

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The End of the Tributary Relationship between Vietnam and China in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

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**Abstract:** This article explores the final movement and transformation of “traditional” diplomatic activities between Vietnam and China in a unique historical period from 1858 to 1885. In particular, this period begins when French colonialists, a third factor, appeared and concludes when the tributary relationship between Vietnam and China ended in accordance with the Tianjin Treaty signed between France and China. Vietnam tried to maintain peaceful and open relations with China. Concurrently, the Qing Dynasty strived to maintain a relationship with its Vietnamese “vassal.” The Qing Dynasty needed both the political and economic interests of its vassal, especially when its own prestige was decreasing. However, despite these efforts, during this period, the traditional diplomacy between the two countries deteriorated and then came to a permanent end. This occurred when China compromised with France and was forced to officially abandon its “suzerain” right in Vietnam (under the Tianjin Treaty signed with France on June 9, 1885). The end of the Vietnam–China tributary relationship at this time contributed to the accelerated collapse of the long-standing Chinese tributary system in East Asia and to the clarification of the mutability of the so-called “center.”

**Keywords:** Vietnam, China, France, diplomacy, tributary relationship

During ancient medieval times, China was considered the center of East Asia. Surrounding the center (China) and its civilized space, peripheral countries were divided into two rounds. The first was next to the Hua Xi center and included Bai Yue (百越/百粤) in the South, Beidi (北狄) in the North, and Xirong (西戎) in the West. The second was outside and included countries affected by the Han, such as Japan, North Korea, and Vietnam (Thịnh, 2014). *Wei Liang and Faizullah Khilji in China and East Asia's*

*Post-Crisis Community: A Region in Flux* affirms this situation: “China, the *primus inter pares* state in this tribute system, constituted the core together with Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, with the system extending to the Southeast Asian States in varying degrees” (Liang & Khilji, 2012, p. 2). In particular, Vietnam, along with North Korea, is a typical “peripheral” country to China “with all its complex and multifaceted properties” (Liễn, 1995, p. 49). Researchers have classified Vietnam’s activities at that time under the so-called

“tributary institution” of China. That institution is “the medium for Chinese international relations and diplomacy” and “a scheme of things entire... the mechanism by which barbarous, non-Chinese regions were given their place in the all-embracing Chinese political, and therefore ethical, scheme of things” (Fairbank & Teng, 1941, pp. 137, 139). Additionally, that institution “was symbolized by the tribute system, under which rulers of lands surrounding the Celestial Kingdom visited the imperial court, performed *ketou*, or obeisance, and presented gifts of local produce. In return, their legitimacy as rulers was affirmed. They were presented with the dynasty’s calendar and received costly items emblematic of the superior Sinitic civilization. The result was *datong*, or great harmony” (Dreyer, 2014). In that environment, the Son of Heaven was commanded on behalf of morality to “civilize” society to maintain a stable social order. However, Chinese researchers believe that the term “tribute system” was a Western invention, dating back at least to the nineteenth century, which was then translated back into Chinese as *Chaogong Tixi* (朝贡体系). The terms *chao* and *gong* do appear in the Chinese historical sources, but the Chinese had no conception of such a system (Feng, 2009). Moreover, according to a survey by Korean historian Yu Insun, the chronicles of the Vietnamese for centuries did not include the word “tribute.” Nevertheless, the Tay Son and Nguyen dynasties (Vietnam) used the word “diplomacy” rather than the word “tribute” to describe their act of sending a delegation to China (Insun, 2009). However, China plays a central role in the hierarchical system, and neighboring countries (which China considers as Nanman, Dongyi, Xirong, and Beidi), like Vietnam, are classified as vassal-peripheries and must pay tribute to China. The tribute system does not define all traditional Chinese relations, nor is it the best way to comprehensively understand them. Moreover, Western researchers on Sino-Western relations may have overly emphasized tributary envoys (John, 1984). Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the tribute system remained the main axis of the diplomatic relations between China and East Asian countries at that time, including Vietnam.

In acting as the center of that tributary system, China combined certain advantages in relation to neighboring smaller countries. It had advantages ranging from territory and the geographical position of a large country with a large population, soon reaching

a relatively high level in terms of socioeconomic morphology compared to other countries at the same time, to cultural advantages, especially those of formats, standards of life, ethics, human behavior, social organization, and a hierarchical order in family and society—standards called Confucianism. Those norms were defined as being supreme and extremely sacred “in the field of symbols, values and creeds” (Shils, 1975, p. 3) or the convergence of traditional values, especially rituals and sacred beliefs (Winthrop, 1991). They were derived from the center and then spread to peripheries such as Vietnam. This cultural attraction and “supremacy” became the primary means by which China exercised its influence, and non-Chinese kings were forced to participate in the Chinese order by obeying the appropriate rituals in their relationship with China (Fairbank, 1968).

For the Vietnamese court, the rule was “Confucianism rather than Nationalism” (Woodside, 1988, p. 21). Vietnam was deeply influenced by Confucian culture, and the infiltration of Chinese Confucian culture into Vietnam was both contingent and arbitrary (Winthrop, 1991). Notably, the concepts of the Mandate of Heaven and the theory of righteousness of Chinese Confucianism were influential on the foreign policy of the Nguyen Dynasty in the nineteenth century. Similar to China, Vietnam accepted the Mandate of Heaven. Also similar to China, in Vietnam under Confucianism, it “was commonly believed that men received their nature or their endowment of abilities and aptitudes from heaven, which was the ultimate source of all things. This belief made the Son of Heaven the humanly incarnated source of education and economic sustenance, the ‘father and mother’ of the people” (Woodside, 1988, p. 13). That belief subjugated the Vietnamese dynasties to China, which was expressed through the requested investiture and caused them to pay tribute to the Chinese emperors and to obey the hierarchy of Chinese leadership. Liam Kelley affirmed that, for people who want to have relations with China, that relationship must include the recognition of a superior Chinese ruler, the Son of Heaven, by prostrating before the courtyard and offering presents (Kelley, 2005), and Vietnam was no exception.

Obviously, the Vietnam–China tribute and request for investiture relationship was established and maintained from the tenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. This situation was due, on the one

hand, to the demand from China. China considered it a way of not cutting off the center-periphery relations while bringing political and economic interests to China. The situation also helped prevent attacks from the outside on China, creating a stable external environment that was adjacent to maintaining stability within its own country. On the other hand, the situation was also due to the demand from Vietnam. Vietnam considered it as an indispensable need for survival when living next to a strong neighbor like China. “The threat of assimilation and annexation by ‘China’ is often portrayed as the paramount existential problem confronting all ‘Vietnamese’ throughout their history who have yearned to preserve their independence even while adapting to ‘Chinese’ culture and worldview” (Vu, 2016, p. 39). Therefore, the Vietnam–China tribute relationship was instituted based on demands from both sides. Therefore, when the needs of either or both were no longer met due to objective and subjective reasons, that tribute relationship would obviously be lost. The reality of Vietnam–China relations in the second half of the nineteenth century vividly proved that.

### **The Last Movements of Traditional Diplomatic Activities between Vietnam and China**

Following China, Vietnam became the object of invasion of Western colonialism in the second half of the nineteenth century. On September 1, 1858, French colonialists officially began their invasion in Vietnam. This date can be seen as an important milestone, marking a change in the content and nature of the diplomatic relationship between Vietnam and China. Until June 6, 1884, when the treaty was signed between France and Vietnam, the long-term right of French colonial rule in Vietnam was established. From then, any activities (including diplomatic activities) of Vietnam could not be removed from the vision, observation, and control of the French colonialists. At this time, the French colonialists also deeply intervened in the Nguyen Dynasty’s diplomatic activities with China in particular and the outside world in general. After the Treaty of 1874, the diplomacy of the Nguyen court in accordance with its provisions depended on the foreign policy of France. Additionally, from this time, the diplomatic relationship between Vietnam and the outside world, including China, no longer

depended on the will and decision of the feudal state of Vietnam.

On the Chinese side, the French colonialists’ invasion at that time was considered by the Qing court to be detrimental to Chinese interests and a threat to Southern China because the French colonialists were determined to occupy Vietnam as a colony to use it as a springboard to enter the Chinese market. France’s problem at this time was that, along with the ports, it had to enter the interior of Southern China. The Sino-French conflict thus became fierce. At that time, the Qing court had a choice: to protect China’s interests, China must give in to the French colonialists or vice versa. It was a challenging period in which the Qing court’s will and attitude towards Vietnam were clearly shown. On the other hand, like Vietnam, in China during this period, France became a factor to which the Qing court must pay attention in its relations with Vietnam. The continuous upheavals that occurred in China and Vietnam during this period had a large impact on the diplomatic relations between the two countries, interrupting, diminishing, and ending traditional diplomatic activities.

### ***Changes in Activities Requesting Investiture and Ordination***

In the feudal era, requesting investiture was one of the two most important activities (along with tribute) for building diplomatic relations between Vietnam and China. This was “a special relationship, which was found only in relations between China and neighboring countries. Vietnam is often considered a typical example, complex in many aspects” (Liễn, 1995, p. 49). In essence, the Chinese crowning of Vietnam was the first act in recognizing the independent position of Vietnam according to the defined Chinese ceremony with countries who had tribute and ordination relations. In addition, for Vietnam, which borders on the great feudal state of China and has been invaded by it for thousands of years, requesting investiture was used as a primary diplomatic method of maintaining a peaceful relationship with China (Hạnh, 2019).

Similar to previous feudal dynasties, from 1802 to 1885, the requested investiture activities were always paid special attention by the Nguyen kings. From the time of Gia Long, Minh Minh, Thieu Tri, and Tu Duc to Duc Duc, Hiep Hoa, and Kien Phuc, as soon as the Nguyen kings were crowned, they all shared the same aspiration to be ordained by the Chinese emperor to

assert their orthodoxy and to legalize their dynasties, while ensuring security and maintaining peaceful relations with their very large neighbor China, who wished to assert its role over other countries in the region. However, because historical circumstances fluctuate constantly and the two sides change in their force correlation, the requested investiture and ordination activities after 1858 changed to a great extent.

Before 1858, the activities of sending envoys to request investiture and receive ordination between the two countries occurred on favorable routes on land and at sea. However, after 1858, that route was sometimes hindered by strong impacts from the French colonial invasion in Vietnam. For example, in 1883, when King Hiep Hoa (Vietnam) intended to send envoys to the Qing Dynasty, the road could no longer be used because the Dong Kinh area (Tonkin, Vietnam) was under the military control of the French army. Therefore, Hiep Hoa had to ask the Qing Dynasty to allow him to travel by sea.

In addition to the direct intervention from the third factor, which was French colonialism, the activities of requesting investiture and ordination after 1858 were confounded by many other difficulties and challenges, such as the short rule of the kings of the Nguyen Dynasty (such as King Duc Duc, who held power for only 3 days). As a result, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the early kings of the Nguyen Dynasty (Gia Long, Minh Menh, Thieu Tri, and Tu Duc) all sent envoys to China to request investiture and were ordained by the emperors of China. However, after 1858, because their reigns were too short, some Nguyen Dynasty kings did not have enough time to request investiture (for example, King Duc Duc and King Hiep Hoa). One king (King Kien Phuc), though, sent an envoy to China to request investiture but, before being ordained, died of illness (Insun, 2009).

Thus, compared to the previous period, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the requested investiture and subsequent ordination, one of the most important activities in Vietnam–China diplomatic relations for many generations, deteriorated: only King Kien Phuc sent an envoy to China to request investiture, and no king (even Kien Phuc) was ordained after 1858.

### ***Changes in Tribute and Offering Activities***

Along with requesting investiture, tribute was an important activity in the Vietnam–China diplomatic

relations under feudalism. In addition to tribute activities, Vietnam offered gifts to the suzerain. The tribute was in the form of a tax, which meant that the vassal had to give precious items to the suzerain according to the (compulsory) agreement of the two sides. Therefore, an offering was made on the occasion of visits, with no certain term, usually conducted when both sides wanted to respectfully communicate, announce a victory, or be ordained.

In the nineteenth century, although the two sides had detailed regulations on tribute activity, for many objective and subjective reasons, especially the constant changes of circumstances and force correlation between the two sides, these activities changed over time.

First, the number of tribute products and the economics of the tributes that the Nguyen paid to the Chinese tended to decrease. For example, in 1803, the Qing Dynasty issued a list of items that the Nguyen Dynasty had to periodically tribute: “2 tusks; 2 rhino decks; 100 sheep; 100 pieces each of silk, carpentry silk, and cloth; and 900 taels (45 pounds) each of incense, sandalwood, and areca. Moreover, for the congratulation ceremony, the offerings were 2 pairs of ivory and 4 rhino tusks; and 100 lambs and pieces of silk, carpentry silk, and cloth” (International Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty, 1993, p. 311). However, by the 20th year of King Minh Menh (1839), the items for each tribute occasion were reduced by half: “1 pair of ivory tusks; 2 rhino decks; 100 lambs and pieces of young silk, carpentry silk, and fabric; 300 kg of incense; and 45 pounds of sandalwood and areca” (International Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty, 1993, p. 312).

Moreover, prior to 1858, the tribute activity and the offering were quite regular and smooth, without any resistance from outside forces. (Specifically, during the reign of King Gia Long, the Chinese tribute was made four times, and the Chinese offerings were made three times; during the reign of King Minh Menh, the Chinese tribute was made four times, and the Chinese offerings were made three times; during the reign of King Minh Menh, the Chinese tribute was made two times; and during the reign of King Tu Duc, but only from 1848 to 1858, the Chinese tribute was made three times, and the Chinese offerings were made two times). However, after 1858, such activities decreased, as they were no longer favorable. They were even interrupted at times, such as from 1861 to 1868. This situation was partly because the Nguyen (Vietnam)



and Qing dynasties (China) were both concentrating on dealing with the invasion of the Western colonialists as well as the continuous uprising of the people. (The Qing Dynasty had to continuously suppress Taiping Heavenly Kingdom troops until 1865.) On the other hand, all diplomatic activities at that time between Vietnam and China (including tribute activities and offerings) did occur outside the view and control of the French colonialists.

Even during the last tribute trips in 1876 and 1880, the French colonialists showed great doubts about the embassy delegation sent by the Nguyen Dynasty. Therefore, tributary activities from 1858 to 1885 did not occur as regularly and smoothly as before but were often subject to the investigation and prevention of the French colonialists, an important object that Vietnam had to always consider in its diplomatic relations with any country, especially China. Moreover, before 1858, offerings were made 10 times, but after 1858, they were made only either 5 (Historiography Institute of Nguyen Dynasty, 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d, 2007e) or 4 times (Hongnian, 2006).

Unlike from 1802 to 1858, in the second half of the nineteenth century, in addition to sending envoys to pay tribute or offer gifts, according to the diplomatic tradition, the Nguyen Dynasty also sent envoys to China for two new goals as required by historical circumstances. First, they asked the Qing Dynasty to suppress the enemy in Tonkin (related to the Qing Dynasty). Second, they wanted to explore the situation of the European and American countries and to learn about China's countermeasures against the Western colonial invasion. Therefore, when he sent an envoy to China in the tribute of 1872, King Tu Duc assigned an additional task to chief envoy Phan Si Thuc to submit to the Qing Dynasty: "find a solution to the enemy at the border" (Historiography Institute of Nguyen Dynasty, 2007d, p. 1380).

Alternatively, during the envoy trips led by Dang Huy Tru in 1865 and 1867, an important purpose was to go to Guangdong–Macao–Hong Kong to explore the situation in places that had relations with the West and to learn about the current figures from the European and American countries. Alternatively, an 1870 trip led by the chief envoy Tran Bich San to China in this period aimed to investigate the situation while determining countermeasures against the Western colonial invasion. In addition, the trip by Pham Than Duat as chief envoy to Beijing in 1882 relied on the help of the

Qing Dynasty against the French after the H.S. Rivie took over Hanoi (Historiography Institute of Nguyen Dynasty, 2007e). All of these events demonstrate the great influence of the French factor in the diplomatic relations between the Nguyen and Qing dynasties at this time.

Thus, in both the periods before and after 1858, in general, the Nguyen continued to pay tribute and make offerings to China as required by traditional regulations to maintain peaceful relations between the two countries. However, because of the new circumstances, that activity decreased after 1858 and was no longer continual or steady. In addition, the goal of the tributes and offerings was to maintain good relations, but such missions were also directed towards new goals dictated by historical contexts.

### **The Shift in Attitudes between Vietnam and China**

As part of their scheme to invade Vietnam, in the second half of the nineteenth century, after establishing the yoke of domination in Cochinchina (Vietnam), the French colonialists continued to send their troops to the north of Vietnam, attacking Hanoi and conquering many provinces in the Tonkin Delta (Vietnam). The French colonialists conspired to use this place as a springboard to invade Yunnan (China). Faced with such historical circumstances, when the national interests of each country were threatened, both the Vietnamese and Chinese governments outlined measures to cope with the new threats. Thus, attitudes and behaviors between the Nguyen and Thanh dynasties underwent certain changes. As the new French factor exerted an increased influence, how would the relationship between the two dynasties change? Did China fulfill the duties of a suzerain when its vassal was in danger?

#### ***From the Nguyen Dynasty's (Vietnam) Being Self-Reliant against the French to Its Asking for Help from the Qing Dynasty***

As early as 1858, the French colonialists officially invaded Vietnam, but "until 1870, the Beijing court was completely unaware of the French colonial occupation in Vietnam" (Tsuboi, 1992, p. 150). Additionally, in the early period of the French colonialists, the Nguyen Dynasty made certain efforts to act autonomously in accordance with its worldview, leading the Vietnamese

people against the French colonialists without asking for help from the outside.

However, when the Hanoi citadel fell after the attack of Henri Rivière on April 25, 1882, Vietnam realized that it could no longer cope with the invasion of the French colonialists. It also realized that the Qing Dynasty and the French government disagreed on the issue of Vietnam, but it believed in the assistance of suzerain China to its vassal country. On February 6, 1883, the Nguyen court officially sent a diplomatic delegation led by Pham Than Duat to China to ask for help from the Qing Dynasty against the French colonialists. At this point, the Nguyen Dynasty officially requested the help of its Chinese suzerain.

The envoy, led by Chief Ambassador Pham Than Duat, stayed in Tianjin from March 13 to November 24, 1883. On March 24, 1883, Li Hongzhang and the governor of Zhili met the Vietnamese envoy delegation. Next, the envoy proposed negotiating directly with the governor of Zhili (because Li Hongzhang returned home to mourn his mother), but his proposal was not approved. On September 4 of that year, after the mission asked to return to Vietnam, Li Hongzhang received a second reception. However, during this trip, the Nguyen Dynasty did not achieve what it expected from the Qing Dynasty (Nhu, 1991a).

At the same time that the Nguyen Dynasty sent its envoys to China for aid, the French colonialists continued to frantically extend the war to the entire Red River delta. In that context, with the consent of the central court, Counsellor Bui An Nien of the Nguyen Dynasty met with the Qing army leader Xu Yanxu, hoping to receive his help. However, Xu Yanxu cleverly refused (Historiography Institute of Nguyen Dynasty, 2007e). According to Xu Yanxu, the Qing Dynasty wanted to save its vassal Vietnam, but because the French were in contact with Li Hongzhang, it could not help.

Next, the officer of Bac Ninh province, Truong Quang Dan, went to Lang Giang District (now located in the north of Bac Giang Province, Vietnam) and suggested that Rear Admiral Huang Guilan send troops across the river to choose the terrain and pressure the French. At that time, Bac Ninh citadel was a base where many of the Vietnamese and Qing troops were concentrated. The commander-in-chief of the Qing army was Xu Yanxu, the governor of Guangxi. Due to his advanced age, Xu Yanxu was stationed in Lang Son, giving command of the Qing army to his subordinate,

Huang Guilan. However, Huang Guilan also refused. Knowing the situation, King Tu Duc had to tell Truong Quang Dan, "In the end, we have to deal with our own affairs" (Historiography Institute of Nguyen Dynasty, 2007e, p. 567). This statement showed the disappointment of the Tu Duc court before the weak response and indifferent attitude of the Qing officials.

In addition, after the defeat at the battle of Cau Giay (Hanoi, Vietnam) in May 1883, the French colonialists used military force to attack the Hue capital directly while the Nguyen court was occupied with the funeral of King Tu Duc (July 1883). On August 18, 1883, the French colonialists attacked strongly along the Thuan An estuary (Hue capital, Vietnam). On August 20, 1883, Thuan An fell, and the Nguyen court was forced to sign the Surrender Treaty on August 25, 1883, historically known as the Harmand Treaty, acknowledging that Vietnam was completely protected by the French colonialists. After the Treaty of August 25, 1883, King Duc Duc (Vietnam) continued to send letters to Governor-General Liangguang and Li Hongzhang of China to report French bullying. Vietnam was forced to sign the a treaty with the French colonialists. Not long after that, the governor of Guangdong, Zeng Guoquan (曾国荃), responded. However, once again, the Nguyen Dynasty was disappointed (Historiography Institute of Nguyen Dynasty, 2007e).

Thus, in the second half of the nineteenth century, certain attempts were made to assert its independence in diplomatic relations with the Qing Dynasty in the early years against the French colonialists. However, since the Chinese–French conflict over the 1874 Treaty, the Nguyen Dynasty proved to be confused and unable to determine skillful and correct behavior between the two governments. At this time, the Nguyen Dynasty did not clearly understand the schemes of each disputing party and did not know how to take advantage of that conflict to protect its own sovereignty. Therefore, over a long period of time, one side of the Nguyen Dynasty was passive in the increasingly tightening siege of French colonialism. On the other hand, at the same time, the Nguyen Dynasty was taken advantage of by the Qing Dynasty in many ways under the guise of saving its vassal to protect suzerain rights in Vietnam. Ultimately, to resolve this situation, King Tu Duc tried to break free from the bondage of the French colonialists by relying on the help of the Qing Dynasty, effectively asking assistance from its suzerain. Tens of thousands of regular troops were present in Tonkin

under the orders of the Qing Dynasty, but practically, they were immobilized soldiers. They did not dare to confront the French military directly, so they only negotiated to resolve the Tonkin issue in their favor.

***From the Qing Dynasty's (China) Attitude of Struggle and Dispute to One of Compromise with France on the Vietnam Issue***

In the second half of the nineteenth century, after establishing the yoke of domination in Cochinchina (Vietnam), the French colonialists continued to send their troops to the north (Vietnam), where they attacked Hanoi and captured many provinces in the Tonkin Plain at the end of 1873. With their diplomatic tricks, the French colonialists forced the Nguyen Dynasty to sign the Treaty of March 1874 and the Trade Treaty in August of the same year with many favorable provisions for them. The Treaty in March 1874 affirmed that six provinces of Cochinchina (Vietnam) were transformed into French colonies, France had the privilege of trading on the Red River from the sea to Yunnan, and the Nguyen Dynasty had to comply with the foreign policy of France. At the same time, the French colonialists recognized the complete sovereignty and independence of Vietnam over any country and promised to help Nguyen kings maintain order and security and resist all foreign attacks. In formal terms, these terms seem to be contradictory, but in reality, they were very consistent with the purpose of the French colonialists. On the one hand, the treaty established an important role for Vietnam for France in many aspects, gradually dismissing the claims of other countries, including China to Vietnam. On the other hand, the French colonialists recognized the Vietnamese king's right of independence as the head of an autonomous state, independent of the Qing Dynasty. Obviously, the provisions of this treaty meant denying the Qing Dynasty's sovereign role over Vietnam at that time. Therefore, the 1874 Giap Tuat Treaty is considered the opening salvo for the Sino-French conflict over Vietnam in the diplomatic field.

In addition, the Qing Dynasty king took the reason for the disagreement with the 1874 treaties to intervene more deeply in Vietnam, claiming it had the authority to take a side to negotiate with the French government on the issue of Tonkin (Vietnam). Since 1880, Emperor Guangxu (China) had assigned the Chinese ambassador in France to negotiate directly with the minister of

foreign affairs and many high-ranking officials in the French government on the Tonkin issue.

News of the fall of Hanoi (April 25, 1882) arrived in Paris on May 1, 1882. On May 6, 1882, Emperor Guangxu asked the Chinese ambassador in France to write to the French Foreign Ministry to demand the French withdraw troops and not establish protection rights for France in Vietnam. This time, the Chinese ambassador in France used not only the excuse of the suzerain's right to its vassal Vietnam but also the pretext of defending China's southern border. Specifically, the Qing Dynasty publicly declared that Vietnam was a part of China, that it did not agree with the issue of the division of the controlled zone in Tonkin (Vietnam) with France, and that, if divided, China would occupy Thanh Hoa (Vietnam) to the north. After that, China continued to propose to the French colonialists that they take Quang Binh (Vietnam) as the frontier and that the north from Quang Binh on belonged to China. Many high-ranking Chinese officials at that time even offered to ask the Qing Dynasty to invade Tonkin and Saigon (Nhu, 1991b). Obviously, throughout the struggle with the French, the Qing Dynasty increasingly revealed its ambition. Under the guise of protecting the suzerain's right and maintaining relations with its Vietnamese vassal, China wanted to contend with France that it had control over Vietnamese territory.

In addition, on the military side, on the one hand, the Qing government captured and manipulated Liu Yongfu and the Black Flag Army to usurp Vietnam from the French. On the other hand, they continued to order the regular troops stationed in Guangxi and Yunnan to cross the border en masse and station in the mountainous and midland provinces of Tonkin (Vietnam). According to estimates, the number of regular troops from Guangxi to Vietnam was up to 40,000. However, this force never admitted that their military presence was to help Vietnam fight against the French colonial invasion. Throughout 1882, the Chinese army did not dare to confront the French colonialists directly. On the contrary, they were still negotiating with the French colonialists to resolve the Tonkin (Vietnam) problem in their own favor. French-Chinese negotiations reached a temporary agreement in December 1882, consisting of three points: "1) China and France agreed to draw a line demarcating the Red River and the Chinese border region. The North was under Chinese control, the South was under French.

2) If the Qing government withdrew all regular troops from Tonkin (Vietnam), the French would not encroach on Vietnam's territory. 3) France would open the Red River route connecting Yunnan with the sea. To exploit this route, China chose Lao Cai to set up an import-export tax collection agency, and opened shops, warehouses, and goods considered to be imported into China" (Ninh, 2010, pp. 171–172). Therefore, despite being in a situation of struggle and dispute with France, China made certain concessions to share interests with France in Tonkin (Vietnam). On the one hand, China gained much interest in trading activities. The French colonialists considered Lao Cai (Vietnam) part of the Chinese territory. On the other hand, China seized control of the Red River north of Vietnam, a place rich in mineral resources. However, that temporary agreement was soon unilaterally broken by the French.

After winning in the Hue capital and forcing the Nguyen Dynasty to sign the Harmand Treaty acknowledging French patronage, the French troops turned to Tonkin (Vietnam) and occupied many places, such as Son Tay (December 16, 1883), Bac Ninh (March 12, 1884), Thai Nguyen (March 19, 1884), Hung Hoa (April 12, 1884), and Tuyen Quang (May 31, 1884). This invasion was a dual failure of the Nguyen court and the Qing army officials because before that, the Qing army had crossed the border to Vietnam under the guise of saving its vassal. After all, the Qing army had to monitor blatant French encroachments on Vietnamese territory. Realizing its military helplessness, the Qing court changed from an attitude of struggle and dispute to one of compromising with the French on the Vietnam issue. That compromise culminated on May 11, 1884, in Tianjin, where Li Hongzhong, a representative of the Qing Dynasty, and Fournier, a representative of France, signed a treaty (commonly known as the Fournier Treaty). Accordingly, the Qing Dynasty pledged to acknowledge all the treaties signed between France and Vietnam and to withdraw all Qing troops, while the French promised to maintain the status of the southern border of the Qing Dynasty, did not demand war costs, and swore not to offend the honor of the Qing Dynasty in the treaties they were to sign with them (Nhu, 1991a). At this point, the French had an almost decisive advantage in relation to both the Nguyen and the Qing dynasties. Only 26 days after the Treaty of Fournier was signed (on June 6, 1884), the Nguyen court had to sign the Patenôtre Treaty, with France reaffirming

the contents of the previous Harmand Treaty. At that time, Patenôtre, the French ambassador to Beijing, demanded the Nguyen Dynasty hand over the seal that the Emperor of the Qing Dynasty had given to it because, according to the Fournier Treaty, that seal had no reason to exist in Vietnam. As a result, the seal, the symbol of the Nguyen Dynasty and its rights as a vessel to its suzerain China, was melted before the signing ceremony of the Treaty of Patenôtre in 1884 (Historiography Institute of Nguyen Dynasty, 2007f).

On the Qing side, according to the Treaty of Fournier in 1884, the Qing army had to withdraw their troops. However, the Qing Dynasty did not want to comply. In May of that year, General Millot ordered General Dugenne to bring 1,000 troops to regain the citadels in the North (Vietnam) held by the Qing army. However, when the French came to Bac Le (currently in Lang Son Province), the Qing army deployed their troops to fight with the French. From here, a Sino-French war occurred drastically, not only in the northern uplands of Vietnam but also in China.

Facing an unfavorable situation for both sides, on June 9, 1885, French representative Patenôtre and Li Hongzhang, representing the Qing Dynasty, signed the Treaty of "Peace, Friendship and Trade" in Tianjin (commonly known as the 1885 China–France Tianjin Treaty), concluding their unfinished agreements. Therefore, in the introduction, when giving the reason for signing, the treaty clearly showed the spirit of compromise for the benefit of France and China on the issue of Vietnam: "The President of the Republic of France and The Chinese Emperor shared their desire to end the difficulties of interfering with each other in the domestic affairs of Annam and to restore and improve the existing friendly and commercial relations between France and China have decided to conclude a new treaty that meets the mutual interests of the two countries" (Article 2 of the Treaty of Tianjin 1885; Documents Diplomatiques, 1885, pp. 259–260). Accordingly, each party must maintain security in its border territories, and the armies of the two sides must not cross the border into the territory of the other side. In particular, China once again acknowledged France's dominance in Vietnam and pledged to do nothing to harm the pacification that France had carried out in Vietnam as well as to respect the present and the future treaties, conventions, and agreements signed and to be signed between France and Vietnam. At this point, the presence of the Qing army on Vietnamese



territory terminated, and the suzerain–vassal/tributary relationship between the two countries seems to have ended.

The Tianjin Treaty was signed on June 9, 1885, with its core contents revealing not only the Sino-French compromise to end the war between the two sides but also the final and most drastic phase of the conflict between the Qing Dynasty and the French colonialists over the Vietnam issue. After failing to achieve diplomatic claims and military competition, the Qing Dynasty turned to trade and compromise with the French colonialists, for its own benefit, even though such compromises were made by depriving the interests of its vassal Vietnam.

### ***From the End of the Vietnam–China Tributary Relationship to the Collapse of the Chinese Tributary System***

Zhang Feng stated, “The characteristics and essence of the tribute system varied considerably in different historical periods. We should therefore speak about different tribute systems rather than a single one in history” (Feng, 2009, p. 553). This assessment shows the history and mutability of the tributary system, which is very evident in the Chinese tribute system.

After its failure in the First and Second Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860), China had to sign a series of unequal treaties with Western countries, making it a colonial country subject to Western imperialism. It was also time for the Chinese tribute system to end. From this point, all China’s diplomatic activities in relationship to its vassal countries, including requesting investiture and tribute, no longer occurred as regularly and smoothly as before but always under the watchful eyes of the Western colonialists. The reality of the Vietnam–China tribute relationship vividly demonstrates this. China’s successive failures against the West in the second half of the nineteenth century revealed the weakness of both the traditional Chinese world order and the tribute system at which China was the center when international relations transformed into a world-centered European system. Therefore, the confrontation between China and the West was no longer a normal one between China and other countries but one between two world systems, two ideologies, and two completely contradictory conceptions about world order. It required China to have a revolutionary change, especially in terms of its ideas and institutions.

Unfortunately, China’s resilient reformers in the second half of the nineteenth century were conservative and pragmatic and simply wanted to borrow Western science and technology, especially their boats and guns, while protecting the tributary order according to inherent Confucian ideology. As a result, China’s successive reforms in the economic, administrative, and legal fields during the last two decades of the nineteenth century failed. As China failed more often in reforms, it more frequently facilitated the strong resurgence of powerful Western countries and the beginning of a process of changing the conception of Japan about China, from admiration to contempt.

Then, conservation and pragmatism turned China into an irresponsible suzerain, especially with two of its typical tributary countries, Vietnam and Korea. In the context of not being able to win against France, China tried to maintain tributary relations with Vietnam and turned it into a “card” to exchange and negotiate with the French colonialists to protect its national interests. In Article 2 of the 1885 Tianjin Treaty, China once again recognized French domination in Vietnam and committed to do nothing to harm the pacification that France had carried out in Vietnam, respecting the present and future treaties, conventions, and agreements that were and would be signed between France and Vietnam (Article 2 of the 1885 Tianjin Treaty; Documents Diplomatiques, 1885).

Following Vietnam, Korea found itself in a similar situation. From 1894 to 1895, China was humiliated at the hands of its Asian neighbor during the Sino-Japanese War. This time, the vassal state of Korea became a card for the Qing Dynasty to trade with Japan through the treaty of Shimonoseki, 1895. The 1885 Tianjin Treaty was the culmination of the French–Qing compromise on Vietnamese issues, while the 1895 Shimonoseki Treaty was also seen as the pinnacle of the Sino-Japanese compromise on the Korean issue. According to the Shimonoseki Treaty, China recognized Korean autonomy, creating favorable conditions for Japan to act freely in the Korean territory in the same way that China gave France freedom in activities in the territory of Vietnam. At that time, China officially abandoned its suzerain role in Korea, paving the way for Japan to gain dominance over Korea. With the bitter defeat in the 1894–1895 Sino-Japanese War and the loss of the last tributary nation of Korea, the remaining influence of the traditional Chinese conception of world order finally and completely collapsed.

Thus, in the second half of the nineteenth century, to protect its hierarchical tributary system, China continued to have struggles and disputes with Western colonialism and Japanese imperialism. The conflicts, especially the Sino-French and Chinese-Japanese wars that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, clearly demonstrated that. However, when realizing that it could not achieve military victory on the battlefields against France and Japan, China found a way to retreat by “selling cheap” the vassal states of Vietnam and Korea to France and Japan, respectively. Accordingly, China chose to abandon its suzerain role, allowing France and Japan to freely act on the territory of these vassal countries and exchange some of its vassal state territories with France and Japan in return for its own security and commercial interests. The abandonment of China’s suzerain right was also the abandonment of the hierarchy, expressed in terms of a tribute system, that had existed for a long time, replaced with the new world system the Western countries established. Obviously, in this situation, China did not fulfill its responsibility as a big country when it abandoned its vassals to exchange with the French and Japanese colonialists for selfish interests through a series of treaties in a short period.

John Fairbank once pointed out that, even in the heyday of the China-centered world order, “China’s outside order has a very close relationship with its domestic order, according to which one order cannot last without the other” (Fairbank, 1968, p. 3). Obviously, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Chinese tributary order could no longer exist, as China itself was unduly weakened compared to Western power and had lost its autonomy in maintaining its order in the country. The inside weakening was reflected in and had a great impact on the weakening and collapse of the external world order.

## Conclusion

In general, 1858–1885 was a unique historical period in the diplomatic relationship between Vietnam and China. During this time, we witness the final movement and transformation of the traditional diplomatic activities that existed for a long time in the Vietnam–China relationship. These final movements are a vivid testament to Vietnam’s ceaseless efforts in maintaining peaceful relations with the great China. At

the same time, the Qing Dynasty strived to maintain the relationship with its Vietnamese vassal through these activities as it needed both the political and economic interests of the relationship and considered it a way to save itself as its prestige was decreasing.

However, since 1858, when Vietnam had to fight against a completely new enemy from the distant West, French colonialism, all traditional diplomatic activities between Vietnam and China (China always considered the yoke of invasion of the French colonialists in Vietnam as a direct threat to its suzerain right) ceased and entered the path outlined by the Western colonialists. Therefore, the activities that were treated as inevitable were those requesting investiture or the tribute activities between the two sides, and they were faced with the scrutiny and control of the French colonialists. Basically, traditional diplomacy activities between the two countries all decreased, no longer occurring regularly, smoothly, or synchronously on the national scale. Sometimes, such activities were interrupted for a long time. Following the initial momentum of 1885, when China fully compromised with France, China officially renounced its supremacy right in Vietnam (under the Treaty of Tianjin signed with France on June 9, 1885) (Documents Diplomatiques, 1885), and the tributary system between the two countries ended forever. The Qing Dynasty regretted that it had to abandon its suzerain role over the vassal Vietnam and saw it as a great concession to the French empire. Nevertheless, at that time, the Qing Dynasty also considered this an opportunity to demand the French government adequately compensate it with a part of the territory of Vietnam. This issue continued to be evidenced in the coming years in the process of exchange and compromise between France and China on the Vietnam–China border.

Thus, the Vietnamese-Chinese tributary relationship that existed since the tenth century officially ended in 1885. “[T]he ability to promote mutual benefits” (Kim, 2008, p. 39) for both sides (Vietnam and China) may be considered the main cause of the persistent existence of this tributary relationship. However, it was also the underlying reason for its collapse in the late nineteenth century when its ability to promote mutual benefits was lost. A tributary relationship existed due to the needs of both sides. When the existence of such a relationship threatened the security interests of the suzerain because of the pressure from Western colonialism, to protect the interests of its people, the suzerain abandoned

the responsibility of protecting its vassal and even sold out the vassal's interests to France. Thus, such a tributary relationship was no longer beneficial to both sides. Therefore, the end of that relationship became unavoidable.

We might divide premodern Sino-Vietnamese relations into three states of interaction as Anderson did—strong China/weak Vietnam, weak China/strong Vietnam, and strong China/strong Vietnam (Anderson, 2013). Under such a division, the tributary relationship between the two countries occurred only when the two countries were in the second (weak China/strong Vietnam) or third (strong China/strong Vietnam) state. Only in these second and third states did China become “a benevolent big brother” (Vu, 2016, p. 53) to Vietnam. This is the reality of the feudal Vietnamese-Chinese relationship that has been acknowledged by many researchers. However, the reality of the Vietnam–China tributary relationship in the second half of the nineteenth century also revealed a fourth state between the two countries, which was weak China/weak Vietnam. In this state, both sides were weakened by colonial invasion. The small tributary country became “vulnerable” (Womack, 2004, p. 13) and always needed cooperation and patronizing from China. However, China was not strong enough to protect its Vietnamese vassal and was irresponsible in abandoning its suzerain role when the vassal was in danger. China “does not cooperate and threatens the interests of the small country, hurting the small country,” resulting in “the tendency of dependence [to] become more and more loose, even the two sides head to head” (Womack, 2012, p. 42). Ultimately, the tributary relationship ended. Thus, in this state, a tributary relationship cannot exist. Clearly, whether that tributary relationship has been damaged is not based on the suzerain's dominance over the vassal country but on “a mutually acceptable relationship” (Womack, 2012, p. 42) for both sides, which means meeting the needs of both sides.

Womack once asserted that the existence of the tributary system had, for a long time, turned China into a “solid center” (Womack, 2012, p. 39) in comparison with other global centers. Then, he must admit the mutability of the center (Womack, 2004). In some cases, when the center ceases to represent the progressive force of the era, it will be replaced by other centers. This phenomenon is also attested to

vividly in the East Asian regional order at the end of the nineteenth century. Vietnam had to redetermine the center to suit the new context to take advantage of the positive resources from the global centers and constantly campaign to escape from the peripheral position to become the center in the future.

## Conflict of Interest

None.

## Declaration of Ownership

This report is my original work.

## Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by my institution.

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