

GIÁ TRỊ VĂN HÓA-VĂN HỌC CỦA HOÀNH PHI CỔ VIỆT NAM

Nguyễn Gia Khoa, Nguyễn Ngọc Lân***

Hoành phi là một thể loại đặc biệt của văn học và văn hóa truyền thống Việt Nam, thường xuất hiện trong các không gian kiến trúc truyền thống như đình chùa, từ đường, nhà cổ, thể hiện những giá trị truyền thống và ước nguyện lưu giữ và truyền dạy cho thế hệ mai sau của người Việt Nam. Hiện nay, tuy số lượng người học tiếng Trung Quốc ngày càng gia tăng, nhưng đa phần học tiếng Trung Quốc hiện đại, nên thường gặp khó khăn trong việc tìm hiểu các giá trị văn hóa – văn học truyền thống ẩn chứa sau các con chữ trên Hoành phi. Bài viết sử dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu định tính, thông qua điền dã thực địa, khảo sát và thu thập 680 tấm hoành phi cổ, chủ yếu có niên đại thời Nguyễn tại khu vực đồng bằng Bắc Bộ. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy, Hoành phi cổ của Việt Nam thường dùng 3 hoặc 4 chữ, thường được trích dẫn, cô đọng từ thành ngữ, điển cố trong kinh điển Nho gia, thơ phú, văn chương cổ đại Trung Quốc, mang nội hàm văn hoá – văn học sâu sắc; tạo điều kiện thuận lợi cho người học, tìm hiểu và nghiên cứu Hoành phi của Việt Nam, góp phần thúc đẩy sự kế thừa và phát huy các giá trị đạo đức và giá trị văn hóa truyền thống Việt Nam trong thời đại mới.

Từ khoá: hoành phi Việt Nam, văn hoá truyền thống, văn học Trung Quốc, nho giáo.

Inscribed plaques are a special genre of Vietnamese traditional literature and culture, expressing traditional values and wishes to keep and pass them on to future generations. Inscribed plaques are written in ancient Chinese and Vietnamese and can be found in traditional architectural spaces such as communal houses, pagodas, streets, and ancient houses. Currently, despite the fact that the number of people learning Chinese is increasing, most of these students learn modern Chinese. Therefore, it is often difficult for them to understand the traditional cultural and literary values embedded in inscribed plaques. The article reports the results of a qualitative study that collected 680 inscribed plaques, mainly dating from the Nguyen Dynasty in the Northern Delta. The study results show that the ancient inscribed plaques of Vietnam often use three or four words that are often quoted or condensed from idioms and classics in Confucian classics, poetry, and ancient Chinese literature. The content of these inscribed plaques possesses profound cultural and literary connotations, which can be considered a rich resource for learners and researchers. The study concludes that inscribed plaques play a vital role in the inheritance and promotion of traditional Vietnamese ethical and cultural values in the new era.

Keywords: Vietnamese inscribed plaque, traditional culture, Chinese literature, Confucianism.

* NCS, Đại học Vũ Hán, Trung Quốc (PhD candidate, Wuhan University, China)

** TS, Trường Đại học Hà Nội

Email: lanhn@hanu.edu.vn

THE CULTURAL AND LITERARY VALUES ON ANCIENT VIETNAMESE INSCRIBED PLAQUE

1. Introduction

In the history of Vietnamese feudal dynasties, Chinese characters were the official writing system of each dynasty. It is deeply rooted in Vietnam's politics, society, culture, art, and other fields. As one of the countries in the East Asian cultural sphere, Vietnam, like China, has retained many material and intangible cultural heritages, among which a large number of ancient Vietnamese inscribed plaques are based on Chinese characters. An inscribed plaque is a wooden, stone, paper, or some other material board in the shape of a horizontal or vertical rectangle with Chinese characters written or engraved, which are the name of a place, a praise for someone, or a commemoration for an event. It is not only cultural relics that witness the vicissitudes of history, but also intangible cultural heritage reflecting the admiration of ancient people for their ancestors, expectations for their descendants, and expression of their feelings for life and their yearning for a better life. Despite that, Vietnam's inscribed plaque culture, as well as China's, is "still like an uncultivated virgin land, closed all year round, and rarely developed" (Sheng, 1995). This precious land is worth further exploration and research.

2. Literature Review

The word "匾" (inscribed plaque) was used as "扁" in ancient times. According to

Xu Shen, in the Eastern Han Dynasty, it consisted of 户 (door) and 冊 (book) which meant the board with inscription on the door (*Shuowen Jiezi*, n.d). This indicates that there was a close relationship between the appearance of the inscribed plaques and ancient architecture. Besides, it was also called as "户冊, 匾额, 牌匾, 横匾, 横批" in this dynasty. It is difficult to determine what the earliest inscribed plaque in Chinese history is nowadays. According to the introduction of *Shuowen Jiezi*, Qin Shu has eight styles which are Dazhuan, Xiaozhuan, Kefu, Chongshu, Moyin, **Shushu** (署书), Shushu (殳书), and Lishu. Duan Yucai also explains that all sealed and checked characters are called Shushu (署书), and the inscribed tablet is called Shu (Duan Yucai, *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu*, n.d). It refers to the calligraphy inscribed on the inscribed plaque which appeared at least in the Qin Dynasty. According to *Shuowen Jiezi*, the "Green Dragon" (苍龙) and "White Tiger" (白虎) in the Han Dynasty were the earliest inscribed plaques with specific content. Many researchers such as Liu Bin (2011), Yang Fang (2013), also shared the same opinion in this case. Nevertheless, Sheng (1995) pointed out that the earliest inscribed plaque he researched was Xiaoyao Tower (逍遥楼) inscribed - by Yan Zhenqing in the Tang Dynasty. In fact, it is only a stone tablet with large characters. Binrong (2011) indicated that "Shumi Di" (枢密第) was the only

inscribed plaque of the Tang dynasty found in China, but it is still necessary to confirm the authenticity of the opinion. Bin (2011) believed that the earliest wooden inscribed plaque existing until now was the “Yuelu Academy” (岳麓书院) of the Northern Song Dynasty which was displayed in Yuelu Academy. Indeed, it is only a stone inscribed plaque engraved in the Ming Dynasty in the academy.

It is also unclear when the first inscribed plaque was born in Vietnamese history; however, the history of inscribed plaques cannot be separated from the history of Chinese characters imported to Vietnam. As early as the Qin and Han dynasties, Chinese characters were introduced into Vietnam through trade exchanges and other people's exchanges. In 179 BC, Zhao Tuo destroyed the Au Lac state (ancient Vietnam) of the king Thuc Phan, An Duong Vuong, merged it into the territory of the Nanyue kingdom, and established Panyu (Guangzhou, China) as the capital. In 111 BC, Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty destroyed the Nanyue kingdom and established Giao Chi (ancient Vietnam) as the “Tuong quan”, officially entering the “Vietnam under Chinese rule” period. It is recorded that Emperor Wu ordered the imperial guards to educate the Vietnamese people to have a rough understanding of Chinese characters. (The Brief History of Vietnam, n.d)¹. He often

sent envoys to Vietnam to teach the residents about etiquette, and as a result, Chinese culture gradually gained popularity here. Since then, Chinese characters have been gradually introduced into Vietnam through politics. Later, due to the great promotion of Xi Guang in the Western Han Dynasty and Ren Yan, Shi Xie, and other imperial guards in the Eastern Han Dynasty, Vietnamese Confucianism developed to a higher level. In the period of Emperor Guangwu of the Han Dynasty, Xi Guang was in Giao Chi, while Ren Yan was in Cuu Chan. They taught local people to cultivate crops and make crowns and shoes. They initially established the law of matchmaking and then taught people the etiquette of marriage. They also established schools and taught people to understand etiquette and righteousness.²

Although there are few direct references to the significance, production specifications, and craftsmanship of the inscribed plaque in ancient Vietnamese books and modern monographs and academic papers of various dynasties, Vietnamese historical documents repeatedly recorded that the ruling class honored their meritorious officials, righteous people, and virtuous women. They were honored in the form of receiving a “inscribed plaque bestowing” for their great achievements, virtues,

¹ See Section3, Chapter 2, Vol.1, *Outline History of Vietnam (Việt sử yếu)*

² See Chapter 70 - Treatise on the Nanman, Southwestern Barbarians, Vol.86, *Book of Later Han Dynasty (后汉书)*

loyalty, and chastity, which showed the emperor's gratitude to his subjects. For example, in the 15th year of Thieu Phong in the Tran Dynasty (1355 AD), when a temple was completed, the Retired Emperor visited and presented a inscribed plaque to honor the filial piety³; In the first year of Quang Thuan in the Le Dynasty (1460), Nguyen Liem, a filial person, was given a inscribed plaque and the local authority was asked to establish a memorial archway to praise him; In the fourth year of Quang Thuan (1463), Nguyen Thi Lu, a virtuous woman, was also given a inscribed plaque to honor her family⁴; In the second year of Canh Hung in the Le Dynasty (1723), Dai An and Nam Chan residents were given a inscribed plaque to praise their loyalty and righteousness⁵; In the 15th year of Canh Hung in the Le Dynasty (1754), Trinh Doanh wrote four characters ‘文武全才’ (Both scholar and a warrior)) for Pham Dinh Trong in Feibai calligraphy, gave him a inscribed plaque of ‘同休功臣’ (Meritorious officials enjoying happiness together) to praise him, and also awarded him thousands of family fiefs⁶. It can be seen that inscribed plaque has been popular among the court, officials and the noble class for a long time, and has become an

important management tool for rulers' moral standards. Later, it gradually became popular in temples, ancestral halls and private houses.



Figure 1: “The Main Hall of Shakyamuni”
(大雄宝殿) inscribed plaque

After the success of the Vietnamese revolution in 1945, the "Quoc ngu" characters (national character) based on the Latin alphabet replaced Chinese characters, and became the official Vietnamese writing system. Since then, Chinese characters were officially abolished, and the number of inscribed plaques decreased year by year. Due to the perennial humid and hot climate in Vietnam and the continuous wars in Vietnam's history, historical relics, especially those made of perishable materials such as wood, paper, silk were severely damaged by nature and human activities for many years. Therefore, the wood inscribed plaques before the Later Le Dynasty have disappeared so far. The earliest existing inscribed plaques with

³ See to King Du Tong, Tran dynasty Records, Vol. 5, *Complete Annals of Đại Việt (Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư)*

⁴ See Vol.19, Principal Records, *The Imperially Ordered Annotated Text Completely Reflecting the History of Viet (Khâm định Việt sử Thông giám cương mục)*

⁵ See Vol.39, Principal Records, *The Imperially Ordered Annotated Text Completely Reflecting the History of Viet (Khâm định Việt sử Thông giám cương mục)*

⁶ See Vol.41, Principal Records, *The Imperially Ordered Annotated Text Completely Reflecting the History of Viet (Khâm định Việt sử Thông giám cương mục)*

detailed dates in Vietnam are "Ninh Phuc Buddhist Temple" (宁福禅寺) and "the Main Hall of Shakyamuni" (大雄宝殿) in the eighth year of Duong Hoa in the Le Dynasty (1642). The number of inscribed plaques in Vietnam was the most considerable in the late Nguyen Dynasty, especially during the periods of Khai Dinh (1916-1925) and Bao Dai (1926-1945), followed by that in the Early and Middle Stages of the Nguyen Dynasty while the number of inscribed plaques in the Le Dynasty was relatively small. Although there is an upsurge in promoting traditional culture and craftsmanship nowadays, the content, calligraphy, and production techniques of modern inscribed plaques are vastly different from those of ancient inscribed plaques.

Research related to Vietnamese inscribed plaques offers a compelling glimpse into Vietnam's rich cultural and historical tapestry. Nguyen's (2018) study on inscribed plaques within Vietnamese temple architecture underscores their pivotal role in conveying religious narratives and preserving cultural heritage. These plaques serve as valuable repositories of history, reflecting the evolution of religious practices and architectural styles over time. Linguistic aspects have also captivated scholars, with Nguyen (2019) exploring the language and writing systems employed on these plaques. Their findings illuminate the dynamic interplay between Vietnamese and Chinese, offering a nuanced

understanding of linguistic adaptation and identity negotiation through written expressions on these plaques. Preservation challenges and techniques have not been overlooked, as evidenced by Le (2005) work on the conservation of Vietnamese inscribed plaques. This research underscores the importance of archival practices and technology in safeguarding these invaluable cultural artifacts. In summary, research on Vietnamese inscribed plaques enhances our appreciation of Vietnam's heritage and underscores the significance of preserving and interpreting these inscriptions for future generations.

In the next section, we will present the literary and cultural connotation of Vietnamese inscribed plaques.

Unlike other literary genres, inscribed plaque does not have a long article but rather a concise phrase, with only a few square characters carrying widely cultural and humanistic connotations. When ancient people wrote and made tablets and couplets, they often sought to reflect the knowledge and cultural achievements of the person who erected, gave, or received the inscribed plaque. There are several reasons explaining why inscribed plaque writers often prefer taking the content from Confucian classics, poetry, prose, and historical allusions to inscribe on the inscribed plaque. Firstly, these literary sources are of immense cultural and historical significance in many societies, especially in East Asia, where

Confucianism has had a significant impact on the cultural fabric. By drawing from these revered texts, plaque authors can access a rich legacy of wisdom, values, and moral teachings that will resonate with the intended audience. The Confucian classics, such as the Analects and the Book of Rites, provide profound insights on topics such as filial piety, social harmony, and ethical behavior, making them an ideal resource for conveying meaningful messages through inscriptions. Second, poetry and prose, which are renowned for their aesthetic beauty and evocative language, possess a unique capacity to evoke emotions and communicate complex ideas concisely. Inscribed plaques frequently seek to inspire, uplift, or commemorate, and incorporating lines of poetry or prose from renowned literary works enhances the artistic and persuasive appeal of the message. Not only do these verses lend elegance and grace to the inscriptions, but they also elicit a sense of cultural continuity and appreciation for the literary heritage. In addition, historical allusions are a potent instrument for connecting the present to the past. By referencing significant historical figures, events, or anecdotes, engraved plaques can invoke feelings of collective memory and pride. These allusions build a bridge between generations and cultures, fostering a greater appreciation for shared history and cultivating a sense of unity and identity.

Overall, by incorporating content from Confucian classics, poetry, prose, and

historical allusions, the authors of engraved plaques imbue their messages with cultural profundity, philosophical insights, aesthetic beauty, and a sense of historical continuity. This method not only enhances the significance and impact of the inscriptions, but also serves as evidence of the enduring influence of these literary and cultural treasures.

3. Research methodology

This study used qualitative method for data collection, content analysis, contextual analysis and symbolic interpretation.

Data Collection: Collecting a diverse set of inscribed plaques from various sources, including temples, historical sites, museums, and private collections. Ensure that the selection represents different time periods, regions, and cultural contexts.

Content Analysis: Examining the textual content of the plaques, including the language used, the script, and the style of writing. Analyze the messages, narratives, or prayers inscribed on the plaques to decipher their cultural, historical, or religious significance.

Contextual Analysis: Investigating the historical and cultural context in which the plaques were created. Consider the purpose of the plaques, the events or individuals they commemorate, and the societal norms and values they reflect.

Symbolic Interpretation: Looking for symbols, motifs, and imagery on the plaques and analyze their symbolic meanings within the Vietnamese cultural

and religious context. Symbols may convey themes related to Buddhism, Confucianism, folklore, or historical events.

By employing these qualitative methods, we could unlock the intricate cultural and historical narratives embedded in these remarkable artifacts, contributing to a deeper understanding of Vietnam's rich heritage.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Content from Confucian Classics

The most common sources of the content on inscribed plaques are the *Four Books* and *Five Classics*, which are the main learning materials for Confucian students. They are also one of the main promotional tools for rulers to disseminate various social orders and moral values, such as loyalty to the monarch and patriotism, respect for heaven and the ancestors, and filial piety and obedience to the elders. Therefore, the content of inscribed plaques quoting the *Four Books* and *Five Classics* is universal, authoritative, and elegant.

According to the preliminary statistical data collected, the classic cited most from the *Four Books* and *Five Classics* is *The Book of Poetry* with 120 pieces of inscribed plaques, accounting for around 17.9 percent of the 680 inscribed plaques examined. *The Book of Changes*, *Book of Documents*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The*

Book of Rites, *The Analects of Confucius*, and *The Spring and Autumn Annals*.

The rich content of the inscribed plaque is not only because it is extracted from various classics but also because it is cited from different part of the same article. For example, the six inscribed plaques which are “祀事孔明” (All the rituals are complete and brilliant), “先祖是皇” (Grandly come our progenitors), “孝孙有庆” (Their filial descendent receives blessing), “万寿无疆” (With myriads of years, life without end)⁷, “既齐” (Solemn and respectful) and “弗替引之” (Never abolish the maintenance of these rituals!⁷) quote from the poem *Chu ci* of *The Book of Poetry – Xiaoya*, reflecting the reverent and solemn atmosphere of later generations when worshipping their ancestors. Besides, many versions of inscribed plaques can also be written from a small part of the classics, such as the first three sentences in Chapter 16 of *The Doctrine of the Mean*: “子曰：‘鬼神之为德，其盛矣乎！视之而弗见，听之而弗闻，体物而不可遗。使天下之人，齐明盛服，以承祭祀，洋洋乎如在其上，如在其左右。’” (The Master said, “How abundantly do Spiritual Beings display the powers that belong to them! We look for them, but do not see them; we listen to, but do not hear them; yet they enter into all things, and there is nothing without them. They cause all the people in the kingdom to fast and purify themselves, and array

⁷ See James Legge (1960). *The Chinese Classics (Vol. IV): The She King, or The Book of Poetry*. Hongkong University Press.

themselves in their richest dresses, in order to attend at their sacrifices. Then, like overflowing water, they seem to be over the heads, and on the right and left of their worshippers.⁸) The result of a survey on ancient inscribed plaques shows that there are twenty-three inscriptions without duplication related to the speech. “德其盛”, “神德其盛”, “为德其盛”, “德其盛矣”, “为德其盛矣”, “盛矣乎”, “其盛矣乎”, “视而弗见”, “弗见闻”, “体物不遗”, “体不遗”, “洋在”, “洋在上” (Figure 2), “洋乎在”, “在其其”, “洋乎如在”, “在其上”, “洋洋在上”, “如在其上”, “如在其左”, “洋乎其左”, “如在其右”, “如在右”. It can be seen that the Confucian classics are full of vitality on the inscribed plaques.



Figure 2: “(Spiritual Beings) seem to be over the heads” (洋在上) inscribed plaque

4.2. Content from ancient literature

In addition to the inscribed plaque content commonly derived from the *Four Books* and *Five Classics*, the ancients also widely cited other ancient books, poems, and articles. For instance, many Vietnamese villages have a inscribed plaque on their village doors which was inscribed the phrase “少高大” (A little

higher). Looking at the three simple Chinese characters, many people cannot understand their profound meaning. Some even misunderstand that the inscribed plaque reminded villagers to be modest and cautious at all times. In fact, the inscription on this inscribed plaque is from *The Book of Han Dynasty: Biography of Yu Dingguo* with the content: “始定国父于公，其阊门坏，父老方共治之。于公谓曰：‘少高大阊门，令容驷马高盖车。我治狱多阴德，未尝有所冤，子孙必有兴者。’至定国为丞相，永为御史大夫，封侯传世云。” (Yugong is Yu Dingguo’s father. Once, the village entrance of his hometown collapsed, so the elderly wanted to rebuild it together. Yugong said to them: **Build a little higher village entrance**, so that a tall cart driven by four horses can pass through. I govern prisons which accumulated many virtues and I have never let anyone be unjustly imprisoned, therefore, my descendants have to make a fortune and prosper.’ After that, his son Yu Dingguo was indeed appointed as Prime Minister, and Yu Yong was also appointed as Chief Minister. The official positions were handed down to posterity.) From this story, it can be inferred that “A little higher” means to build higher entrances so that tall vehicles and horses can pass through. The implication of this inscribed plaque is that if ancestors practice charity and

⁸ See James Legge (1960). *The Chinese Classics (Vol. I): Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*. Hongkong University Press.

accumulate virtue, their descendants will surely prosper.

Another example is an inscribed plaque with the question "于此乎?" ([Is it all not] because of this?) in a Town God's Temple in Hanoi, Vietnam. The inscription on the inscribed plaque is based on an outstanding article named *Shi Shuo* (师说: Discourse on Teacher) written by Han Yu - a writer, politician, and thinker of the Tang Dynasty. He asserted that “古之圣人，其出人也远矣，犹且从师而问焉；今之众人，其下圣人也亦远矣，而耻学于师。是故圣益圣，愚益愚。圣人之所以为圣，愚人之所以为愚，其皆出于此乎？” (Sages in ancient times outstripped the ordinary people. Also, they actively learned from their teachers. By contrast, the multitude who though are much inferior to sages, are ashamed of being instructed by teachers nowadays. As a result, sages become wiser, and ignoramuses become more ignorant. Is the reason for the wisdom of the former and the stupidity of the latter not because of this?) The Town God worshipped in the temple is not a teacher, but it is said that he served the residents during his lifetime, taught them how to grow rice and raise silkworms. Therefore, this inscribed plaque reflects the people's reverence for their teacher and sage.



Figure 3: "Vague – Respectful – Sighing" (懔肃愴) inscribed plaque

Some inscribed plaques extract complete sentences from the original text, while others select several important words. For example, the contents of the two inscribed boards, "懔肃愴" (Vague, Respectful, Sighing - Figure 3) and "爱存懋著" (Love your ancestors, and they will live forever; respect them reverently, as if they were always in front of us), are both from the *Book of Rites*: "祭之日，入室僾然必有见乎其位，周还出户肃然必有闻乎其容声，出户而听愴然必有闻乎其叹息之声。” "Vague" (懔) indicates that one seems to see the appearance of his ancestor on the divine position. "Respectful" (肃) and "Sighing" (愴) illustrates that when one's heart is full of respect for his forebears, he can feel their sound, silhouettes, even their breath." And the phrase "爱存懋著" comes from the next part: “是故，先王之孝也，色不忘乎目，声不绝乎耳，心志嗜欲不忘乎心。致爱则存，致懋则著。著存不忘乎心，夫安得不敬乎？” The inscription on the inscribed plaque taken from the extract shows that when one's love for his ancestors reaches the limit, they will always exist in his heart, and when his piety is in the extreme, they will appear in

front of him. Both of these inscribed plaques emphasize that when the remembrance and reverence for ancestors reaches the extreme, it is natural to feel their sounds and silhouettes. The above quotations show that ancients were very familiar with the canonical content and also showed ingenious creative use in writing inscribed plaques.

5. Conclusion

Vietnamese inscribed plaques have a long history, but due to natural disasters, wars, and other reasons, the number of inscribed plaques has also decreased year by year. Most of the existing inscribed plaques belong to the Le and Nguyen dynasties. With the decline of Confucianism and the abolishment of Chinese characters in Vietnam, there are not many Vietnamese people who can read Chinese characters at present; hence, the culture of Vietnamese inscribed plaques and couplets has gradually been forgotten. It is difficult to recognize the Chinese characters on the inscribed plaques, and it is even more difficult to understand the literary allusions and cultural connotations of the inscribed plaques. Protecting the inscribed plaque culture means not only preserving those cultural relics that have experienced many ups and downs but also enabling more young people to recognize Chinese characters and cherish traditional Vietnamese culture. In professional courses such as Sino-Nom Studies, it is necessary to separate the inscribed plaque study from others to be an independent

learning subject highlighting the differences between inscribed plaques in Vietnam and other countries in East Asian culture. This makes students proud of the Vietnamese inscribed plaque culture and helps them avoid misunderstanding and misreading when studying about inscribed plaques, thereby cultivating a new generation who can inscribe inscribed plaques.

Inscribed plaques and couplets have a close relationship with each other. However, while most scholars currently attach great importance to the study of couplets, there is very little research on inscribed plaques. If there are any mentions of inscribed plaques, it is only because they go along with couplets in a set. Surveying and photographing the existing inscribed plaques around Vietnam is conducive to the management and protection of cultural relics, and different books on the inscribed plaque culture can be compiled by region, age, and hanging space.

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