the Vietnamese but also extremely beneficial to the Chenla. King (Chenla) should meet the people to tell him the hard work once but it has the benefit for all." [3, p.960].

The Vinh Te canal started to be dug on the full moon day of December of Ky Mao year (1819). It started from the west bank of Chau Doc river, running parallel to the border of Vietnam with Chenla, connecting with the Giang Thanh river (in Ha Tien). The construction of the Vinh Te canal encountered numerous obstacles, such as unpredictable weather, climate, or human resources, which caused the work to be halted. As a result, the Vinh Te canal was built in three stages beginning in 1819 and lasting until 1824:

+ The first phase: Commenced in December 1819 to March 1820 (Lunar calendar), then stopped. The direct commanders were Generals: Nguyen Van Thoai, Nguyen Van Tuyen and Nguyen Van Ton. The number of troops and workers was totally 10,500 people, including

5,000 Vietnamese and Champa people; 5,000 Chenla people; 500 armies of station Uy Vien (Tra On). The Vinh Te canal had been digging for nearly a year, it had been delayed for many reasons [3, p.997].

+ The second phase was from February 1823 to April 1823 (Lunar calendar). The direct commanders were Generals: Nguyen Van Thoai, Nguyen Van Tuyen and Tran Cong Lai. The number of troops and workers was totally more than 55,000 people, including over 39,000 armies of stations Uy Vien (Tra On), Vinh Thanh (An Giang) and Dinh Tuong together with more than 16,000 Chenla armies and people. A, divided into 3 sessions [4, pp.259-260].

+ The third phase was from February 1824 to May 1824 (Lunar calendar). Canal digging was resumed and still led by Generals Nguyen Van Thoai and Tran Cong Lai. Dai Nam Thuc Luc, recorded in the 5th Minh Menh year (1824), revealed that the Vinh Te canal continued to be dug. The people of the towns in the An Giang province and the people of Chenla were taken up, totally more than 24,700 people. They were paid salary as usual as in the 4th year of Minh Menh (1823). The king decreed that: "The digging of the Vinh Te canal is to obey the will of Hoang Khao The To Cao Hoang De (King Gia Long). But the digging has just begun, the work is still difficult, I obeyed the previous lice. Last year, there were more than 1,700 Truong remaining. Now the country is idle, so we can dig continuously to achieved the benefits forever." [4, p.331].

The project was a combination of military strength, the wisdom of the dynasty and the efforts of thousands of people. The method of digging canals at the time was alternating, relaying between groups of workers continuously days and nights. To keep the canal straight during the digging process, at night, they use the way of burning stakes torches and then follow the 3-point projection to dig. This was the most basic method of connecting the canal straight from Chau Doc to Ha Tien, with only a few bends along the border. From this, it was clear that the canal's defense purpose was the first criterion for sacrificing human and material strength for this project.

After all the hardships and delays, in May 1824, the Vinh Te canal was completed with the labor of the people of Vietnam and Chenla [4, p.351]. This canal was 205 Dam long (about 91 km), 7 Truong 5 Thuoc wide (about 25 m), and 6 Thuoc deep (about 3m) [4], [17]. In five years, the Nguyen dynasty mobilized about 80,000 people, including: Vietnamese, Chenla, and Champa. Nguyen Van Thoai and his wife were the ones with the greatest merit in opening the Vinh Te canal, connecting Chau Doc with Ha Tien [14]. King Minh Menh was very satisfied with this project, so he issued a decree to name the Vinh Te canal. In 1835, Minh Menh ordered Cuu Dinh to be cast as a national treasure and symbolized the royal longevity, the image of the Vinh Te canal was carved into Cao Dinh [2, p.207].

3.3. Role and strategic significance of the Vinh Te canal in the defense posture of the southwestern border in the period 1824 – 1867

3.3.1. Creating a direct basis for the defense of the southwest border and asserting the country's sovereignty over the new land

The Vinh Te canal was the largest water project at that time. It not only showed the strategic vision of the Nguyen dynasty but also promoted the role and great value in politics, national defense and security as well as economic development in the border area from Chau Doc to Ha Tien. In the period 1824 - 1867, the Vinh Te canal demonstrated its true role and value in diplomatic affairs and border defense.

The Vinh Te canal served as a military defense capable of defending in the situation of war both with Chenla and Siam. In this regard, King Gia Long must have understood very well the Siamese "East advance" policy after a long "asylum" there. The Vinh Te canal was as a giant moat with many strong defensive facilities that were difficult to overcome. On the other hand, the Vinh Te canal connected the two economic, political and military centers of the Nguyen dynasty – Chau Doc and Ha Tien. Nguyen Dynasty general Le Van Duc once said: "the Vinh Te canal is the back road of Ha Tien, connecting to the intestines of An Giang province, prevention is very

important” [8, p.366]. Vinh Te canal was intended to be a painting of the “Great Wall” with the mobility and solidity of amphibious troops to prevent the enemy from approaching Chan Lap and effectively supporting the defense system in Ha Tien - Phu Quoc. This is clearly demonstrated by Nguyen Cong Nhan’s statement to King Thieu Tri: “Vinh Te is the road behind Ha Tien province; if it is cut off, Ha Tien cannot be kept” [8, p.316]. Since its inception in 1824, the Vinh Te canal has played an important role in the Nguyen government’s Southwest defense policy.

Besides, the Vinh Te canal also acted as an outpost used to control, consolidate and maintain the protectionist regime in Chenla. King Gia Long and Minh Menh understood that any stationary action by a foreign army in Chenla, whatever the purpose, would cause outrage from the local people. Therefore, the Nguyen dynasty was forced to find a stable military position that was not in the territory of Chenla (avoiding further conflicts with the people of Chenla), but at the same time, it did not diminish the influence of the Nguyen dynasty against this nation. Basically, the Vinh Te canal has satisfactorily solved all the above problems.

Most importantly, the Vinh Te canal played a role as a great project marking and establishing the sovereignty of the Vietnamese people in the Southern region. The issue of sovereignty in Southern land was inherently a sensitive and prone to conflict between the Vietnamese and the Khmer that opposing forces can use to cause divisions, incite, and destabilize the border areas. From the beginning of the seventeenth century, the southern region continued to be explored and expanded following the process of establishing sovereignty of Nguyen Lords. The government system in turn was born, fortresses to protect the land and residents of Nguyen Lords were set up; the canal systems were dredged or excavated to serve security and defense purposes. The Nguyen government’s policy of encouraging reclamation and establishment of villages was a sure guarantee to Vietnamese migrants more and more firmly entering into exploration.

The establishment of sovereignty by the border and the influence area is only the first step towards bringing people to live, turning the new land into residence, living and production to establish sovereignty on that land [18]. With that approach, the role of Nguyen Cu Trinh and Nguyen Van Thoai in the early stage was extremely important [19]. They had taken the creative policies and measures on Tam Phong Long land to explore and develop this land. In addition to the role of outstanding individuals, the solidarity and joint strength of the Vietnamese, Khmer, and Champa peoples from the mid-eighteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century became the decisive factor in asserting the sovereignty of Vietnamese people over the Southwest border region [11].

The Nguyen dynasty understood that the consolidation and establishment of national territorial sovereignty in the Southern region was very urgent, so they quickly promoted the digging of the Thoai Ha canal and then dug the Vinh Te canal to create waterways for defense work. It should be seen that the Vietnamese are inherently the next class of residents, so it is necessary to have a large work, stature, showing determination, the ability to conquer nature, to become convincing evidence of their sovereignty over this land. Apparently, kings Gia Long and Minh Menh showed themselves as emperors with foresight and thorough knowledge of the history of the Southern region.

It can be seen that the geostrategic position of the Vinh Te canal has created an organic link in the defense and economic development in An Giang and Ha Tien provinces. At the same time, the establishment of the Vinh Te canal contributed to perfecting the southwestern border defense system of the Nguyen dynasty in the period before the French colonial invasion.

In fact, the Vinh Te canal was a defense system for the front-line waterways, which was adjacent to Chenla, flexible in movement and combat, supported by the That Son defense system in the back. At the same time, it also linked with two defense systems on the Tien and Hau rivers to create a constant attack on the enemy [12]. General of the Nguyen dynasty, Le Van Duc, once said that: “The Vinh Te canal is the back road of Ha Tien, connecting to the intestines of An Giang province, prevention is very important” [6, p.336].

Running along the Vinh Te canal, the Nguyen government set up a defense system including important posts such as Vinh Te [5, p.827], Vinh Gia [20, p.405], Vinh Dieu, Vinh Lac, Vinh

Hoa, Vinh Thong [2, p.219], Tien An, An Nong, Than Nhan, Hung Nhuong [21, p.536], Nhon Hoi [2, p.221], Dam Triet, Thuyet Nac [6, p.141]. This is an important basis for guarding and defending the Southwestern border line of the country.

The Vinh Te canal was like “a great trench”, with the mobility and flexibility of the naval armies to prevent the enemy from the Chenla side, effectively supporting the defense system in Ha Tien. This is clearly demonstrated by Nguyen Cong Tru, Doan Van Sach and Nguyen Cong Nhan’s statement to King Thieu Tri in 1842 that: “If Vinh Te canal is congested with traffic, Ha Tien will be isolated” [8, p.274]. In addition, Vinh Te canal was also a waterway route to support Chau Doc actively for communications, operations of troops and internal political stability. The Thoai Ha canal (1818) and the Vinh Te canal (1819-1824) were built and created a defensive strategic quadrangle that included Chau Doc – Ha Tien – Rach Gia – Dong Xuyen, and the majestic That Son mountains, which “strike hardly, defend easily” formed a defensive system in which “mountains and rivers were integrated” very solidly. All of above factors created a defensive shield in the Southwest border of the country in which Chau Doc was a command center for the defensive system not only in the ancient An Giang province but also in the Southwest border. The Vinh Te canal since its inception in 1824 had played an important role in the defense policy of Nguyen dynasty in the Southwestern frontier.

A fortress system was formed continuously from Chau Doc to Ha Tien. Through the reigns of kings from Gia Long to Tu Duc, depending on each period and specific circumstances, the posts had been changed, newly built or removed accordingly. The number of soldiers stationed in those places also had specific regulations from time to time. This clearly demonstrated the Nguyen dynasty’s interest in defense in this crucial border area. Accordingly, under Minh Menh era, two posts of Vinh Dieu and Vinh Thong: each post had 1 commander and 30 soldiers; Vinh Gia post: 1 commander and 20 soldiers; Tien An post: 1 commander and 103 soldiers; Binh Di post: 1 commander and 85 soldiers; Nhan Hoi post: 1 commander and 85 soldiers; Giang Nong post: 1 commander and 51 soldiers [20, p.405]. By the reign of King Thieu Tri, the first year (1841) was determined: Vinh Gia post was sent 21 soldiers to guard. In the second year (1842), Giang Nong post was sent 51 soldiers to guard [20, p.407]. The posts that were not very important such as Vinh Te, Vinh Thinh, Tinh Bien, Than Nhan, Vinh Lac, Vinh Hoa, Thuyet Nac, and Dam Triet were all removed to reduce costs and soldiers’ laboring [20, p.407].

It could be said that the military organization of the Nguyen dynasty in the An Giang - Ha Tien border area had a great impact on the security and defense situation in the Southwest border of the country. This created a new force for the reclamation of the villages and economic development of the people in the wasteland in the early Nguyen dynasty. King Minh Menh said that: “The army is the clutches of the country” [4, p.136]. Therefore, the arrangement of the army in important places such as An Giang and Ha Tien at that time was of vital significance in the defense of the country. At the same time, it helped to maintain the influence of Vietnam on the land of Chenla as well as create solid outposts against the ambition of “Expanding to the East” of the Siamese.

3.3.2. Increasing and promoting the internal resources for defense work on new lands

The Vinh Te canal was not only a project of great national defense but also economic development of both commerce and agriculture, effectively serving the reclamation of villages in the border region of An Giang-Ha Tien. The Vinh Te canal carried water from Hau river through That Son area to Giang Thanh area of Ha Tien. From the Vinh Te canal, people dug many other canals, watered fields, drained acidity, washed alum, built irrigation roads to bring agricultural products home, or moved to neighboring areas to trade.

In this case, it is clearly seen that the Vinh Te canal together with the Thoai Ha canal had played a positive role and benefits in the economic development and population stability in the Western border of the Hau river. Dai Nam Nhat Thong Chi wrote that: “Since then, the river was

smooth, the defense border and the trade had enjoyed great benefits” [2, p.207]. Furthermore, the Vinh Te canal helped to remove acid and wash alum, bringing fresh water to lush fields and gardens, and creating favorable conditions for immigrants to reclaim land, expand farming areas, and establish hamlets in Southwestern region.

Many new villages were established on the banks of Vinh Te. The population had been increasingly crowded, the number of people had increased significantly to recruit soldiers and reclaim land by means of plantations. The work of reclaiming the villages and expanding production was promoted by the Nguyen dynasty in An Giang - Ha Tien area based on the advantage created by the canal system, in which the most important canal was Vinh Te. According to Son Nam [9, p.81], when the Vinh Te canal was not completed yet, Thoai Ngoc Hau allowed people to establish villages with extensive regulations along the bank of the Vinh Te canal, extending from Chau Doc to That Son. At that time, Vinh Te village was also established with the name Vinh Te Son Thon, a village located at the foot of Vinh Te mountain (i.e. Sam mountain).

Along the bank of the Vinh Te canal, by 1823, people had established 5 villages, including: Vinh Ngon, Vinh Te, Vinh Thong, Vinh Gia and Vinh Dieu. Each village had over 20 families and over 100 people. Up to the 19th Minh Menh year (1838), along the Vinh Te canal through That Son side, many hamlets were formed: Vinh Te, Vinh Gia, Vinh Dien, Vinh Thong, Vinh Lac, Nhon Hoa, An Qui, Than Nhon, Vinh Bao, Long Thanh, Toan Thanh, An Thanh, An Nong, Phu Cuong [9, pp.87-88].

In 1850, under the reign of king Tu Duc, Nguyen Tri Phuong promoted the establishment of plantations to expand the reclamation of Chau Doc and Ha Tien region, especially in Vinh Te. Nguyen Tri Phuong proposed to bring prisoners in six provinces of Nam Ky to An Giang province to reclaim in strategic plantations in Chau Doc, That Son, Ha Tien and along the bank of Vinh Te canal to create food sources for the amies that kept and stabilized the border area [7, p.264]. In 1851, Buu Son Ky Huong denomination under the leadership of Doan Minh Huyen led four groups of devotees to reclaim the area of Vinh Te, That Son. They established two villages, Hung Son and Xuan Son.

In terms of trade, the Vinh Te canal connected two center of Chau Doc and Ha Tien, and adjacent with border of Chenla, so the business was very conducive to develop [14]. As a result, the Nguyen dynasty had tax revenues to strengthen internal resources for the defense of the Southwest border area. The Vinh Te canal played a role as a transport hub in the three-way junction area of Vietnam - Chenla - Siam. This was clearly demonstrated in the folk song: Vinh Te canal, Ha Tien sea/Boats going up and down wholesale crowded. In particular, author Aubaret commented: “The Vinh Te economy plays a huge role in trade; it makes trade easy and is a source of many benefits for merchants” [22]. The Vinh Te canal was not only a place that attracted boats from neighboring countries to do business, but also had political and military significance because a strong military center must be at the same time a strong economic capacity.

Besides, the general mentality of any people they want a stable life to live and do business, no one wants a chaotic war. Therefore, that the Nguyen dynasty created favorable conditions for the people of the two countries, Vietnam and Chenla to do business and live peacefully, was the most effective “remote defense” measure [18]. The birth of the Vinh Te canal played an active role in the reclamation of the Nguyen dynasty’s villages in An Giang - Ha Tien [10], in order to increase internal resources for defense work in the Southwest border area.

4. Conclusion

Vinh Te canal was an important project with great value in terms of national defense and economy, especially in relations with the countries of Chenla and Siam under the Nguyen dynasty. The completion of the Vinh Te canal has brought great excitement to the military and residents in border areas because it not only creates convenient waterways for trade, but it also facilitates border defense easier. In terms of the military, the Vinh Te canal was a strategic defense project. It was reflected in two aspects: first, this was important defensive work for

national security, and second, it helps to strengthen Vietnam's international influence. For the Nguyen dynasty, defense work was shown in both the foreign policy and an important, long-term and fundamental effect on domestic development. Along with the canals of Thoai Ha, Bao Dinh and Vinh An, the Vinh Te canal was a typical symbol for the Nguyen dynasty's strategic role in the defense of the canal system on the Southwestern border region.

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