

# The *Descriptive Geography of the Emperor Đông Khánh*: A Late Nineteenth Century Landmark of Vietnamese Geography

Ngô Đức Thọ

## Vietnam's Last Classical Geography

The *Descriptive Geography of the Emperor Đông Khánh* (hereafter referred to as the *Descriptive Geography*) is an important document of the Nguyễn dynasty, and is regarded nowadays as the final work in the bibliography of classical Vietnamese geography<sup>1</sup>.

Geography has a long tradition in Vietnam. During the Lý dynasty, the *Maps of the Borders of the Land of the South*<sup>2</sup>, recorded “the topography of the hills and rivers and the nature of the customs and material life” during the reign of the emperor Lý Anh Tông (1138-1175). This document unfortunately has long been lost. The tradition of geographical studies in Vietnam may therefore be regarded as truly opening in the fifteenth century with the *Geographical Treatise*<sup>3</sup> by the great scholar Nguyễn Trãi.<sup>4</sup>

Two important steps in the definition of the border and the revision of place names were made during the reign of Lê Thánh Tông (1460-1497). In 1469, the country was divided into twelve parts, known as divisions (*thừa tuyên*). In 1490 it was divided again, into thirteen divisions and domains (*xứ*). The emperor ordered the senior mandarins of each division to carry out a survey of their territory, to record each remote river and mountain and the region's history from ancient times, to draw the citadels on maps with clear notes, and to send this information to the Ministry of Finance, for an atlas to be made.<sup>5</sup> This became the famous collection of *Geographical Maps of the Realm*<sup>6</sup>, which was the most important cartographical work of the Lê dynasty. During the Mạc dynasty and after the Lê Restoration, it was decreed that this work be one of the two sets of books which the mandarin's law court in every

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<sup>1</sup> See John K. Whitmore, “Cartography in Vietnam”, in J. B. Harley and David Woodward, *Cartography in the Traditional East and Southeast Asian Societies* (The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 478-508. And J. B. Harley, *The New Nature of Maps – Essay in history of Cartography* (The John Hopkins University Press, 2001, 331 p.).

<sup>2</sup> 南北藩界地圖 [*Nam quốc phiên giới địa đồ*].

<sup>3</sup> 輿地誌 [*Dư địa chí*].

<sup>4</sup> However, it is worth noting the existence of the *Summary Description of An Nam* 安南志略 [*An Nam chí lược*], by Lê Trác 黎崱, a Trần 陳朝 dynasty work in nineteen volumes. The work was written principally in the genre of historical description, but volumes 1 and 19 contained geographical description. It was placed in the *Great Collection of Dynastic Regulations* 經世大典 [*Kinh thế đại điển*], but was subsequently lost. One copy of the *An Nam chí lược* was discovered by the Chinese Zhou Yi Sun (1629-1709), during the Qing dynasty, and revised by Tiên Đại Hân 前大昕 and Hoàng Phi Liệt 黃飛烈 in the late eighteenth century. It was only much later that the work was published, however, by the Japanese Kishida Ginko (樂善堂 Lạc Thiện Đường Publishing House, Tokyo, 1884). It was thanks to this printed copy that Vietnamese scholars discovered the *Summary Description of An Nam* in the early twentieth century.

<sup>5</sup> According to the *Imperial Version of the Text and Commentary of the General Mirror of Việt History* 欽定越史通鑿綱目 [*Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục*], CB 20, folio 25.

<sup>6</sup> 天下版圖 [*Thiên hạ bản đồ*].

administrative centre from the district upwards was obliged to possess.<sup>1</sup> It was also during this period that appeared the *Collection Compiled during the Leisure of the Land of the Southern Heavens*<sup>2</sup>, in which the chapter “Geographical Maps of the Realm” recorded the place names of all the districts and prefectures in the country.

No geography of the entire country was produced during the Mạc dynasty. But Dương Văn An compiled a volume entitled *True Account of the Region of Ô Châu*<sup>3</sup>, which described the territory now included in the three provinces of Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên, as well as the prefecture of Điện Bàn which corresponds to today’s province of Quảng Nam. This document is most interesting, as it provides a complete set of toponyms right down to the level of the commune and village.

After the Restoration of the Lê dynasty, which followed the Lê Trịnh army’s capture of the capital city of Thăng Long in May 1593, it was ordered that “all the place names on the map which had been changed by the Mạc have their former name restored”.<sup>4</sup> But the Mạc dynasty was only fully defeated in 1677, and as a result many administrative divisions and place names established by the Mạc survived. In 1723, during the reign of the emperor Lê Dụ Tông, this problem was addressed when a civil register of the country’s inhabitants was established. Across the board corrections were made. It was recorded that on the occasion of these corrections, “changes were made in each area, depending on the topography of the land, back to the system of the Hồng Đức era [1470-1497] with its thirteen divisions”.<sup>5</sup> The entire structure of toponyms existing from 1723 thus corresponded, with only a few exceptions, to the old names of the Hồng Đức era. The only changes made were those place names which coincided with the characters or phonetics of the taboo names of the Lê emperors and the Trịnh lords. According to Phan Huy Chú, who mentioned the correction of names carried out that year, the court compiled a list of names entitled *Newly Established Maps*.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, no extant list of maps bears this name, and the only surviving document with such contents is the *Hồng Đức Atlas*.<sup>7</sup> A number of other maps were copied from the *Hồng Đức Atlas* (1490), with the place names of the Lê Trịnh era added in. Of particular interest are the maps of the two divisions of Thuận Hoá and Quảng Nam, where the place names changed after the arrival of Nguyễn Hoàng.

The *Hồng Đức Atlas* also includes a document entitled *Summary Atlas of the Main Roads Leading to the Capital of the Land of the Southern Heavens*<sup>8</sup> (pp. 63-159), which records the mountains, rivers and names of important places on the roads from the capital at Thăng Long to the governments (*trấn*) of Đàng Ngoài, extending as far south as the border with Champa. On this map, offshore from the estuaries

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<sup>1</sup> The two obligatory sets of books were the *Geographical Maps of the Realm* and the *Code of Punishments of the Imperial Dynasty* [*Quốc triều hình luật*]. Cf. *Instructions on the principles of the mandarin* [*Sĩ hoạn châm quy*], 1777, folio 3a.

<sup>2</sup> 天南餘暇集 [*Thiên Nam dư hạ tập*].

<sup>3</sup> 烏州近錄 [*Ô Châu cận lục*].

<sup>4</sup> Phan Huy Chú, *Regulations of the Successive Dynasties* 歷朝憲章類志 [*Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*], chapter on ‘Geographical Description’ 輿地志 [*Dư địa chí*], (trans. Institute of History, Hanoi), Hanoi, Nxb. Sử học, 1960, vol. 1, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Imperial Version of the Text and Commentary of the General Mirror of Việt History* [*Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục*], CB 36, folio 8.

<sup>6</sup> 新定版圖 [*Tân định bản đồ*]. Voir Phan Huy Chú, op.cit., chapter on ‘Description of Texts’ [*Văn tịch chí*].

<sup>7</sup> 洪德版圖 [*Hồng Đức bản đồ*]. A copy is indexed under the reference code A. 2499 at the Hán-Nôm Institute in Hà-Nội.

<sup>8</sup> 纂集天南四至路圖書 [*Toản tập Thiên Nam tứ chí lộ đồ thư*].

of Chu Ồ 朱塢海門 and Sa Kỳ 沙淇海門, in the prefecture of Quảng Ngãi, some small ‘mountainous’ islands are shown protruding from the waves and marked in Nôm characters “*Bãi Cát Vàng* 垸葛鑽”, which translates as “the Beach of Golden Sand”. These are the Paracel (Hoàng Sa) islands of Vietnam.

The late Lê dynasty also saw the compilation of a further geographical study, the *Collected Illustrated Maps of the Mountains, Rivers and Landscapes of Annam*<sup>1</sup>, also known as the *Illustrated Maps of the Landscapes of Annam*<sup>2</sup>. This collection shows many similarities to the *Summary Atlas of the Main Roads Leading to the Capital of the Land of the Southern Heavens* but comparisons show that it contains much information of great value. The case of these maritime territories shows this clearly, as the maps in this book record – in the open sea off the estuary of Sa Kỳ, to the left of Cù Lao Ré (Du Trường mountain) – the words “Beach of Golden Sand”.

Other precious sources from the final period of the Lê Restoration include the volume *The Itinerary of Annam*<sup>3</sup>, otherwise known as *The Itinerary for Travel to Pay Tribute to the Court of the Lê Dynasty*<sup>4</sup>. This book was a version of Nguyễn Trãi’s *Geographical Treatise*, to which annotations and supplements were added by Ngô Thì Sĩ, Nguyễn Nghiễm, Nguyễn Tông Khuê and others. Lê Quý Đôn’s book, the *Collection on the Pacification of the Marches*<sup>5</sup>, was a regional study of Thuận Hoá and Quảng Nam and gives the names of communes and villages in Đàng Trong at the time of the Nguyễn lords. A further work by the same author, the *Notes on Things Seen and Heard*<sup>6</sup>, constitutes a careful record of the customs practised in Sơn Tây, Hưng Hoá and Tuyên Quang. There are other important works, such as the *Summary of the History of Hải-Đông*<sup>7</sup> [Hải-Dương] by Ngô Thì Nhậm, and the *Dissertation on the Region of Hưng-Hoá*<sup>8</sup> by Hoàng Bình Chính.

In the early years of the Nguyễn dynasty, the Minister of War Lê Quang Định compiled the *Complete Imperial Geography*<sup>9</sup> in response to a royal decree. This set of books came out in 1806 after more than 350 years of the country’s partition, and was the first geography compiled after meticulous research. It had many methodological particularities. The section on roads showed every staging post from the capital at Huế, both to the south and north to Thăng Long. For each staging post, the local mountains and rivers were noted down, as well as the characteristics of the population, the customs and local produce, and ancient monuments and sites of natural beauty. The section entitled “True Accounts” used the same method, but followed the roads using a ‘wheel spoke’ method, radiating out from the capital of each government to all the places in the area.

Maps and geographies were collected by other authors of the late Lê and early Nguyễn periods. These included the *Perspective on the Heavens and the Earth*<sup>10</sup>, by Phạm Đình Hổ, and the *Reflections on the Past Thousand Years*<sup>11</sup> (1810), by Đàm Nghĩa Am. The *Complete History of the Government of*

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<sup>1</sup> 安南山川形勝總覽之圖 [An Nam sơn xuyên hình thắng tổng lãm chi đồ].

<sup>2</sup> 安南形勝圖 [An Nam hình thắng đồ].

<sup>3</sup> 安南禹貢 [An Nam Vũ cống].

<sup>4</sup> 黎朝貢法 [Lê triều cống pháp].

<sup>5</sup> 府邊雜錄 [Phủ biên tạp lục].

<sup>6</sup> 見聞小錄 [Kiến văn tiểu lục].

<sup>7</sup> 海東志略 [Hải Đông chí lược].

<sup>8</sup> 興化處風土錄 [Hưng Hoá xứ phong thổ lục].

<sup>9</sup> 皇越一統地輿志 [Hoàng Việt nhất thống địa dư chí].

<sup>10</sup> 乾坤一覽 [Kiên khôn nhất lãm].

<sup>11</sup> 千載間談 [Thiên tải nhàn đàm].

*Gia-Định*<sup>1</sup> by Trịnh Hoài Đức, the *Dissertation on Nghệ-An*<sup>2</sup> by Bùi Dương Lịch, and the *Complete Inventory of the Names of the Communes, Cantons and Governments*<sup>3</sup> recorded the names of communes and villages in the governments of the north. All of them were compiled in the final years of the reign of the emperor Gia Long.

Under the emperor Minh Mệnh, Phan Huy Chú published his *Imperial Geography*<sup>4</sup>. This was the first geography to be printed (1833). The *Summary of the Geography of the Government of Bắc Thành*<sup>5</sup>, recorded the names of communes and villages of the twelve governments and citadels. It was compiled by Lê Chất while he held the position of governor in the government of Bắc Thành, but was only completed in the reign of the emperor Thiệu Trị (1845), after revision and amendment by Nguyễn Văn Lý. A project to publish a large scale geographical description of the country was mooted at the end of the reign of the same emperor, but work on it only started in the second year of the reign of the emperor Tự Đức (1849). At this time, the Grand Editor at the Service of the Annals, Bùi Quĩ, named the project *The Encyclopedia – or ‘complete description’ – of the Empire of Đại-Nam*<sup>6</sup> (hereafter referred to as the *Encyclopedia*). Then, just over ten years later, a further book appeared, the *Complete Cartography of the Empire of Đại-Nam*<sup>7</sup> containing seventy-six maps of the country’s thirty-one provinces and forty-five prefectures, many of them very rudimentary.<sup>8</sup> The book’s dedication contained the following text:

“On the twentieth day of the tenth month of the fourteenth year of the reign of the emperor Tự Đức (1861), I, loyal subject of the emperor, Grand Editor of the Service of the Annals, and all the mandarins of the Service have respectfully obeyed the imperial edict ‘given to the mandarins to conduct research, regarding Quảng Bình, Nghệ An and other places, into what their names were in the past, and to establish a report explaining the process of change’. Scribblers in the ancient history books and the stories passed down and remembered by the common people of our country have, since the time of the Hùng kings, been collected and form fifteen set of history books, full of lacunae and mostly lacking in credibility. The Qin dynasty established the Chinese dominion of Tượng and the Han dynasty established the three dominions of Nhật Nam, Cửu Chân and Giao Chỉ. The territory from Quảng Bình southward as far as Bình Định formed the dominion of Nhật Nam. The territory of Nghệ An and Thanh Hoá formed the dominion of Cửu Chân. The territory of the provinces of the north formed the dominion of Giao Chỉ. Later on, the south and north were merged and divided and the records were kept in a cursory manner, with many shortcomings and discrepancies. In most cases, names were recorded without a clear indication of where the land to which they corresponded was situated. We now beg to bring those aspects of the problem which have been possible to research to the esteemed attention [of the emperor], and in profound respect present the following report.”<sup>(9)</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 嘉定城通志 [*Gia Định thành thông chí*].

<sup>2</sup> 乂安記 [*Nghệ An ký*].

<sup>3</sup> 各鎮總社名備覽 [*Các trấn tổng xã danh bị lãm*].

<sup>4</sup> 皇越地輿誌 [*Hoàng Việt địa dư chí*].

<sup>5</sup> 北城地輿志錄 [*Bắc Thành địa dư chí lục*].

<sup>6</sup> 大南一統志 [*Đại Nam nhất thống chí*]. See the entry on Bùi Quĩ in *Principal Part of the Biographies of the Great Personalities of Đại Nam*, 大南正編列傳 [*Đại Nam chính biên liệt truyện*], book 29.

<sup>7</sup> 大南一統輿圖 [*Đại Nam nhất thống dư đồ*].

<sup>8</sup> Institute of Hán-Nôm Studies, copy from the École française d’Extrême-Orient, reference code A. 3142.

<sup>9</sup> 大南一統志 [*Đại Nam nhất thống chí*], p. 1a.

The Service of the Annals at the court of the emperor Tự Đức had a cartographic archive, where other works were compiled during this emperor's reign. The collections are known to us thanks to the copies made by the École française d'Extrême-Orient in Hanoi (hereafter referred to as the EFEO). They include the *Complete Maps of Đại-Nam*<sup>1</sup>, the *Complete Maps of the Provinces of the North*<sup>2</sup> and the *Collection of Maps of the North and the South*<sup>3</sup>. The *Complete Maps of the Provinces of the North* is prefaced by the same dedication by the Service of the Annals reproduced above. These manuscripts contain extremely precious information on geography and place names. The map of the entire country in the *Complete Maps of Đại-Nam* already shows a semblance of the letter S in the country's shape, and records the existence of an archipelago in the ocean off the estuaries of Đại Chiêm and Sa Kỳ clearly marked with the name “Hoàng Sa 黃沙”, etc.

The reign of the emperor Tự Đức, despite its great length and the unceasing activity of the Service of the Annals, did not allow the completion of all these geographical studies. But research was carried out and maps were drawn, as mentioned above. In 1865, the emperor Tự Đức issued an edict approving the Service of the Annals' compilation of the *Encyclopedia*, in the same format as the encyclopedias of the Qing dynasty. Around 1882, a work of research into historical place names, entitled the *Complete Geography of Đại-Việt*<sup>4</sup>, was compiled in five volumes by Nguyễn Văn Siêu. Also in that year (the thirty-fifth of the reign of the emperor Tự Đức), the Service of the Annals completed the compilation of a first draft of the *Encyclopedia*. However, the emperor inspected the work and remained unsatisfied, withholding his approval for printing. The annals (*True Account of Đại-Nam*<sup>5</sup>) relate that “Compilation of the draft of the *Encyclopedia of the Empire of Đại Nam* is complete, and the mandarins of the Service of the Annals have requested that the work should be printed. The emperor replied: ‘The manuscript must be checked with extreme care before it is printed, in order to avoid exposure to such insults and mockery as the efforts of past historians have received.’” The emperor also pointed out that preparation for the project had been underway since the eighteenth year of his reign, and that during the intervening years changes in boundary, name or other administrative status had taken place in certain places. These places included Quảng Trị, Phú Yên and Hà Tĩnh, which had used to be counties (*đạo*) and later became provinces (*tỉnh*), and the provinces of Hà Nội, Ninh Bình, Sơn Tây and Bắc Ninh, where the prefectures frequently merged and split. Finally the emperor observed that no lists were made of the loyal subjects and righteous men, due to lack of time. He then ordered this supplementary work to be completed and updated to the thirty-fourth year of his reign. The supplementary volume was not yet complete when the events of the first year of the reign of the emperor Hàm Nghi took place. The draft apparently records the chaos of that time, but has unfortunately been lost.<sup>6</sup>

Thus was lost, in 1885, the final text of the *Encyclopedia*, recording the events up to the thirty-fourth year of the reign of the emperor Tự Đức (1881) and including, as far as we know, the text of the emperor's criticism. All that remained at the Service of the Annals is the 1865 draft text. It was this version that was copied by the EFEO, which became the original used by the Institute of History in

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<sup>1</sup> 大南全圖 [Đại Nam toàn đồ], A. 2959.

<sup>2</sup> 北圻各省全圖 [Bắc Kỳ các tỉnh toàn đồ], A. 590.

<sup>3</sup> 南北圻會圖 [Nam Bắc Kỳ hội đồ], A. 95.

<sup>4</sup> 大越地輿全編 [Đại Việt địa dư toàn biên].

<sup>5</sup> 大南實錄 [Đại Nam thực lục].

<sup>6</sup> Đại Nam thực lục Chính biên, Đế tứ kỷ, book 38.

Hanoi for translation into modern Vietnamese.<sup>1</sup> The *Encyclopedia* nonetheless remains a work of immense value, being a complete geographical description of the entire country, from Cao Bằng to Hà Tiên, before the six provinces of the south became a French colony.

## **The Original Text and Copies of the *Descriptive Geography*: A Complex and Uncertain History**

The original text of the *Descriptive Geography*, which was compiled during the reign of the emperor Đông Khánh (1886-87), was kept at the cabinet office of the court of Huế. In the early twentieth century, the EFEO in Hanoi received permission to borrow the text, in order to make a copy and place it in the Institute's collection of Chinese and Nôm language documents. This copy, from which the present edition has been reproduced, was indexed under the reference copy A.537.

Around 1933, Japanese scholars learnt of the existence of this document, through an article by Matsumoto entitled “Inventory of the Books of Annam Kept at the École française d'Extrême-Orient”, published in the journal *History* at the University of Keio. The director for the Toyo Bunko (Japan's Indochina Archives) later asked E. Gaspardone to obtain the help of the EFEO in arranging a copy to be made available. By 1940, the Japanese had already obtained a good quality text,<sup>2</sup> hand-copied from the document referenced A.537 at the EFEO. Some of the maps, however, were rather blurred, but the Toyo Bunko later sent someone to Hanoi to take photographs. In July 1945, just one month before the end of the Pacific War, the *Maps and Geography Submitted to the Attention of the Emperor Đông Khánh* was published in Tokyo, appearing in two volumes.<sup>3</sup>

The first Vietnamese scholar to become interested in the *Descriptive Geography* was undoubtedly Dr Nguyễn Văn Huyền. In his *Administrative Geography of Kinh Bắc*<sup>4</sup> he used it to present a description of village place names in the province of Bắc Ninh in the late nineteenth century, comparing them with the place names lists, dating from the early nineteenth century, found in the *Complete Inventory of the Names of the Communes, Cantons and Governments*. After 1954, it was the turn of Hà Văn Tấn to make use of the *Descriptive Geography* in his annotation of Nguyễn Trãi's *Geographical Treatise*. Others who used the work included the authors of the preface to the translation of the *Encyclopedia*<sup>5</sup> and two other scholars – Trần Văn Giáp<sup>6</sup> and Trần Nghĩa<sup>7</sup> – who mentioned the *Descriptive Geography* in their discussions of the geographical bibliography of Vietnam. But for reasons unknown, these authors credit the *Descriptive Geography* with twenty-seven tomes. This error may be the result of a coincidence, as in

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<sup>1</sup> The École française d'Extrême-Orient copy is indexed under the reference code A.69. There exists a further woodprinted copy (1909) revised by the Service of the Annals at the court of Duy Tân. Its contents only cover the provinces of the centre.

<sup>2</sup> Toyo Bunko (Indochina Archives), Tokyo, Index reference: X -79.

<sup>3</sup> 同慶御覽地輿志圖 [Đông Khánh ngự lãm địa dư chí đồ], two volumes, entitled by Toyo Bunko, introduced by Sơn Bản Đạt Lang (Yamamoto), Tokyo, 1945.

<sup>4</sup> See Nguyễn Văn Huyền, *Địa lý hành chính Kinh-Bắc - Tableau de géographie administrative d'une ancienne province vietnamienne, le Bắc-Ninh ou Kinh-Bắc*, Hanoi, EFEO, Nxb. Văn-hoá, 1996, I-XIII and 185 p.

<sup>5</sup> *Đại Nam nhất thống chí*, (trans. Viện Sử học), Hanoi, Nxb. Khoa học Xã hội, 1969, vol. 1. p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Trần Văn Giáp, *Tìm hiểu kho sách Hán Nôm*, Hanoi, Thư viện Quốc gia xuất bản, 1970, vol. 1, p. 345.

<sup>7</sup> Trần Nghĩa and F. Gros (eds), *Di sản Hán Nôm Thư mục để yếu*, Hanoi, Nxb. Khoa Học Xã hội, 1993, vol. 1, p. 647.

reality the manuscript is made up of twenty-five tomes<sup>1</sup>, all of them extant and listed in the roneo-ed inventory of books in Hán Nôm (1972).

After 1945, the original text of the *Descriptive Geography* remained in the archives of the Nguyễn court in Huế. In 1961, it was transferred to Đà Lạt, and came under the management of the Archive Department of the Saigon administration. Among the scholars from overseas who came to read in those archives, Dr R.B. Smith (an Englishman) published a survey article of the Nguyễn dynasty documents written in Chinese and Nôm which he consulted in Đà Lạt (1969). Among the materials he described was a document made up of two separate parts, a written description in Chinese characters on the one hand and a set of maps on the other.<sup>2</sup> His clear description allows us to conclude without doubt that the set of books R.B. Smith read in Đà Lạt was the original text of the *Descriptive Geography*, transferred from the cabinet office in Huế. It is most regrettable that since R.B. Smith's visit, we have received no other news of that original text.

The copy made by the EFEO (today indexed under the same reference code A.537 at the Hán Nôm Institute in Hanoi) is a voluminous set of books handwritten in Chinese characters. It is made up of twenty-five tomes, each tome being the description of one province. It contains 1,416 folios of good quality paper, each folio being two pages, making a total of 2,832 pages (27 x 38 cm). Each page has eight lines of around 18-20 characters, all written in the careful and elegant hand of the scribe.

Each volume starts with an introductory page according to the following formula: "We respectfully present the following maps for [the emperor's] esteemed comments".<sup>3</sup> There follow the contents of each tome, that is to say the contents of the book, organised under a series of thematic headings. A section entitled "citadel of the province" (or prefecture or district) offers a general presentation of the place chosen as capital of the province (or prefecture or district), as well as the geographical situation of the province (or prefecture or district), its borders with other provinces and districts and its size measured in leagues from east to west and north to south, etc. There follows a list of the names of each level in the administrative hierarchy. For provinces, this includes the names of prefectures and districts; for prefectures, the names of districts and cantons; for districts, the names of cantons, communes and villages of various categories (*thôn, phường, giáp, trại, ấp, lý*, etc.). The section entitled "walls and moats" describes the geographical situation and construction of the citadel ramparts, gate, walls, gun emplacements, watch towers etc.. Other sections include "soldiers", recording the number of soldiers recruited by the court, as well as those enrolled locally by the mandarin and the citadel guard; "population", recording the number of people registered on the village rolls for tax payment; "fields", recording the areas of land cultivated for the production of paddy and other produce; "taxation", recording the amount of tax paid in cash, paddy and produce, as well as other separate categories. Further sections are entitled "temples and shrines", "customs and manners", "local produce", "climate", "rivers and mountains", "notable sites and monuments", "roads, routes and itineraries", and "forts and strongholds", etc.

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<sup>1</sup> In the entire book, only the volume on Hải Dương is divided into two fascicules (Thượng and Hạ), both of which are extant and indexed under the same reference code: A.537/7.

<sup>2</sup> R.B. Smith: 'Sino-Vietnamese sources for the Nguyễn period: an introduction', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African studies*, vol. XXX, no. 3 (1967), pp. 600-621.

<sup>3</sup> The original text reads as follows: 奏册。...省蒞臣等欽遵批示編繪圖本進呈 (Tấu sách. [...] tỉnh lý thân dâng khâm tuân phê thị, biên hội đồ bản tiến trình)". The full translation for each province reads as follows: "For the eyes of His Majesty the Emperor Đồng Khánh. We, the mandarins of the province of (...), respectfully present the following papers, being the Geographical Description of the Province of (...).

In general, the description of each province follows this pattern. However, greater or lesser variations from it may be observed in each tome. For example, some place the description of the citadel of the province under the rubric “walls and moats”, and some record information about fields under a general statistical total, whereas others present it in various sub-categories, such as “paddy fields”, “land for other crops”, “salt fields”, etc..

In each tome, a map of the entire province may be found after the general description of the province, and the same is true for each prefecture and district. There are 314 maps in all, of different dimensions ranging from 42 x 31 cm to 51 x 38 cm, and drawn on white silk. Each of them is illustrated in five colours, red for roads and routes, navy blue for the sea, sky blue for rivers and streams, green for mountains, light brown for ramparts and straw yellow for regions outside the territory represented on the map. From one map to the next, these colours vary slightly. All the maps are annotated with Chinese or Nom characters according to context. We also know that the maps were copied by an expert of the Indochina Geographical Service (*Service Géographique de l'Indochine*), using the tracing method.<sup>1</sup>

Each tome was presented in the original form of a ‘report’ submitted to royal consideration. There was no general organising structure to the entire document as one often finds in such works, which generally includes the imperial decree, dedication, title, introduction and preface, etc.. The only exception to this could be found at the beginning of each volume, where folio numbers for each prefecture and district were marked in a short table of contents to facilitate the task of the reader. But these were added when the document was copied, and underneath it the following message may be found: “this does not appear in the original text”. No book title is marked on the constituent volumes, although, once again, a title was added in the processing of reproduction. The following title may be read in red ink on the copy: “同慶敕製御覽 [“Đông Khánh sắc chế ngự lãm]”. This means “[A report] in response to the imperial edict, for the contemplation of [the emperor] Đông Khánh”. Twenty-one of the (copied) tomes bear this title in six characters. The two tomes on Nghệ An and Quảng Bình provinces reverse the order of the characters, which then reads “Đông Khánh ngự lãm sắc chế” ([A report] for the contemplation of [the emperor] Đông Khánh, in response to the imperial edict). The two tomes on Thanh Hoá and Thừa Thiên limit the title to four characters, “Đông Khánh ngự lãm” ([A report] for the contemplation of [the emperor] Đông Khánh).

The title of the document thus poses a problem of some complexity. The affairs of the emperor Đông Khánh’s court are recorded in the annals (*True Account of Đại-Nam*), but no direct mention of this project may be found there. With their title in doubt and their origin far from certain, these manuscripts are shrouded in mystery. It is quite clear, however, that we have here a vast project of geographical description which is entirely different, both in contents and in compilation method, from the better known *Encyclopedia* (1862).

To learn how the *Descriptive Geography* came to be, we must make a brief digression into its historical context. This was a time of national catastrophe, when the country was ravaged and government over it was lost. The emperor Đông Khánh himself (whose name was Nguyễn Phúc Ưng Xuy) came to the throne as a result of a choice made by the French, seconded by the mandarin Nguyễn Hữu Độ. When he ascended the throne, the six provinces of the south had already fallen irretrievably into French hands, and almost immediately after the death of the emperor Tự Đức, the Harmand Treaty (25 August 1883) placed the entire country under French domination. Strictly speaking, only the south became a French colony. The authority of the court was still respected in the centre and north, under a

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<sup>1</sup> According to Yamamoto, op. cit.

system of French ‘protection’. However, this treaty defined the south not only in terms of the six original provinces, but as the entire territory as far north as Bình Thuận, while the centre now only included the provinces from Khánh Hoà to the pass of Hoàn-Sơn. According to the Patenôtre Treaty (6 June 1884), the court of Huế was obliged to pass all powers of foreign diplomacy to the French. The French then returned the province of Bình Thuận, while the three provinces of Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh also became part of the centre. As a result, at this time of the ‘prostrate emperor’, the Nguyễn court retained only formal authority over the provinces from Bình Thuận northward. It was precisely this space that was treated in the *Descriptive Geography*, which was made up of reports from only the twenty-five provinces under the formal authority of the crown.

This context undoubtedly explains the uncertainty surrounding the title of the manuscript. What title could such a document bear, in order to distinguish it from geographical descriptions of the entire country of Đại Nam? The country of Đại Nam, before the reign of the emperor Tự Đức, extended across the territory of all thirty-one provinces from Cao Bằng to Hà Tiên. A geography compiled under the emperor Đồng Khánh, when the sovereign retained only a feeble authority over twenty-five provinces, could not fail to note this change. This emperor’s geography was not a ‘complete description’. This, perhaps, is how we should interpret the very precise reference to the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh, which as we have seen was placed right at the beginning of the title. It may be seen as a careful way of announcing this geographically limited aspect of the contents of the book.

The two characters “sắc chế”, which refer to an imperial order, may be explained by reference to the annals. The *True Account of Đại-Nam* recorded an event that took place during the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh which was linked to the compilation of a document as follows: “Compilation of the *Summary Description of the Borders of Đại-Nam*<sup>1</sup> was completed, and the book contained seven volumes and one map. The director of the cabinet office, Hoàng Hữu Xứng, was rewarded with the title of Honorary Inspector in the Ministry of Public Affairs, while officially maintaining his position as a senior assistant to the ministerial counsellor. Those who contributed to the compilation of the book were rewarded, with promotions, citations and bonuses, according to their service. Later Hoàng Hữu Xứng was promoted to a high position in the Imperial Service of the Annals.”<sup>2</sup>

This record shows that during the second year of the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh (1886), Hoàng Hữu Xứng completed the compilation of a book called *Summary Description of the Borders of Đại-Nam*, the full name of which was *Information on and Summary Description of the Borders of Đại-Nam*<sup>3</sup>. The emperor Đồng Khánh knew about this project and rewarded its author with honours, along with those working under him, as noted above. Later Hoàng Hữu Xứng was promoted in the Service of the Annals. The *Summary Description of the Borders of Đại-Nam*, then, was a document written from geographical research and its author we may understand, was promoted to high mandarin honours in the Service of the Annals to work on the draft of a geographical description. This detail, however, was not directly mentioned in the record cited above.

There is nothing unusual about an emperor ordering a courtier to compile a book of geographical description. As we know, the emperor Tự Đức exercised this prerogative on a number of occasions.

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<sup>1</sup> 大南疆界 [Đại Nam cương giới].

<sup>2</sup> 大南疆界書成，凡七卷並圖一幅。準董理黃有稱實受吏部侍郎，銜署左參知（原光祿寺卿領），隨派人等各加賞升秩紀錄錢文有差。尋準有稱充國史館纂修。 See *Đại Nam thực lục Chính biên*, Đế lục kỷ, fascicule 6.

<sup>3</sup> 大南疆界彙編 [Đại Nam cương giới vịnh biên].

However, we should ask whether a work such as the *Descriptive Geography* could actually be completed within a year or two – the emperor Đồng Khánh reigned for only two years – in time for submission to the consideration of the emperor.

In terms of the book's content, comparison of the *Descriptive Geography* with the *Encyclopedia* reveals the following particularities.

1. The *Encyclopedia* was a geography compiled on the basis of the province. Sub-sections dealing with boundaries, topography, climate, walls and moats, schools, the civil register, land tax, rivers and mountains, local produce, etc. covered the entire province as a whole. They were generalisations. Prefectures and districts were recorded in lists, showing how many prefectures and districts there were in each province, and describing changes in their geographical situation over the generations.

By contrast, the *Descriptive Geography* was a geography compiled on the basis of the district. Each prefecture and district was the subject of a separate chapter. As a result, it presented very detailed information on each prefecture and district: geographical situation, topography, walls and moats, soldiers, population, taxation, temples and shrines, customs and manners, local produce, climate, rivers and mountains, roads and routes, etc. This is an important difference, demonstrating both the nature and method of the book's compilation.

2. The *Encyclopedia* contained a few documents drawn from research and statistics, such as the number of communes and villages in each district, the number of people on the civil register, the amount of land, etc.. However, its strongpoint was the material presented from historical research, with sections on place names in each prefecture and districts, entries for historical personalities, sections on temples, shrines and pagodas, etc.

By contrast, the *Descriptive Geography* contained very little historical research. Sections on temples and shrines only recorded the name of the site, and noted very little about its history. There was no section on historical personalities. The contemporary situation was the main point of reference for this geography, which was reflected in its content. Great attention was paid to topography and geographical position. The citadels of each province, prefecture and district were described in minute detail. Lists of population owing tax, and lists of field areas were established on the basis of detailed statistics. For example, some places contain entries showing, district by district, how many taxpayers of different categories were registered on the village rolls, and how many people were exempt from taxation and corvee labour. The sections on customs and manners treated different parts of the provinces of the plains in generalisations, but communes situated near the sea or mountains were described in separate detail. This was especially the case in mountainous areas where Việt people and ethnic minorities lived side by side. In these areas, customs and manners were described very specifically, which attests to the fact that research was carried out in these areas and that its results were close reflections of contemporary reality. Not least among the qualities of this contemporary research was the entire hierarchy of place names established from the village right up to the district. This stands as the main distinguishing feature of the *Descriptive Geography*, by contrast with the *Encyclopedia*.

If we return to the events recorded in the annals, we will recall that the *True Account of Đại-Nam* described the emperor Tự Đức's requirement that supplementary research should be carried out, in order to make a careful record of changes up to 1881. This amounted to a demand for the inclusion in the *Encyclopedia* of a chapter on the contemporary situation. No historical document allows us to conclude that the Service of the Annals actually carried out this project of supplementary research. As a result we must limit ourselves to hypotheses, and the results of our reflection may be summarised as follows.

If the book was to meet the requirements laid down by the emperor Tự Đức, as noted above, the Service of History would have had to establish a new method of research, draw up response forms in order to maintain the consistency of the information, and send these to the official responsible for each province. Provincial mandarins would then have passed on these forms to the prefectures and districts for completion. They would then have collected and edited the responses, drawing up a report for dispatch to the court. This method of survey and collection would have suited a project like *Descriptive Geography*, involving the establishment of a draft text with the participation of a large number of people. The senior mandarins in each province, prefecture and district may not have possessed the skills and experience for the conduct of research. However, it would not have been difficult for them to report clearly the boundaries of the administrative area under their jurisdiction, the names of neighbouring areas, and the names of all the prefectures, districts, communes and villages in their area. Each report would then have been sent from the province to the capital. There, they would have been collected, one after the other, in the final years of the reign of the emperor Tự Đức, and processed by the Service of the Annals.

However, these procedures would have taken some time. The response forms and introductory notes had to be sent out. Each district, prefecture and province had to make its declaration. The province then had to collect the declarations and draw up a report. This had to be sent back to the court. With the conditions of transportation existing in those days, communication always required time. However, the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh lasted slightly less than two and a half years. We should, therefore, reflect carefully on the meaning of the title, “In response to the imperial edict, for the consideration of [the emperor] Đồng Khánh” [Đồng Khánh sắc chế ngự lãm]. We may wish to conclude that the emperor Đồng Khánh wrote the “imperial edict” (sắc chế) and “contemplated with his eyes” (ngự lãm) the reports sent in. However, such a conclusion is all but impossible. The twenty-nine months of his reign did not provide enough time to send and return all the forms and declarations from every part of the entire country. If we count the time available from the moment that Hoàng Hữu Xứng received his appointment at the Service of History, there was even less time available: just over eight months. Furthermore, we also know that this was the period during which the anti-colonial Cần Vương movement spread throughout the realm, and the court was able to maintain contact with very few localities.

What does this imply? All these factors direct us towards the conclusion that the reports were drawn up during the final years of the reign of the emperor Tự Đức. The work started, perhaps, in 1882 when the Service of the Annals set to implementing its project of supplementary research, in response to the criticisms of the emperor Tự Đức. During the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh, the Service of History would only have had time to make corrections and additions, deal with errors and ensure consistency of style, in the twenty-five reports. After these revisions, the maps would have been copied, with adjustments made for any changes in places names, etc.. The whole project would then have been brought to the eyes of the emperor.

We should add one final small point. This book is generally regarded as having been completed during the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh. However, some of the reports reveal a small number of minor revisions, which were made later. For example, the report on *Hà Nội* mentions a village named Hội Vũ 會舞 (canton of Thuận Mỹ, district of Thọ Xương). But up to the end of the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh, this village was named Chiêu Hội 昭會. In the first year of the reign of the emperor Thành Thái (1889), the name was changed out of respect for the taboo on the word Chiêu 昭, which was the name of the emperor Thành Thái (whose full name was Nguyễn Phúc Chiêu). In a further example, the report on *Nghệ An* mentions a commune and village named Quang Chiêm 光瞻 (canton of Văn Lâm, district of La Sơn). Up to the end of the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh, the commune and village were named Quang Chiêu 光昭. At the beginning of the reign of the emperor Thành Thái,

out of respect for the same taboo on the word Chiêu, the name was changed. A further example may be found in the report on *Hải Dương*, which lists the temple of the Trần dynasty prince Huệ Vũ as situated in the commune of Kiệt Đặc, district of Chí Linh. Prince Huệ Vũ's name was Quốc Chấn 國瑱. The character Chấn 瑱 is partly formed from the character Chân 眞. The character Chân 眞 was the given name of the emperor Dục Đức (Ứng Chân 膺禎, father of the emperor Thành Thái). The copy scribe of the *Descriptive Geography* recorded this name, but removed the upper part of the character Chấn 瑱, to form a character similar to the word Kỳ 琪 (*folio 41-a, page 193*). This indicates that the original text of the report on *Hải Dương* was completed only at the beginning of the reign of the emperor Thành Thái. Elsewhere in the same province, a similar instance may be observed in the record for the canton of Chân Lại 眞賴, district of Tứ Kỳ, prefecture of Ninh Giang. Here the character Chân 眞 shares the same phonetic and written forms as the character Chân 禎, and was therefore rewritten: 眞 → 真.

The drawing of 314 maps of large format (in the circumstances of the time) may provide reinforcing evidence towards this conclusion. It was quite simply not possible, during the two years of the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh, to draw a full set of maps of every province, prefecture and district throughout the country. Yet this was the achievement of the *Descriptive Geography*. If we reflect on the complex difficulties involved in the process of drawing maps down to district level in twenty-five provinces, we are drawn to the conclusion that this was the achievement of a long term and accumulated project. The process may have been underway since 1861, when the *Complete Cartography of the Empire of Đại-Nam* was completed. At that time, the Service of the Annals already possessed seventy-six maps down to the level of the prefecture. Although these were very rudimentary, the drawing would have been continually improved, the districts would have been added and amendments made. 'Updating' of place names would have been carried out at the end of the reign of the emperor Tự Đức. The whole project would then have been presented to the emperor Đồng Khánh.

In the current conditions of research, not restricted to the *Descriptive Geography* but shared by all the original maps no longer extant but produced by the Service of the Annals, it is not possible to offer further details of this process.

As for the authors of this work, we know nothing of them. It may have been the case that each tome bore the name of the senior mandarin of the province. However, these names were not shown in the dedication written on the version we possess, which is marked simply "the mandarins of the province...". The provincial governor and prefectural governor of each province changed regularly, sometimes staying in office for no more than a few months before moving on elsewhere. In addition, the volumes do not state clearly their date of completion, which means that we have no basis on which to draw conclusions as to the names of their authors.

As for Hoàng Hữu Xứng, he may have been the person principally responsible for the compilation of the *Descriptive Geography*. But why, then, was this fact not recorded on the document? It seems more likely that, as the text suggests, the main role was played by a collective editorial board at the Service of the Annals of the Nguyễn court, during the final years of the reign of the emperor Tự Đức and through the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh.

### **The value of the *Descriptive Geography* for scholarly research**

In ancient Chinese, the word geography (*địa lý*) appears very early on. The *Rituals of Zhou* [*Zhouli*] records the following couplet: "Looking up to see the astronomy above, looking down to study the

geography below”.<sup>1</sup> It was, however, during the Han dynasty that Ban Gu used the word as the title for a chapter, called ‘geographical description’ (*Địa lý chí*), in the famous “History of the Han” [*Hanshu*]. From then on, a geographical description was written under each dynasty, including the Jin, Sung, Tang, etc. From the Yuan and Ming dynasties onward, each geographical description of the realm was presented in a separate book entitled “complete description” – *Nhất thống chí* XXX – which may also be translated – as we have done here – as encyclopedia. Examples included the *Encyclopedia of the Yuan Dynasty*, the *Encyclopedia of the Ming Dynasty*, etc.

In Vietnam, the term ‘geography’ has also been used for the study of Fung Shui, which involves looking at the entrails of the earth to determine good and bad land on which to build houses and tombs, etc., although no one is sure when this practice first started in Vietnam.

It was, perhaps, in order to distinguish his work from the above that Nguyễn Trãi entitled his own work *Dư địa chí*, which we translate as ‘descriptive geography’. Almost all later works of geographical description followed suit. Examples include the *Complete Imperial Geography*, the *Summary of the Geography of the Government of Bắc Thành*, etc. Phan Huy Chú, the author of the *Complete Imperial Geography*, used the expression *địa dư chí*, and this became normal usage thereafter. The words *dư địa*, *địa dư* and *địa lý* were in fact all used without distinction to mean geography. Geographical descriptions (known as *địa lý chí*, *dư địa chí* and *địa dư chí*) are normally regarded as works of general geographical scholarship presenting a synthesis of human and physical geography.

In its institutions, the Nguyễn court tended to emulate the Qing dynasty. In his 1865 edict, it was made quite clear that the emperor Tự Đức chose the name *Encyclopedia of the Empire of Đại Nam* and ordered its research to reflect the nature and compilation methods of the *Encyclopedia of the Qing Dynasty*. This work, by the Grand Editor He Kun, was completed in 1764 and followed a method starting with with the capital, progressing then to the provinces, and from there to the prefectures and districts. The *Encyclopedia of the Empire of Đại Nam* was also structured in this way, but only went as far as the province. Prefectures and districts were not described in separate sections. However, the book produced by the Service of Annals during the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh dealt with the prefectures and districts in separate sections under each province. This reflected a step forward in the process of compilation, by comparison with geographical descriptions up to and including the *True Account of Đại Nam*.

This innovation in the method of compilation, as mentioned above, required access to a network of people collecting information in each province, prefecture and district. Its basis on first-hand information gathered at the source gave the work its character as firmly grounded in local reality. An example taken from the description of the citadel of *Hà Nội* illustrates this clearly.

The *Encyclopedia* notes simply that “the circumference measures 432 rods, stands one rod, one foot and two inches high; the moat is four rods across; it opens at five gates”. (A.69/2, p. 30).

By contrast, the *Descriptive Geography* presents abundant detail and different statistics: “The provincial citadel is situated in the district of Thọ Xương, prefecture of Hoài Đức. Its four-sided rampart is built in brick and is 1,285 rods, six cubits and six inches in circumference. The rampart is one rod, one cubit high and four rods thick. It opens at three principal entrances – the East Gate, the West Gate and the North Gate – as well as two secondary entrances – the Southeast Gate and the Southwest Gate. The gates are one rod, one cubit high, and one rod wide. Each gate is surrounded by an outer reinforcement, known

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<sup>1</sup> A classical scholar of the Tang dynasty, Kong Ying Da, also made the following comment: “The earth has its mountains and rivers, with high places and low places, each place has its own characteristics, which is why this is called *geography*”.

as the ‘goats and horses wall’.<sup>1</sup> The goats and horses wall measures sixty rods in length at the Southeast and Southwest Gates, fifty-seven rods, three cubits at the East Gate, sixty rods, three cubits at the West Gate, and sixty-five rods, five cubits at the North Gate. Each of these walls is seven cubits, five inches high, and two rods, seven cubits thick, opening at a double entrance one rod wide. The goats and horses walls are protected by moats more than eight rods across. The moat which surrounds the entire citadel is five rods across and six rods deep.”

Comparison of the texts shows that the fortifications of the citadel had been greatly extended by the time of the *Descriptive Geography*. The rampart used to be 432 rods in circumference, and now measured 1,285 rods. Defensive structures had been added, including the five ‘goats and horses walls’ built outside the citadel gates and the enlargement of the old moat which used to measure four rods across and now measured five. The description of the walls and moats contained within the *Descriptive Geography* is up to date, and presents information that is more complete and specific than many be found in other sources of the same type. It provides a sound basis for research into ancient citadels and ramparts in Vietnam. But this is but one example among many. Other statistics, concerning population, armed forces, land, annual taxation (paid in cash, paddy, silver or produce), etc., all record information in greater detail. They may be compared with the *Encyclopedia* to show changes in the situation between the beginning of the reign of the emperor Tự Đức and the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh.

Moreover, comparisons may be extended to the beginning of the century, as some of the statistics recorded in the *Encyclopedia* date from the beginning of the reign of the emperor Gia Long. For a specialised study, the information recorded from these three periods offer the possibility of general statistical enquiry into the country’s socio-economic situation during the Nguyễn dynasty. Let us look, for example, at the section on local produce. Although most of the information is a record of names of local forms of production with which we are long familiar, every now and then a handicraft or artisanal profession is noted as practised in a number of communes and villages. This is essential information for research into traditional professions, some of which are practiced even today. In another example, while descriptions of the Việt people living in the plains contained in the sections on ‘customs and manners’ teach us nothing new, they do allow us to see how late nineteenth century mandarins viewed the lifestyles of their own time. From their attitude there clearly emerges a respect for the qualities of industriousness, simplicity and education. By contrast, superstition, laziness and luxury are criticised. It is worth noting that at those points in the book where the people of this region are described as “stingy”, and the people of that region as “quarrelsome and dishonest”, etc., these descriptions may not, in fact, be judicious. Such ways of speaking were quite widespread among the common people (and remain so even today), but judged from the standpoint of observed reality they cannot be regarded as accurate.

As for the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities, many of the sections on customs and manners are of real ethnographic value. Such descriptions are infrequent in the *Encyclopedia*. They are very rarely found in all our country’s other ancient texts. For example, the section on customs and manners in the province of Cao Bằng explains the origin of the ethnonym Mán Sùng: “The Mán Đại Bản people are otherwise known as the Mán Sùng (Horned Mán), from their men’s habit of shaving their heads, leaving tufts on four sides, and wrapping a scarf around their temples, knotted to the right. The effect of the whole resembles a horn. They wear short black tunics. Women wear clothes tailored from two cuts of cloth. The front section is joined to the back section with red thread sown in flowered patterns. The

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘goats and horses wall’ [dương mã thành 羊馬城] translates into Vietnamese as ‘thành dê ngựa’. The low wall surrounding the citadel was built with openings for guns to shoot through. In ancient times, when the enemy army attacked, the local population was admitted inside the citadel walls for temporary shelter, and could bring their goats and horses with them, hence the name of this fortification.

upper part is mounted with a narrow, round collar pierced around the four sides from which hang strands of thread in a fringe, studded with seeds which shine like diamonds.”<sup>1</sup>

Further on, the Mán Đại Bản are distinguished from a related ethnic group, the Mán Tiểu Bản, by means of analysis of the origin of their respective ethnonym. The name of the latter group is drawn from a detail in the clothing of their young women, who wore a square wooden frame (bản 板) on their heads, wrapping a length of white cloth around it. We are led to understand that the group whose women wore their scarves mounted on a *small* wooden frame are the Tiểu Bản (小板), not to be confused with the group whose women wore their scarves on a *large* wooden frame, who are the Đại Bản (大板). The description continues as follows: “The Mán Tiểu Bản are otherwise known as the Mán Tiên (Sapeque Mán). They are known as such from their women’s habit of wearing a square wooden scarf-frame on their heads covered with a white cloth, and fringed blouses embroidered with wave patterns and backed with sapeque coins which they sport as tokens. The men wear indigo scarves and collar-less shirts embroidered on all sides with decorative patterns in coloured thread.”

Writing based on investigation into reality, as illustrated above, is the distinctive feature of the *Descriptive Geography*. It lends the work its value for scholarly study today.

The work is also notable for its list of administrative place names during the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh. In fact, geographical descriptions written in Chinese and Nôm, as described in the preceding pages, are quite rare. They include a Mạc dynasty work, an early Nguyễn dynasty work from the reign of the emperor Gia Long, a work from the reign of the emperor Minh Mệnh, and a late Nguyễn dynasty work, the *Descriptive Geography*. But coincidentally, of all these works, none of them offers a complete list of Vietnam’s place names. The *Descriptive Geography* covers, as noted above, only the twenty-five provinces north from Bình Thuận which remained under the formal authority of the Nguyễn court, that court which had already fallen under French domination! The timing of the compilation of the *Descriptive Geography* was most unfortunate, and it is certainly regrettable that it does not offer us a panorama of the whole country. But let us leave aside such problems of the past and content ourselves with what we possess, for the toponyms listed here remain of great value for scholarship, essential for the purposes of research and investigation.

With the list of late nineteenth century place names recorded in the *Descriptive Geography*, scholars can lay the foundations of a bridge extending back across time in the pursuit of a history of toponyms, as indeed was already begun by Nguyễn Văn Huyền. Since the end of the nineteenth century, through the colonial period and the August Revolution up to the present time, the place names of the communes and villages of our country have changed many times. The new names usually make it difficult to establish connections and methods useful for tracing names through the changes back into the past. But a list of names has been preserved from the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh, and the majority of those names were of great age. The geography thus acts as an essential point of reference for investigation. Our research shows that most name changes were the result of taboos on sacred names at the court. For example, in the province of Hải Dương, comparison of the *Descriptive Geography* with the *Complete Inventory of the Names of the Communes, Cantons and Governments* and the *Summary of the Geography of the Government of Bắc Thành* revealed that 115 prefectures, districts, communes and villages changed their name. Of these eighty-eight did so out of respect for edicts creating a taboo. Research into taboo regulations<sup>2</sup> allows us to trace the history of place names. The following examples illustrate this point.

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘diamonds’ here [Kim cương lạp 金剛粒] were seeds of the *cốt ngạnh* tree [骨硬]. Monks would string these seeds to form a rosary, calling them ‘diamond seeds’.

<sup>2</sup> See Ngô Đức Thọ, *Nghiên cứu chữ huý Việt Nam qua các triều đại*, Hanoi, Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm and Centre de l’EFEO au Vietnam, 1997.

- Bàng Đê (commune) in the district of Đường An. Up to the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasty, the name was Bình Đê 平堤. Under the Tây Sơn, the phonetic Bình became taboo, and the name was changed to Bàng Đê 憑堤.
- Bàng Cách (commune) in the district of Đường An. Up to the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasty, the name was Bình Cách 平格. Under the Tây Sơn the phonetic Bình became taboo, and the name was changed to Bàng Cách 憑格.
- Bàng Dã (canton and commune) in the district of Đường An. Up to the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasty the name was Bình Dã 平野. Under the Tây Sơn the phonetic Bình became taboo, and the name was changed to Bàng Dã 憑野.
- Bàng Trai (village) in the district of Đường An. Under the Lê dynasty, the name was Bình Tê 平齊. Under the Tây Sơn the phonetic Bình 平 became taboo, being the name of Quang Trung. The name was changed to Bàng Trai 憑齊.
- Lương Đường (commune) in the district of Đường An. Up to the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasty, the name was Hoa Đường 華堂. At the beginning of the reign of the emperor Thiệu Trị (1841) the character Hoa became taboo. The name was changed to Lương Đường 良堂.
- Lý Đông (commune) in the district of Đường An. Up to the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasty, the name was Triền Đông 廛東. From 1843 the character Triền became taboo, being phonetically close to Tuyên 璇, which was the name of the emperor Thiệu Trị. The name was changed to Lý Đông 里東.
- Lý Đổ (canton and commune) in the district of Đường An. Up to the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasty, the name was Triền Đổ 廛堵. From 1843 the character Triền became taboo, being phonetically close to Tuyên, which was the name of the emperor Thiệu Trị. The name was changed to Lý Đổ 里堵.
- Thị Tranh (canton and commune) in the district of Đường An. Up to the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasty, the name was Tông Tranh 琮琿. From 1841 the radical Tông 宗 became taboo, being the given name of Thiệu Trị. The name was changed to Thị Tranh 琯琿.
- Tuyển Cử (canton and village). Up to the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasty, the name was Thì Cử 時舉. From 1848 the character Thì 時 became taboo, being the name of the emperor Tự Đức. The name was changed to Tuyển Cử 選舉.

The recovery of these names would not have been possible if we were aware only of place names existing during the reign of the emperor Thành Thái and later on, in the twentieth century. A point of reference, namely the list of place names existing during the reign of the emperor Đồng Khánh, was essential to the research. Documentary sources like the *Descriptive Geography* are of immense value, not only to scholars of geography and other branches of the human sciences, but also to the authors of a future dictionary of Vietnamese toponyms. The compilation of such a dictionary was, in fact, one of the principal motivations and hopes of the people who participated in the publication of this work.

This publication is intended to make a work of scholarly importance available, and its value has been described in the paragraphs above. In view of this, it is perhaps unnecessary to note that the editors did not wish to address the further question of sovereignty over the national territory and the maritime border regions. That is a matter for the government departments with jurisdiction over those affairs, and no discussion of the issue is attempted here.