

# SINO-VIETNAMESE RELATIONS, 1771-1802: FROM CONTENTION TO FAITHFUL CORRELATION

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## **Abstract**

*This article attempts to examine the nature of the Tay Son period (1771-1802), through the study of their foreign relations with the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) in which the latter became closely involved in Vietnamese affairs. The uprising of Tay Son had led a heterogeneous military force that ousted the Trinh and Nguyen families and eventually toppled the 348 year-old Le Dynasty (1428-1776) where China recognized herself as the legitimate rulers of Vietnam. Hence, this gave rise to serious friction and profoundly altered the relationship between the two countries. Findings suggested that Tay Son rulers willingly accepted their role as minor partners with China being the largest partner after relations returned to their traditional period. Vietnam clearly realized she had to acknowledge China's suzerainty and become a tributary in order to avoid China's intervention in their internal affairs.*

## **Introduction**

Throughout the centuries, the history of Vietnam has been closely intertwined with that of China. From Chinese colonisation to periodic armed invasions and resistance, it also took on the form of a formal and rather symbolic tributary system with administrative and cultural borrowings from China.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between China and Vietnam is usually characterized as a tributary relationship. However, what exactly does "tributary" mean and what constitutes a tributary system? Much has been done to define this intricate concept, but it can hardly be said that all the aspects of this institution have been adequately studied.<sup>2</sup> It is at best an overview of the China's tribute system, with only descriptive information.

This was the basic foundation on which the ties between China and Vietnam rested; whereby rulers of other countries were inferior and were expected to recognize the sovereignty of China. The tribute system model had been based on an assumption that foreign rulers willingly accepted their role as limited partners while China, being the largest and most culturally advanced state, would claim universal rule. With its impressive size, culture, power and wealth, it would induce foreign rulers to voluntarily seek recognition as tributaries in a hierarchical "China World Order".<sup>3</sup> Consequently, this paper attempts to look into the various facets of their relationship, specifically in the political and economic aspects which has made great progress base on the case-study analysis of the relations between China and Vietnam during the Tay Son Rebellion period (1771-1802), or more precisely, during the reign of Nguyen Hue (Quang Trung). Indeed, Sino-Vietnamese relations in the late eighteenth century remained virtually *terra incognita* among scholars.

During this short period, a number of significant events have occurred. It was at this point that the Chinese began to be closely involved in Vietnamese affairs. At first, these events gave rise to serious friction between China and Vietnam which transformed the relationship between the two countries to an extreme degree. However, by the end of the period, ties between the two countries were resumed and returned to their traditional pattern. The Tay Son leader sought to re-establish friendly relations with China, acknowledging her

rule by sending the usual tributary mission. Therefore, it presents “an interesting case of an asymmetric relationship that has moved through a full gamut of possible variations and can be used to explain its restlessness as well as the methods that both sides have used to define and to manage it”, as pointed out by Brantly Womack.<sup>4</sup>

There is very little detailed information on the Tay Son available in the western language. The Tay Son uprising has left a blank spot in Western scholarship which has failed to address the complexities of this period. Most of these books are not directly about the Tay Son but dealt with issues of 18<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese history which only helped explained the context of the uprising. The most thorough account of Tay Son history is contained in George Dutton’s book, “*The Tay Son Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam*” which was published in 2006. While the overall scope of the volume is comprehensive, the reader will find that there is an emphasis on social historical approach, which is Dutton’s area of specialisation. Hence, this resulted in some areas being neglected. One is Tay Son’s foreign policy. Having been transformed from a movement into a government, Tay Son exercised true supremacy. Examining its nascent foreign policies in the far south and north of the country, namely China, when those regions were under Tay Son control in the 1770s and 1780s can help explain how people throughout Vietnam perceived this 18th century rebellion. Thus, the Tay Son movement is best understood not as an isolated event but as part of a longer era in Southeast Asian history.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Course of Tay Son Rebellion: A Brief Historical Outline**

Between 1730 and 1770, Vietnam witnessed scores of local rebellions. However, none of these were strong enough to intimidate the existing political system because the upheavals were geographically confined to local villages.<sup>6</sup> This situation changed with the emergence of the Tay Son brothers; Nguyen Nhac, Nguyen Hue and Nguyen Lu, from the hamlet of Tay Son in the prefecture of Hoai-nhon, Binh Dinh Province (west of modern day Qui Nhon). In actual fact, the three brothers did not have the surname Nguyen. They were of the Ho line and were descendants of Ho Hung Dat, who lived in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It came to be that the forefather of the Tay Son brothers in the Huong Nguyen district, Nghe An, was captured by a Nguyen lord, who was leading his army northwards. He was brought to Tay Son (now An Khe commune, Hoai Nhon district, Binh Dinh province) and forced to change his surname to Nguyen. However, some historians think that it was their mother’s surname while others think that they wanted to take advantage of a surname which had great prestige in the South. Adopting the name was indeed a clever move, since it succeeded at least in confusing the Chinese authorities who thought they were the Nguyen princes who ruled the Southern part of Vietnam independently.<sup>7</sup> The Tay Son Rebellion was a cataclysmic event that greatly distorted the 18th century Vietnamese political and social landscape.<sup>8</sup> The Tay Son brothers managed to give the movement an effective political orientation right from the beginning. As Alexander Woodside pointed out, this rebellion inaugurates modern Vietnamese history.<sup>9</sup> It emerged during a time when Vietnam underwent one of the most turbulent periods of its history, in which Vietnam had been partitioned into two parts along the Gianh River. The Trinh family controlled the north as the Nguyen family governed the south, while an Emperor of the Le family presided over both regions in name only. The Tay Son Uprising had engulfed the entire country and heralded the end of the Le family.

The motivation for this revolution was mixed. A common response to economic pressure and social injustice is a revolution. Widespread corruption led to increased financial exaction on the population and to the Tay Son uprising. As a result, even minor natural disasters sometimes led to disastrous famines. Peasants were forced to leave their villages, wandering in search of food and dying by the thousands on the roads.<sup>10</sup> The State was able to do little more than dole out inadequate supplies of food as described by Cung Muc Annals:

Thieves and bandits multiplied in number, especially in Hai Duong. Peasants gave up all cultivation. All food reserves were exhausted in the villages, except in Son Nam. People roamed about carrying their children in search of rice. The price of rice soared; 100 coins were no longer enough to pay for a meal. People lived on vegetable and herbs, and ate rats and snakes. Dead bodies lay about on the roads.

Tradition claimed that these brothers were offended by the mistreatment of their father at the hands of the Early Nguyen government. They were also angry because of Nguyen's penchant for growing rich at the expense of the general population. The popular slogan of the Tay Son rebellion was "Seize the property of the rich and distribute it to the poor". Their uprising gained momentum as landless farmers united with the Tay Son army.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the Tay Son red flag had become the symbol of the people's will to achieve unity and independence, as they led a heterogeneous military force that expelled the Trinh and Nguyen families. The spirit of national resistance was expressed in this marching song:

Fight to keep our long hair,  
 Fight to keep our black teeth.  
 Fight to destroy every enemy vehicle;  
 Fight to leave no enemy armour intact.  
 Fight to let them know heroic Southern Country is its own master.<sup>12</sup>

The Tay Son leaders claimed that they were rebelling in the name of the Le emperor [Diet Trinh, Phu Le] as Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and only maintained official relations with the Le government as the legitimate authority. Hence, they pledged their allegiance to the Le emperor, whose court was at the ancient capital of Thang Long (now Hanoi). This arrangement lasted only two years. Exhausted of this ceremonial role, Le Chieu Thong asked China to aid him in over-throwing the Tay Son kings. He appeared with his entourage at the Guangxi border and was given asylum.<sup>13</sup> His plea for help regarding his throne received a response. In order to fulfil his duty as protector to Vietnam, Emperor Qianlong (1736-1795) responded favourably to Le Chieu Thong's [Le Dy Ky] request.<sup>14</sup> Hence, during this period, China greatly altered their relationship with Vietnam.

### **Conflict Management and Tension: China Resolve Tay Son Uprising**

At first, Chinese authorities apparently were not very well informed about developments in Vietnam during the Tay Son rebellion. The Tay Son Rebellion has not received the attention it deserved as one of the major episodes of Vietnam's peasants uprising. In 1774, the governor-general of Liangguang (Guangdong and Guangxi, the southernmost provinces of the Qing Empire), Li Shiyao, in his report stated that "hearsay from a trader that had passed near Vietnam coast, had seen many insurrections and heard much gunfire day and night".<sup>15</sup> However, replying immediately to this report, Emperor Qianlong expressed his views as, "insurrections occur within vassal states, so keep away and do not interfere".<sup>16</sup>

China did not interfere with Vietnamese internal and diplomatic affairs because they were aware that its relations with Vietnam had a special diplomatic nature reflecting the hierarchical relationship between China's emperor and their counterpart in Vietnam, via a series of etiquettes and norms.<sup>17</sup> Emperor Qianlong (1735-1796) was not interested in territorial expansions in the south, but taking his duty as an overlord seriously, he approved a

limited expedition to support Le dynasty's forces in taking back their capital. Thus, a year later, the emperor decided to send an army to Vietnam with a decree which stated:

Notwithstanding the fact that Annam [Vietnam] has been filial to our court and has been most complaisant, it has suffered usurpation of the throne by a vassal and has come asking for assistance. Abandoning it would not be "the path of nurturing small states and caring for their fate." We (China) must immediately send large numbers of troops to Annam; condemn the crime loudly, and put down [the usurpers].<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, the governor-general of Liangguang, Sun Shiyi was eager to gain martial glory and he strongly pressed the Qing court to approve the action.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the war against Vietnam was for the purpose of keeping the suzerain-vassal relationship between Qing Dynasty and Vietnam, and it had not influenced the normal development of relationships between the two countries. The aim of the expedition was thus to restore the Le family to the Vietnamese throne.<sup>20</sup> Sun Shiyi gained glory for the dynasty when he took the capital and helped Le Chieu Thong to rebuild his government.<sup>21</sup>

Desiring great military glory and feeling the needed to distinguish himself with further achievements, Sun's troop entered Thang Long following a strategy to "lure them deep" in little more than a month. However, the Grand Council disagreed with the decision since the objective of protecting the weak and recovering the lost had been achieved. Although the Qing court felt that Sun should return to China with his troops, Sun was reluctant to leave the Vietnamese capital. Sun's troops, however, lost several battles in the course of their retreat and were defeated in battle in 1789.

Therefore, Fu Kang'an (Phuc An Khang) a famous military commander appointed as the new governor-general of Liangguang was sent South to manage the final stages of the withdrawal and the acceptance of the Tay Son King, Nguyen Hue, as King of Annam, who then changed his name to Quang Trung (Shining Loyalty). The Qing court decided that the Le king had lost his "Mandate of Heaven" and gave formal recognition to the victorious Quang Trung.<sup>22</sup> Quang Trung and Fu Kang'an were expert managers of ceremony and of power. Quang Trung agreed to pay tribute to China if it would recognize his rule in Vietnam. Elaborate arrangements were made for Quang Trung to humbly seek imperial pardon and to be admitted as a tributary. Thus, the ceremonial proprieties again were manipulated to maintain a flow of interchange and conventional communication. These rebels occupied the whole of Vietnam while Emperor Qianlong, after having invaded that country and failing to restore the throne of Le Chieu Thong, recognized Quang Trung as king, in 1789, and received him in his summer palace at Rehe (Jehol).<sup>23</sup>

### **Rethinking of the Tribute Mission: Explaining the View**

After the Tay Son rebellion overthrew the Le dynasty and defeated the Chinese army, the first thing that Quang Trung did was to immediately dispatch an emissary and presented himself at the Chinese Court. The sending of diplomatic missions to China in the form of tributary missions by Quang Trung demonstrated that he understood the significance of such relations and as such, his submission and apologies were perfectly acceptable. The tone of his petition

was respectful and obedient as were the manners of his envoys.<sup>24</sup> In addition to all this, Quang Trung also sent a double in his place to receive investiture and thereafter maintained annual tribute missions to Beijing. His double was allotted a place of honor at the eightieth birthday celebration of Emperor Qianlong.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, he showed gallantry to the defeated Chinese by allowing them to return home with honour and encouraging a peaceful relationship in keeping with previous arrangements, with the Qing Emperor. This act demonstrated Vietnam's willingness to subordinate itself to the authority of the Chinese court. These rituals of tributary diplomacy involved a whole range of activities including the exchange of tribute goods, tribute memorials and accompanying documents in respectable literary Chinese letters and ambassadors.<sup>26</sup>

For Vietnam perhaps, the ultimate goal was the maintenance of the status-quo, which could be translated into the sustainment of the suzerain and subordinate relations between the patron and vassal states. As pointed out by Truong Buu Lam, for the Vietnamese rulers, tributary relations provided a way to remain relatively independent of their giant neighbour, and to prevent Chinese interference in their internal affairs.<sup>27</sup> Strongly conscious of their country's geographical proximity to China, Quang Trung was eager to keep the Chinese at bay by assuming the position of a subordinate vassal in their relationship with China. This strategic consideration was also reinforced by the belief of the Vietnamese in a Chinese world order.<sup>28</sup> Tribute provides an important case study of differing Chinese and Vietnam perceptions. Chinese emperors considered Vietnam to be within the orbit of China's influence and kept that country within its tributary system as Vietnam was important for several reasons. Perhaps, the most strategically significant was that Vietnam provided the most potentially fruitful and receptive region for the projection of Chinese influence.<sup>29</sup>

The Chinese had never sought control over Vietnam. Apart from granting recognition and in some cases, protection, Chinese control over Vietnam was nominal. Thus, China's distance and its unwillingness to project its power meant that there was no real security threat from China should they refused to submit. Vietnam not only benefited because the return gifts from the Chinese were generous and the very best that an advanced civilization could offer, but that the measure was a reflection of both the superior position of the Chinese emperor as well as his benevolent character. In addition, the Chinese emperor confirmed the Quang Trung ruler in office, providing a form of legitimacy. At the same time, the Qing court seemed to comply with the request put forward by Quang Trung, who appeared to be testing out Qing's good will. For instance, he asked his ambassadors to request for some ginseng for his mother and the emperor quickly consented.<sup>30</sup>

The first maxim which governed the ties of Vietnam's relations with China was based on the understanding that actual diplomatic exchanges or embassies were seen as ritual confirmation of existing ties. The second maxim is that Vietnam will not acknowledge itself to be inferior to any other country.<sup>31</sup> The exception being its relations with China, in which the latter was considered to be the source of legitimising its rule. As Brantly Womack argues,

“Chinese legitimation was a factor in domestic power struggles in Vietnam ...It was important to every new ruler – even to recent victors over the Chinese like Le Loi or Nguyen Hue [Quang Trung] – to secure recognition from Beijing”<sup>32</sup>

In addition, Boot mentioned, “in a hierarchically conceived world, equals do not exist”.<sup>33</sup> Given these maxims, it would appear that successive Vietnamese regimes, more specifically Quang Trung, have always subscribed to China. From China’s point of view, the tribute was not merely a material gift or donation; they regarded it as an act of political submission with feudal overtones. As a result, they would not hesitate to send troops into Vietnam to restore peace and order if the authority of an existing tributary ruler was endangered by either domestic uprisings or foreign invasions, as is demonstrated between 1788 and 1790 when Emperor Qianlong dispatched an expeditionary force to Vietnam to restore Le Chieu Thong, who had been overthrown by Tay Son rebellion. Indeed, they did not take the tributary status of their inferior neighbors for granted but carried on an active policy based upon “the imperial way of managing the subordinate states” as Qianlong’s policy toward Nguyen Hue was merely one example of this attitude.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, the Chinese also held a much more practical view of the value of the tributaries. China’s main object was to maintain peace and order in the border regions. For this reason, Qing policy thus seemed to rely entirely upon the information and assessment of the governor-general of Liangguang. Therefore, when Nguyen Hue overthrew the Le king, the Grand Council decided to reinforce the troops along the frontier and to await the results of the investigations into the reason for the rebellion before taking any definite action.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the tribute offered to Emperor Qianlong by Quang Trung was refused until Quang Trung had been recognized by China as the ruler of Vietnam. This is because tributary status was granted by China not to a country but to a ruler.<sup>36</sup>

The Vietnamese had a tradition of observing China as reference for model and inspiration. Throughout their history, Vietnam adapted China’s methods and institutions for their own use as a legitimizing force. Therefore, Le Chieu Thong’s decision to seek Qing’s help was not solely determined by ideological reasons but was consistent with Vietnam’s long history of referring to China as a model while maintaining independence.

For Vietnam, being the immediate southern neighbour of China, the Chinese threat was real. Thus, Vietnam supplemented this effort by “keeping the emperor at bay” through regular tribute. When Quang Trung accepted the position of vassal to the emperor of China, it was out of several considerations which included security. Without much discontentment, they accepted to be incorporated into a system which did not involve any direct or excessive interference in their internal affairs and was less costly. Moreover, the recognition of this loose superiority of the Chinese empire allowed them - particularly sharing a common frontier with the empire - to remain relatively independent of their giant neighbour who constituted a permanent threat. This threat was in fact very real, for the Chinese quickly moved to chastise a state that tried to break out of the tributary system.<sup>37</sup> Hence, for the Vietnamese, respect has often been tinged with fear and suspicion.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, after the victory over the Qing in 1789, Ngo Thi Nham (1746-1803) who was put in charge of foreign affairs for the Tay Son Court had an active diplomatic role and fulfilled political responsibilities befitting its position while thwarting the destabilizing elements and promoting the stabilizing ones with China.<sup>39</sup> Ngo Thi Nham proved himself an eminent diplomat; thoroughly understanding his and the enemy’s side. He was prepared to be

flexible and was instrumental in preserving the Chinese dynasty's honour. It is therefore ironic that this military defect and some diplomatic manoeuvring between Ngo Thi Nham and certain key members of the Qing court's Grand Secretariat led Qing to abandon their military support for the Le and to recognize Tay Son as the legitimate ruling house of the secure south.

Following victory, enhancing relations with China became one of his main focuses. Ngo Thi Nham had to bring into play the newly recorded victory to enhance Vietnam's prestige and avert another invasion by the Qing Dynasty. Nevertheless, under his leadership, Vietnamese diplomacy made advances that were never possible during the feudal period. Emperor Qianlong had to give up raising an army to take revenge and conferred kingship on Quang Trung to exile Le Chieu Thong. In addition, he also had to meet Quang Trung's demands for abolishing the custom of offering golden dummies and gold as tributes and returned the occupied territories to Vietnam. Nonetheless, leading this important mission, Ngo Thi Nham used his pen instead of the sword to promote the image of the nation.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, during this period, China's cultural influence, especially the learning of literature, flourished following the expulsion of its officials as Vietnamese monarchs and aristocrats strove to emulate the cultural ideal established by the middle kingdom. Vietnamese interaction with the Chinese, particularly in missions to the Chinese capital, often (if not always) involved the writing of poetry to show the Chinese that they should be regarded as ambassadors from a civilized (and not a barbarous) country.<sup>41</sup>

### **From Impede to Facilitate: Cross Border Trade and Frontier Dispute**

The Tay Son insurrection had caused a state of great disruption and confusion in Vietnam. As a result, commercial activities along the border were gradually restricted during the early days of the Tay Son uprising, as political and economic striking led to swelling numbers of Vietnamese refugees from Vietnam to China.<sup>42</sup> This prohibited action for trade along the border between Vietnam and China, leading to a savage increase in prices due to an acute shortage of consumer goods and other products, especially medicine and tea, which was imported in bulk into Vietnam.<sup>43</sup> Following the pacification of the frontier at the end of the resistance against the Qing, Quang Trung proclaimed a series of policies for economic rehabilitation, particularly the expansion of commercial relations with foreign countries.<sup>44</sup> Quang Trung was interested in commerce and promulgated policies concerning trade.

Even with the Qing dynasty defeated, Quang Trung was interested in increasing trade with China. The necessity of amiable relations between Vietnam and China was emphasized in the Vietnamese court.<sup>45</sup> One of the major directions capable of accelerating a country's economic development was the expansion of foreign relations. Having realized in part its significance, Quang Trung proposed to the Governor of Liangguang (Guangxi and Guangdong provinces), that border gates be opened, market be made to interconnect and people of the two countries allowed to cross the border for trading activities. Hence, Quang Trung sends proposals to Beijing for an agreement in which "the frontier would be opened and market freed, so that goods could circulate in the interests of the people's consumption".<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps due to the important role of cross-border trade in providing resources to both countries, policies and protocols were quickly formatted and put in place by Qing and

Vietnam courts to encourage trade. The Qing court ordered that the frontier be reopened and the emperor established in order to provide the Vietnamese population with all that was needed. Since the ruling of Emperor Qianlong, the closure of the trade border had drastically altered the livelihoods of those living at the border. These people had previously experienced a rather porous state boundary where the rise in the price of goods caused everyone at the border to suffer. Hence, the opening up of border trade would have been the best solution.<sup>47</sup> Thus in 1791, the prohibition of border trade was released as in his order, “Let Sui Goa Gate resume their border-trade for the prosperity and wealth of my people and treat them [Vietnamese] equally. May my deliberation be as fruitful as ever”.<sup>48</sup>

Fu Kang An<sup>49</sup> was ordered to draw up “the 16 manageable clauses for the border trade between Vietnam and China in Guangxi” 《安南通市章程》. Following these trade protocols, a Vietnamese trading-post was established at Nanning, while special local frontier markets for small scale trades were allowed on the border. Subsequently, special licenses were issued in order to allow the traders to exchange commodities with local merchants. Hence, Cao Bang, Bao Lac, Lang Son, Lai Chai and Ha Giang in Vietnam and Guibian Sanguan (three checkpoints at the borders) in China developed their border-trade functions—collecting produce from the commercial hinterland, exporting and distributing imported goods as well as serving as an exchange location for the products of the region between the two countries. It made the manageable measures for the border between Vietnam and China better and promoted the manageability of trade between these two countries to a new level.<sup>50</sup> The opening of the border and the enactment of policies to facilitate trade has certainly encouraged those crossing the border to follow legal procedures.

The commercial situation along the China-Vietnam coast confirmed that the trade between Vietnam and China started to blossom since the mid-18th century. This new revelation sheds light on the trading activities of the Vietnam border, where state interests had shifted toward the facilitation of cross-border flows, especially in a crowded community and had inherited the diversity from economic acts and dynamics. As pointed out by Cheng Li, Guangxi Governor in his edict to the emperor, it signifies that Sino-Vietnamese border trade gained some development all the time with trading activities between these two countries quite continuously eventful.<sup>51</sup> Cross border trade at the Lao Cai city entrance was occurring at a much larger scale than elsewhere in the province. Another obstacle included, “in the border regions, trading has increased significantly and become a part of life among the border residents. It is common for people of border residents to be engaged in some kind of petty trading in the region. Trade is arguably an essential economic and social activity for them.”<sup>52</sup>

Commodities were not only brought abroad through normal trading channels, but also through political and diplomatic exchanges such as gifts or things exchanged through tributary relations. That was the common practice of Vietnam and other kingdoms in Southeast Asia. In this context, the political and diplomatic relations paved the way and supported the trading activities which were chiefly for the profit of the people at the border.

Quang Trung’s close contacts with China on the official level did not prevent him from pursuing an independent policy designed to further Vietnamese interests as he saw them, even when it antagonized the Chinese.<sup>53</sup> Tensions in bilateral relations had primarily been caused by territorial dispute by Quang Trung sovereignty claims. As stated in *Dai Nai Su Luc*,

“Quang Trung intends to invade the Qing court, especially to conquer Liangguang (Guangdong and Guangxi) province”<sup>54</sup>. This territorial dispute in the Yunan-Vietnam border were set to erupt in 1792 with a unified Vietnam asserting its Quang Trung interest in that area. He continued to voice out unreasonable demands for his sovereignty claim to territories along LiuMeng (today Menghai County, Yunnan Province) and kept roaring, “Assuming you give me several years to quickly raise the number of my soldiers, am I definitely not fearful to unwrap war with China.”<sup>55</sup>

Although Quang Trung never truly disregarded his desire to expand Tay Son’s territories, he reportedly gave certain Chinese pirates official Vietnamese ranks and then sent them to raid the South China coast, although during the 1790s, Qing authorities listed central Vietnam as among the many pirate bases threatening China’s security. For instance, in June and July, 1792, Tay Son commissioned 40 Chinese pirate junks to conduct expeditions along the coasts of Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang provinces. Thereafter, Chinese pirates participated in every major Tay Son naval encounter<sup>56</sup>. In 1796, Wang Ya’er who had gone to Giang Binh with four friends seeking work found none to be had and decided to become pirates. They also received “certificates” (zhao) from Tay Son leaders authorizing them to build ships and recruit gangs, ostensibly for piratical activities.<sup>57</sup>

In addition, he was said to have aided a rebel triad society (Tien-ti hui) in Sichuan.<sup>58</sup> These moves were meant to pave the way for the re-conquest of Liangguang which, according to Quang Trung, had belonged to Vietnam in ancient times during the reign of Emperor Chao Tao (207-111BC) who rebelled in Sichuan.<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, there was no significant tension relating to the disputed areas along the borderland between the two countries.

In order to manage the territorial disputes between two countries, China was actively trying to resolve its border disputes as part of a continuous policy pursued since the early days of Qianlong reign, although there were repeated protests and complains about the Vietnam moves.<sup>60</sup> This is the second theme which is still premature in its exploration, which the writer hopes can be carried further using both Chinese and Vietnamese documents.

### **Conclusion Remarks**

The Tay Son or most precisely Quang Trung’s reign was brief and it was difficult indeed to do anything much in those few years. The Tay Son declined after the death of Quang Trung in 1792. Ten years later, Nguyen Anh executed the last Tay Son ruler, Nguyen Quang Toan and founded the Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1840). What was done was suffice to show that his policies were expressions of his aspiration for independence and resilience. The policies were his measures or transitory orders targeting a return to discipline and his strategic deal with China. However, perhaps prompted by their own admiration and regret for an eminent military genius, some have come to think that if Quang Trung had not died so young, Vietnam would have entered an era of reform and eventually become a contemporary major power. Yet, Quang Trung is always seen as a champion of the Vietnamese people and a defender of the country against Chinese invasion.

In summation, Sino-Vietnamese relations during this turbulent period, are based on a tribute system model that Tay Son rulers willingly accepted as their role as limited partners

with China owning the largest power. Quang Trung clearly realized he had to acknowledge China's suzerainty and become a tributary in order to avoid China's intervention in their internal affairs. Meanwhile, China was interested to keep Vietnam within the tributary system with which they wished to avoid any trouble in the frontier regions.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Nguyen Hoi-chan. 1971, "Some Aspects of the Chinese Community in Vietnam, 1650-1850", *Paper on China*, Vol. 42, December, p. 104.
- <sup>2</sup> By far the most significant studies of the institutions of traditional China's interaction with other societies are contained in John K. Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968. Also John K. Fairbank & S.Y. Teng, "On the Ch'ing Tributary System", *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 2, February, 1942, pp. 191-192, Morris Rossabi, *China Among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and its Neighbours, 10th-14th centuries*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, Mark Mancall, *China at the Center: 300 Years of Foreign Policy*. New York: The Free Press, 1984. Also see James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the McCartney Embassy of 1793*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- <sup>3</sup> For further discussion, see Li Yunquan, *Chaogong zhidu shilun: Zhongguo gudai duiwai guanxi tizhi yanjiu* 朝贡制度史论-中国古代对外关系体制研究 [Study on the Ming and Ch'ing Tributary System]. Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 2004. Also see Wu Jianyong, *18 shi ji de Zhongguo yu shi jie. Dui wai guan xi juan* [China and the World in the Eighteenth Century. Foreign Relations. 18 世紀的中國與世界對外關係卷]. Shenyang: Liaohai chubanshe, 1999.
- <sup>4</sup> Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 1.
- <sup>5</sup> Ku Boon Dar, *Brothers In Arms: The Tay Son Uprising*, IAS Newsletters, Winter 46, 2008, p. 34. [[http://www.ias.nl/sites/default/files/IIAS\\_NL46\\_32.pdf](http://www.ias.nl/sites/default/files/IIAS_NL46_32.pdf)]
- <sup>6</sup> The insurrectionary movements of the peasants in Northern Vietnam began in the 1730s, reached the peak of their development in the 1740s and continued to smoulder until 1770, a year before the outbreak of the Tay Son Rebellion. For a basic review, see Thomas Hodgkin, *Vietnam: the Revolutionary Path*. London: Macmillan, 1980, pp. 82-84, Oscar Chapuis, *History of Vietnam: From Hong Bang to Tu Duc*. Westport, Conn. : Greenwood Press, 1995, pp. 120-135 and George Dutton, *The Tay Son Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006, pp. 18-56.
- <sup>7</sup> See Tran Trong Kim, *Viet Nam Su Luoc*, Quyen II, 1983, pp. 127-129 and Anonymous, *Tay Son Thuat Luoc* [A Brief Narration of the Tay Son], *Nam Phong* [Literary Sinitic Section], 1930, p. 148. Also see *Dai Nam Chinh-bien liet-truyen so tap* [Biographies of Dai Nam: Principal annal, first part 大南实录正编列传初集], Vol. 30, [Biography of Tay Son 伪西列传].
- <sup>8</sup> George Dutton, *The Tay Son Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006. Also historical novel by Thomas Barner, *Tay Son: Rebellion in 18th Century Vietnam*, 2005, and Thomas Barner. 2007. *Vietnam When the Tanks Were Elephants*. Martinisville: Airleaf Publishing. For those who read Vietnamese, there are a great number of sources available with 1623 entries most of them written by modern Vietnamese scholars, namely Quach Tan-Quach Giao. 1970. *Nha Tay Son*, Saigon: Nha Xuat Ban Tre, Tran Phuong Ho. 1997. *Tay Son Tam Kiet*, Hanoi: Nha Xuan Ban Van Hoc and so on. For the details list, see Nguyen Tri Son, *Thu Muc Ve Tay Son Nguyen Hue*, Nghia Binh: Uy Ban Khoa Hoc Ky Thuat, 1988.
- <sup>9</sup> Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese model: A Comparative Study of Nguyen and Ch'ing Civil Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Nguyen Khac Vien, *Vietnam: A Long History*. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2007, pp. 91.
- <sup>11</sup> George Dutton, *The Tay Son Uprising...*, 2006, pp. 29-36.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Crawford's Report on the State of the Annamese Empire', quoted in A. Lamb, *The Mandarin Road to Old Hue: Narratives of Anglo-Vietnamese Diplomacy from the 17th century to the Eve of the French Conquest*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1970, pp. 266-267.

- <sup>13</sup> For detail discussion related the escape of Le Chieu Thong to China, see *Gongzhong dang qianlong chao zouzhe*, [Emperor Qianlong Historical Archives 宫中档乾隆朝奏摺, 乾隆五十四年], 1789 year and *Qing Shi Gao* [Draft of Qing Dynasty History 清史稿, 高宗本纪六].
- <sup>14</sup> *Junji chudang yue zhebao* 《军机处月折包》 No. 39039, Li Yutong proposal to Emperor Qianlong (11.3.1788), quoted in Zhuang Jifa, *Qing Gaozong shiquan wugong yanjiu* [Emperor Qianlong Ten Great Campaigns 清高宗十全武功研究], Taipei: Guoli gugong bowuyuan, 1982, p. 353.
- <sup>15</sup> *Qing Gaozong Shilu* [Qing Emperor Qianlong Veritable Records], Vol. 959.
- <sup>16</sup> *Qing Gaozong Shilu*, Vol. 9999, and see also Gugong Bowuyuan, *Annan Jilue* 安南纪略, Vol. 18.
- <sup>17</sup> Niu Junkai, *Qingdai Zhongyue Zongfan Guanxi Yanjiu* [Research on the Tribute Relations between China and Vietnam], Haerbin: Heilongjiang jiao yu chu ban she, 2006, pp. 383-394.
- <sup>18</sup> *Qing Shilu*, *Gengxu*, 6<sup>th</sup> month, Qianlong 53, in Fuma Susumu, “Ming-Qing China’s Policy towards Vietnam as a Mirror of Its Policy towards Korea: With a Focus on the Question of Investiture and “Punitive Expeditions”, *The Memoir of the Toyo Bunko*, 65, 2007, pp. 23-24
- <sup>19</sup> K. W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 378
- <sup>20</sup> Edict Emperor Qianlong to Sun Shiyi, date 28 February, 1789, *Annan Jilue*, Vol. 15.
- <sup>21</sup> Sun, in his proclamations and reports to the court, clearly believed that as soon as Qing forces crossed the border they would be joined by many thousands of Le loyalists; this is the sole piece evidence that can be used to support the Vietnamese sources’ claim that the invaders numbered 100,000-200,000. Some sources give the total of the Qing army actually engaged as 8000, and it is not likely to have been more than 40,000. See Guo Zhenduo and Zhang Xiaomei, *Yuenan tongshi* [History of Vietnam 越南通史], Beijing : Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2001.
- <sup>22</sup> The expedition to Vietnam had obviously been sent to restore the Le king. But the Le King had no sooner been restored than the emperor decided to drop him on the grounds that he had lost the mandate of Heaven, as stated that “Heaven has tired of the Le dynasty and abandoned it” and “Heaven has lost interest in the virtue [of the Le Dynasty]. See *Qing Shi Gao*, *An nan Chuan* [Vietnam Annal], *Jiayin*, 12<sup>th</sup> month, Qianlong 53.
- <sup>23</sup> However, when Nguyen Du, Phan Huy Ich, and Vu Huy Tan travelled to the Qing court on behalf of the Tay Son dynasty, Quang Trung was supposed to accompany them. Rather than comply with what must have seemed a troublesome and perhaps even dangerous request, the Vietnamese court sent an imposter in his place.
- <sup>24</sup> Truong Buu Lam, “Intervention versus Tribute in Sino-Vietnamese Relations, 1788-1790”, in John K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968, p. 174.
- <sup>25</sup> *Da Qing Hui Dian* [Collected Statutes of the Great Qing Dynasty] Vol. 503, which have full of his instruction concerning this visit.
- <sup>26</sup> Within a month, Vietnamese delegations travelled four times on land from Thang Long through Lang Son before entering China via the Zheng Nanguan in the province of Guangxi and from there, they continue travel to the Chinese capital where it would be received. See *Annan Jilue*, Vol. 18.
- <sup>27</sup> Truong Buu Lam, “Intervention versus Tribute in Sino-Vietnamese Relations, 1788-1790”, 1968, p. 178.
- <sup>28</sup> Truong Buu Lam, “Intervention Versus Tribute in Sino-Vietnamese Relations, 1788-1790”, 1968, pp.165-179; and Phan Thuc Truc, *Quoc Su Di Bien* (National History, Supplementary Version). Chen Chingho (ed.), Hong Kong: New Asia Research Institute, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Vol. I: pp. 30-31.
- <sup>29</sup> Niu Jun Kai, “Dispute over Protocol between the Qing Dynasty and Annam: ‘Wu Bai San Kou’ or ‘San Gui Jiu Kou’” (in Chinese), *Southeast Asian Affairs Journal*, No.1: 2005, pp. 46-52.
- <sup>30</sup> *Qing Shilu*, Vol. 1348, Ming Qing Shilu Vol. 2.
- <sup>31</sup> W. J. Boot, “Maxims of Foreign Policies”, *Itinerario*, Vol. XXIV, No. 2, 2000, p. 66. It is perhaps important to bear in mind that despite Vietnamese rulers’ acceptance of the Chinese model of tributary relations as the modus operandi of their foreign relations, the reality of the functioning of this system in Vietnam’s case reflects some variants that warrant attention. This is especially so in Vietnam’s dealings with its neighbours and foreigners. See Danny Wong, *The Nguyen and Champa during 17th and 18th Century: A Study of Nguyen Foreign Relations*, Champaka Monograph No. 5, Paris-San Jose: International Office of Champa, 2007, pp. 52-57.
- <sup>32</sup> Brantly Womack. 2006, p. 135.
- <sup>33</sup> W. J. Boot, “Maxims of Foreign Policies”, *Itinerario*, 2000, p. 69.
- <sup>34</sup> *Qing Shilu* [Draft History of the Qing], *An nan chuan*.
- <sup>35</sup> *Qin Ding Da Qing Hui Dian Shi Li* [Collected Statutes of the Qing Dynasty], Vol. 1307.

- 36 Truong Buu Lam, "Intervention versus Tribute in Sino-Vietnamese Relations, 1788-1790", 1968, p. 179.
- 37 D.G.E. Hall, *History of South-east Asia*, London, 1964, p 74-75, Kublai Khan was sending envoys to the states of Asia which had been in the habit of recognizing the overlord ship of China to demand token of submission. Where this was refused he was prepared to back his demand by military action.
- 38 For more than two millennia, China represented the primary threat to the independence and national identity of the Vietnamese people, and it is not too much to say that the Vietnamese nation has been formed, in considerable measure, in the crucible of its historic resistance to Chinese conquest and assimilation. See Danny Wong Tze Ken, 2007, p. 56.
- 39 Ngo Thi Nham was the author of many of the Tay Son's most important edicts, and these have been collected in his *Han Cac Anh Hoa*.2001. See *Ngo Thi Nham tac pham / Do Thi Hao ... [et al.], dich ; Mai Quuc Lien, chu bien va khao luan. Han cac anh hoa bang giao hao thoai - tap. 2*, Hanoi: Trung tam nghien cuu quoc hoc: Nha xuất bản Văn học.
- 40 Mai Quoc Lien, *Renowned Vietnamese Intellectuals Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Hanoi: Gioi Publishers, 1998, p.121-128.
- 41 *Tong Tap Van Hoc Viet Ma, -Van Hoe Thoi Tay Son*. Also see Liam C. Kelley, *Beyond the bronze pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship*, Honolulu: Association for Asian Studies : University of Hawaii Press, 2005, p. 177-186, which he provides a close examination of poems written by Vietnamese envoys to the Chinese court, focusing on the late sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries.
- 42 It is said to prevent spreading of the 'barbarian' culture. But such measures failed to deter the continuing influx of Chinese.
- 43 *Qing Gao Zong Shilue*, Vol. 1334.
- 44 For the border trade with Lao archives, see Tran Van Quy. "The Quy Hop Archive: Vietnamese-Lao Relations Reflected in Border-post documents dating from 1619 to 1880", in Mayoury Ngaosrivathana, Kennon Brezeale (eds.). 2002, *Breaking New Ground in Lao History: Essays on Seventh to Twentieth Centuries*. Chiangmai: Silkworm Books.
- 45 See Ngo Thi Nham, *Tac Pham I, Han Cac Anh Hoa Bang Giao Hao Thoai* (Book of International Relations), Hanoi: Trung tam nghien cuu quoc hoc, 2002.
- 46 *Ngo Thi Nham, Tac Pham I, Han Cac Anh Hoa Bang Giao Hao Thoai* (Book of Internation Relations), quoted from Lich Su Vietnam, p.360.
- 47 *Qing Gao Zong Shilue*, Vol. 1344.
- 48 *Dai Nam Chinh-bien liet-truyen so tap*, Vol. 30 and *Qing Gaozong Shilue*, Vol. 1344.
- 49 Fukang'An was not only a famous general, but also an excellent statesman in the history of the Qing dynasty. In the 1788, Fukang'An become the governor of Guangdong and Guangxi, and made arrangements for Viet Nam's affairs. For more details on Fukang'An, see *Qing Shilie-Zhuan* (Biographies of the Qing Period).
- 50 *Huang Zhao Zheng Dian Lei Zuan* (Classified Compilation on Governmental Institutions of The Reigning Dynasty), Vol. 117: Hu Yi Wu (Trade Transaction), No. 5, Fan Bu Hu Shi (Babarian Department Trade), 皇朝政典类纂》。卷一百一十七: 互易五。藩部互市,p. 3733.
- 51 *Qing Gaozong Shilue*, Vol. 1344.
- 52 "Guo Shixun, Governor General Guangxi-Guangdong report to Emperor Qianlong ", 26 January 1793, in *Guo Zhong Zhu Pi Zou Zhe* (Endorsements and Memorials of Qing Dynasty), *Wai Jiao Lei* (Chapter: Foreign Policy). (《官中朱批奏折》。外交类). Also see Chen Xiyu, "Yue Nan Ruan Zhao Wai Yi Zheng Ce Chu Shen", (Foreign Trade Policy of Early Nguyen Dynasty in Vietnam), *Dong Nan Ya Xue Kan* (Journal of Southeast Asian studies), , 《越南阮朝外贸政策初探》, 《东南亚学刊》 Vol. 10, Taiwan, 1993., P. 21.
- 53 Truong Buu Lam, "Intervention versus Tribute in Sino-Vietnamese Relations, 1788-1790", 1968, p. 176.
- 54 *Dai Nam Chinh-bien liet-truyen so tap*, Vol. 30.
- 55 *Ibid*
- 56 *Ibid*.
- 57 *Lufu zouzhe* [Grand Copuncil copies of palace memorials, peasant uprising category] [3854], Jiaqing 2.1.27 First Historical Archives, Beijing and also see Dian Murray, *Pirates of the South China Coast, 1790-1810*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987, and Robert James Anthony. 1988, *Pirates, bandits, and brotherhoods: A study of crime and law in Kwangtung Province, 1796-1839*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii. Both of their study describes how the Tay Son government integrated numerous Chinese pirate groups into its military rank. Also Robert J. Antony, "Pacification of the Seas: Qing Anti-Piracy Policies in Guangdong, 1794-1810", *Journal of Oriental Studies*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, 1994, p. 17.

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- <sup>58</sup> Dian H. Murray, *The origins of the Tian di-hui: The Chinese Triads in Legend and History*, Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 32-55.
- <sup>59</sup> *Dai Nam Thuc Lu Tien Bien* (The Preliminary Compilation of the Veritable Records of Dai Nam), Vol 30.. From 111 BC the region was securely under central Chinese control again, while from 25 AD Chinese migration from the north began in earnest and the influence of Chinese cultural practices began in earnest and the influence of Chinese cultural practices began to transfer both Guangxi and the Tonking Delta area. See also *Dai Nam Chinh-bien liet-truyen so tap*, Vol. 30.
- <sup>60</sup> Tay Son licensing of Vietnamese and Chinese pirates also focused official attention on the ocean, and made the emergence of an alternative to the Tay Son most welcome. See Zheng Guangnan. 2001. *Zhongguo hai dao shi*, [History of China Pirates 中国海盜史]. Shanghai Shi: Huadong ligong daxue chubanshe.