

INTRODUCTION

PROJECT OF “PRESERVING AND PROMOTING VALUE OF THE ROYAL WOODBLOCKS OF THE NGUYEN DYNASTY - WORLD’S DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE”

*Nguyen Xuan Hung
National Archives Center IV*

I. INTRODUCTION

Woodblock left from Nguyen Dynasty is believed to have precious values in many ways, it is the factual expression of Vietnam’s political, economical, culture and social life in the past with various topics, like history, geography, politic, society, military, legality, education and culture..., all of the features form a reliable source of historical material for reference and research on early modern history of Vietnam. It is the said importance that makes woodblock the “national treasure” in time of feudal time. Only persons- in- charge at National History Department were allowed to work with woodblocks, each of which must obtain approval from the King prior to being carved.

Royal woodblocks of the Nguyen Dynasty was recognized by UNESCO as Documentary Heritage in The World’s Memory Program on July 31, 2009, becoming the world’s first Documentary Heritage of Vietnam.

Currently, the remaining collection of Royal woodblocks of the Nguyen Dynasty is one of specially precious document type preserved in Vietnam Archiving background, stored at Center for Archives IV under Bureau of Archives and Document- Ministry of Home Affairs.

II. WOODBLOCKS OF THE NGUYEN DYNASTY AND HISTORICAL VICISSITUDES

1. In Nguyen Dynasty

Preservation of Woodblocks was focused by Kings of The Nguyen Dynasty. Firstly, National History Department was founded in the first year of Minh Mang (1820) to compile historical documents and also preserve the carving wood sets. In the second year of Tu Duc (1849), Tang Ban Duong (Document Store House) was built separately for keeping woodblocks. Van Mieu (Temple of Literature) was established, beside the function of training, it received, stored and maintained book printing frames moved from the Northern City (Hanoi). Every year, officers in charge of the woodblocks must make regular inspection on the carving blocks, any damaged block or dimmed pen stroke of which was sent to Doc Cong Vu Kho to make timely repair.

In 1933, with change of book printing technology and under influence of French colony administration in the Central, National History Department was removed by The Nguyen's Dynasty Government and turned into headquarter of the first library of Gouvernement of Annam). After that, the facility was repaired, upgraded with large scale and became the Central General Library. By 1937, the work was completed. It had been called Bao Dai Library before changing name to Institute of Culture of the Central. This library collected books and documents from all storehouse established in Hue, including the Woodblocks.

2. In time of the Republic of Vietnam

In 1960, all Woodblocks and Royal documents were taken to Da Lat, which was explained by the current Government: "In dry climate all year round of Da Lat, books, materials and especially woodblocks can be preserved for longer time". In addition, Da Lat at that time was planned to become a tourism city, it is necessary to build up a museum to attract tourists.

However, after Ngo Dinh Diem's government had been overthrown in 1963, woodblock was not a concern. Due to space insufficiency, woodblocks were stored at 3 different places, most of them were bound and overlapped on each other on wet basement. Therefore, during this time, woodblocks were lost, rotten and severely degraded.

In 1974, roof of Da Lat Archives Office was broken, which let rain water in: : *"Woodblocks in basement is being seriously threatened by rain water, chafing, overlapping and moisture. No light can come into the basement, rain water once poured in here. Officials must use all tools they have to scoop water out. Thus, full woodblocks with title, mark and number are left very few, the remaining is broken.*

By the end of 1974, the woodblocks had not been moved out as *"the basement was flooded, water level was 0.45m high. The movement can only be performed after all the water comes out"* At Document No.4/VKTV dated January 18, 1975 sent to National Archives Department, its Branch said: *"Public Administration Agency and Da Lat Center for Irritation are not able to drain water from the basement as they do not have proper tools"*. Thus, during several months, the woodblocks were sunk in water without solution to cure.

3. Since the years after 1975

After unification of Vietnam, Royal woodblocks of the Nguyen Dynasty were preserved by Department of Archives, President's Palace of Revolution Temporary Government of The South Republic Vietnam.

In 1976, the Woodblocks were transferred to National for Archives II under the State's Bureau of Archiving (now is State Records Management and Archives

Department of Vietnam) and stored at Building of Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. In 1988, the Woodblocks were moved to be preserved at the old Villa of Tran Le Xuan- No.2 Yet Kieu, Ward 5, Da Lat City, Lam Dong Province until now.

Since August of 2006, Woodblocks are kept and managed by National Archives Center IV.

Currently, The Dynasty's Woodblock is being kept by National Archives Center IV in dedicated warehouses with method of **natural air ventilation, no cooling**, only use fan of air-conditioners. Through daily records, temperature in the warehouse is relatively stable, kept at: 21 - 26°C with moisture from 55% - 70%; the Woodblocks are regularly sterilized and controlled mildew. Besides, the dedicated warehouses are also equipped with a modern system of fire prevention and security devices.

The Woodblocks are preserved at 02 big, 02 small warehouses in the dedicated warehouse. The whole Woodblocks are placed on 60 iron shelves, supporters are attached to fix position of the blocks. Officials of the Center always be careful when taking the woodblocks out to practice their profession.

4. Previous plan

In 1993, Prime Minister permitted State's Department of Archives to realize project "Salvage Imperial records and Royal woodblocks" in period 1993 – 2000 to save the woodblocks falling into severe degradation under overlapped heaps without classification and edition to define their contents. Completing the project, many works had been done, including:

- Classification, systematization of printing versions into sets and volumes of each set. Consequentially, 152 sets were determined and 1.953 books were put in statistic.

- 55.318 carving sheets of the documents are printed; digitalize the whole 55.318 sheets of the printing version and transferred information to 184 CD-ROM (each CD-ROM is printed in 3 sets, 2 of them are for original guaranty and 01 is for reference and use;

- Setting up applicable software to manage and exploit the Woodblocks.

Achievement of the Project "Rescuing Imperial records and Woodblocks" made a significant contribution to save the Woodblocks from degradation. This is the first time since the formation, the whole Woodblocks were fully printed; classified, systematized the printing versions per as each book set, each book per as set; basically digitalized and built up database for guaranty and service of utilization, exploitation. In addition, the Woodblocks were taken into preservation warehouse, which facilitates protection, fire prevention and minimize any loss or

damage of documents due to natural disasters and calamities as well as human's awareness.

III. CONTENT OF THE PLAN

On February 3, 2016, Prime Minister approved the Project "Preserving and promoting value of The Royal woodblocks of the Nguyen Dynasty - World's Documentary Heritage" with objectives:

- To increase methods of safe storage for Woodblocks, preventing damage and preserve them for long.

- To promote the woodblocks' value through renovation and extension of ways of propagandization to help International and domestic public be aware of value, content and meaning of the documents, serving for historical research.

- Increase awareness of the whole society, especially Vietnamese youth for role of archiving as well as value of the archived documents via the World's Documentary Heritage.

The project was developed into 2 phases as follows:

1. Phase I (2016 – 2020)

a) Organizing works of Woodblock preservation

- Classified, evaluated the physical status, determine intactness of the Woodblocks;

- Researched, built up and tested methods, solutions of maintenance, restorage and consolidation for damaged documents per as classification result;

- Made repair, restorage for Woodblocks after successful pilots;

- Renovated to make clean warehouse appropriate for Woodblocks preservation;

- Set up procedure, economical- technical norms for sanitation, maintenance and recovery of Woodblocks.

b) Promoting value of the Woodblocks,

- Compiled, published material introducing Woodblock materials;

- Held gallery, exhibition, made versions and films to introduce Woodblocks;

- Built up E-page for Woodblocks.

c) Enhancing officers' capacity

- Trained direct official in charge in terms of profession and technique;

- Engaged International and Vietnamese experts, artists to make guidance and give advice on technique of maintenance, recovery and preservation for wooden documents;

- Made surveys in Vietnam and abroad countries on methods of processing, experiences of preservation and promotion for Woodblocks' value.

2. Phase II (2021 – 2025)

- a) Continue the maintenance, recovery and consolidation for broken Woodblocks;

- b) Build up, upgrade database of information grade 1 and software of woodblock management and exploitation;

- c) Promote Woodblock value through methods like: Compilation and publication of printing products; exhibition, making versions and documentary films, theme seminars to introduce Woodblocks into schools;

- d) Continue to train and push up professional qualification for officers who directly perform this plan.

IV. FIRST EFFECTIVENESS

The project was developed for nearly 2 years and gained many subjective results.

1. Preservation

Following works were completed:

- Make survey, classification, evaluation and statistic on physical status of the whole Nguyen Dynasty's woodblocks;

- Make sanitation for mildewy and ink stuck woodblocks;

- Combine with Institute of Wood Industry to make research on sanitation methods for mildewy and ink stuck woodblocks with modern technologies;

- Combine with Institute of Wood Industry Research to research, test and propose for measures of maintenance and recovery with different levels of the broken documents: research, setting up solution for perfect environment (temperature, moisture, light ...) of the warehouse keeping royal document of The Nguyen Dynasty.

- Review documents of printing versions of the Woodblocks to determine the absent ones; make statistic, list and copy for supplementing the absence;

- Edited 2.392 Woodblocks of which contents have not been determined.

- Hold international conference "Exchanging experiences on Woodblock preservation of other countries in the World".

2. Promoting the document value

- Organized the compilation and publication for 2 volumes of the book “Summary on Meritorious officials of The Nguyen Dynasty through its Woodblocks- The World’s Documentary Heritage”
- Hold 4 exhibitions of The Nguyen Dynasty’s woodblocks at the Center and locals.
- Made overall fine art design for the exhibition area of archives at the Center.

Upon the achievements, we hope to receive ideas from scientists and our colleagues so that we can complete our work with better quality, contributing to career of preserving and promoting value of The Royal woodblocks of the Nguyen Dynasty. Also, we feel pleased to share all professional experiences we have obtained during the time at your request.