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### Tributary Relations between the Nguyen and Qing Dynasties: An Examination of Vietnam's Diplomatic Submission (1802-1885)

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Tributary Relations between the Nguyen and Qing Dynasties: An Examination of Vietnam's  
Diplomatic Submission (1802-1885)

**Abstract**

The Qing and Nguyen Dynasties share the same fate as the last dynasties of China and Vietnam. These two monarchs also maintained a tributary system, which had existed for hundreds of years. In this tributary system, China, under the leadership of the Qing dynasty, referred to itself as the Celestial Empire (天朝), a term used by China's vassal states to implicate their submission towards the "Celestial Empire". Vietnam, as a vassal state, has a responsibility to show submission to the "Celestial Empire" by paying tributes at certain times that were decided by Chinese dynasty. These tributaries inadvertently posed questions about whether these activities just simply show submission of a smaller and weaker country to the larger and stronger country, or whether there are any reasons behind these "tributary adventures". This paper attempts to provide insight into the tributary activities of Vietnam under the Nguyen Dynasty towards the Qing Dynasty of China.

**Keywords:** Tribute, Vietnam, China.

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## Introduction

According to Nguyen Thi My Hanh, tribute system is a 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 (Nguyen, 105). Chinese dynasties considered themselves as the center of East Asia, and civilization. The concept of China as the "Middle Kingdom" (中国, Zhongguo) is deeply ingrained in Chinese history and culture. It reflects the traditional view that China was the center of the civilized world, surrounded by barbarian lands. This ethnocentric perspective shaped Chinese foreign policy and interactions for centuries. The tribute system was a practical manifestation of this worldview, reinforcing the idea that all other states were, to varying degrees, subordinate to China to receive recognition. China occupies a central position in this hierarchical system, considered other countries as barbaric states such as Nanman (南蠻), Dongyi(東夷), Xirong (西戎), and Beidi (北狄) (Banwo 3). Vietnam is classified as a vassal-periphery and was required to pay tribute to China.

Vietnam had always been a small country when compared to China by population and area, hence from the beginning of Vietnam history, Vietnamese Dynasties had adopted a policy of strategic submission to the larger neighbor of China (Le 111). According to Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu, the earliest tributary activities were in 1110 BC, the 6th year during the reign of King Thanh Vuong of the Zhou Dynasty, King Hung sent envoys to have friendly relations with China and pay tribute to white pheasants; the king of the Zhou Dynasty gave the messenger five chariots with compasses to return. However, not until Vietnam gained independence after the

battle of Bach Dang (938) did China began to properly pay diplomatic attention to Vietnam as a nation. This policy guided the Vietnam monarch's policies throughout history. This diplomatic relationship was not equal as aforementioned, but rather like between a large country and a small country. A small country must show respect and deference to the larger nation in all circumstances.

This policy guided Vietnam monarch's policies throughout history, the newly established monarch of Vietnam must gain recognition from "Celestial Empire" to be considered as a legitimacy monarch (Chen 179). The Nguyen Dynasty was not an exception, after the defeat of Tay Son house, the first emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty, Nguyen Anh had sent an embassy led by Trinh Hoai Duc to request for legitimate title. In the end of that year Emperor Anh had sent president of Ministry of War Le Quang Dinh to ask for changing country name to Nam Viet (南越) (Chen 191). According to Tran Trong Kim, the Qing dynasty concerned to confuse the name with ancient China nation, which also had the same name, so they decided to reverse it into Vietnam (越南). Despite the given name, Gia Long restored the national pride by renaming the country 'Da Yue' (大越—the Great Viet) and used it when addressed the smaller countries in a region, such as Vientiane and Khmer (Feng 474).

Qing dynasty regulated that every two years Vietnam will pay tribute and in every four years the Nguyen Dynasty must send an embassy to hold a ceremony (Fairbank 175). During Gia Long period, the regulation required tribute to be paid every two years (Dai Viet Su Ki Toan Thu). In the 20th year of Minh Mang, the Qing emperor decreed that Vietnam, following the old custom of paying tribute every two years and sending envoys every four years, could now pay tribute once every four years (Nguyen Thi My Hanh 66). This shows that the tribute period was

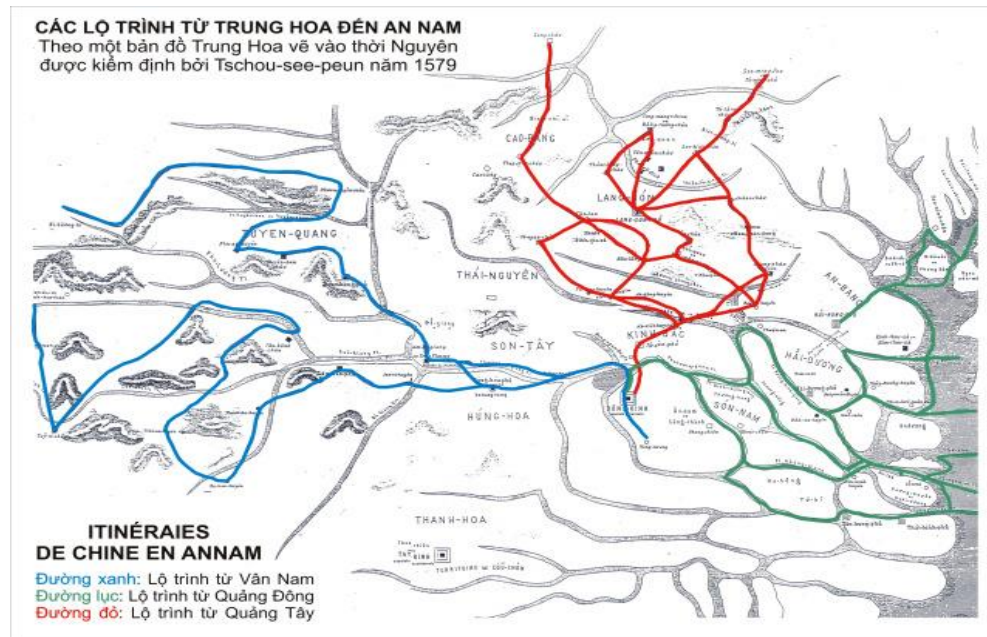
gradually relaxed over time. It is worth noticing that, both the Tay Son and Nguyen dynasties of Vietnam preferred to use the term "diplomacy" instead of "tribute" when referring to their practice of sending delegations to China (Insun 101).

According to Tran Trong Kim, tribute included 200 taels of gold; 1000 taels of silver; silk and grant 100 trees each; 2 sets of rhino horns; Ivory and cinnamon each 100 pounds. In 1803, the Qing Dynasty issued a list of tributes that the Nguyen Dynasty required to periodically pay tribute to the Chinese court: "According to the proposal of the Ministry of Rites, the normal tribute period is 2 years. The regular tribute items to be sent by Annam every two years, as decided by His Majesty, include: 600 taels of agarwood (沉香); 1200 taels of incense to scent clothes (薰衣香); 4 elephant tusks (象牙); 4 rhinoceros horns (犀角); 600 silk sheets (白絹); 200 cotton cloths (棉花); 90 pounds of amaryllis seeds (砂仁); 90 pounds of dried areca nuts (檳榔). As for the tributes on the occasion of celebrations (Coronation; Longevity... of the Qing emperor or royal family - T.D.A.S.) include: 4 elephant tusks (象牙); 4 rhinoceros horns (犀角); 300 silk sheets (白絹); 100 sheets of cotton cloth (棉花)" ("Kham Dinh Dai Nam" 311).

In addition to the items listed above, sometimes China also requested additional tribute items such as processed gold and silver (金銀器皿), aloeswood (降真香), camphor wood (速香), agarwood (木香), black agarwood fibers (黑線香), paper fans (紙扇), and various local silk fabrics such as earthy silk (土綢), earthy silk cloth (土絹), earthy silk handkerchiefs (土紬), and purple aloeswood (紫降香). (Tran Trong Kim).

There are three road taken by Vietnamese embassies to China, according to Histoire Des Relations De La Chine Avec L'annam-Viêt-nam Du Xvie Au Xixe Siècle: D'après Des Documents

Chinois Traduits Pour La Première Fois Et Annotés (History of China's Relations with Vietnam from the 16th to the 19th Century: Based on Chinese Documents Translated for the First Time and Annotated) . The 1804 tribute embassies led by Le Ba Pham brought tribute through Nam Quan pass (隘南關), then heading to Beijing by waterway.



Pic1. Three routes from China to VietNam. (Blue: Yunnan route, Red: Guangxi route, Green: Guangdong route)

The number of embassies recorded may vary from sources. The information about tributary activities recorded in typical histories of the Nguyen Dynasty such as Dai Nam Thuc Luc (DNTL), Kham Dinh Dai Nam Hoi Dien Su Le (KĐNHĐSL), Dai Nam Liet Truyen (ĐNLT), Quoc Trieu Chinh Bien Toa Compendium (QTCBTY), etc., according to these sources:

– KĐĐNHĐSL records the following 19 embassy delegations (we name the chief envoy representing the embassy): 1. Trinh Hoai Duc, 2. Le Quang Dinh, 3. Le Ba Pham, 4. Nguyen

Huu Than, 5. Vu Trinh, 6. Nguyen Du, 7. Ho Cong Thuan, 8. Nguyen Xuan Tinh, 9. Ngo Vi, 10. Hoang Van Quyen, 11. Hoang Kim Hoan, 12. Nguyen Trong Vu, 13. Hoang Van Dan , 14. Tran Van Trung, 15. Pham The Trung, 16. Ly Van Phuc, 17. Truong Hao Hop, 18. Bui Quy, 19. Phan Tinh.

– QTCBTY recorded the following 10 envoys: 1. Trinh Hoai Duc, 2. Le Quang Dinh, 3. Le Ba Pham, 4. Nguyen Huu Than, 5. Ho Cong Thuan, 6. Tran Ba Kien, 7. Le Tuan , 8. Phan Si Thuc, 9. Bui An Nien, 10. Nguyen Thuat.

– DNTL records the following 26 embassy delegations (we take the name of the chief envoy to represent the embassy): 1. Trinh Hoai Duc, 2. Le Quang Dinh, 3. Le Ba Pham, 4. Nguyen Huu Than , 5. Vu Trinh, 6. Nguyen Du, 7. Ho Cong Thuan, 8. Nguyen Xuan Tinh, 9. Ngo Vi, 10. Hoang Kim Hoan, 11. Hoang Van Quyen, 12. Nguyen Trong Vu, 13. Hoang Van Dan, 14. Tran Van Trung, 15. Pham The Trung, 16. Ly Van Phuc, 17. Truong Hao Hop, 18. Bui Quy, 19. Phan Tinh, 20. Phan Huy Vinh, 21. Pham Chi Huong, 22. Le Tuan, 23. Nguyen Huu Lap, 24. Phan Si Thuc, 25. Bui An Nien, 26. Nguyen Thuat. Additionally, DNTL documented instances of delayed embassy delegations that missed their trips due to various subjective and objective reasons. However, in some instances, DNTL did not clearly specify the purpose of dispatching the embassy delegation.

The tributary activities between the Nguyen dynasty to the Qing dynasty can be divided into two period of time: from 1802 to 1858 and 1858 to 1885. The reason behind this division of time can be explained as the time period of the Nguyen Dynasty from 1802 to 1858 was the period of peacefully, the concentration of monarch was building the country (Nguyen Thi My Hanh 69). The tributary activities during this period could be considered as stable as the majority

of Vietnamese Emperor regularly sent annual tributes to the Chinese court, except Emperor Thieu Tri, who cannot send tributary delegate due to the shortness of his rulership. The period from 1858 to 1885 marked a new challenge for both China and Vietnam monarch as these two monarchs faced with western influence expansion to them (Le 112). In this period Vietnam had to deal with the French conquest began by the French invasion of Tourane (1858). China under Qing rule at the time was dealt with challenges both internal and external. The tributary activities were interrupted and not continuously and regularly like the 1802-1858 period.

### **Tributary activities from 1802-1858 period.**

As aforementioned, the Nguyen Dynasty was established on the foundation of the defeated of Tay Son house. Nguyen Anh had successfully unified Vietnam in 1802 after a prolonged period of civil war and fragmentation. This historical context inadvertently posted struggle for Nguyen Anh rulership as Nguyen Anh himself used to seek support from the outsiders (French, Siam), an action cannot be accepted in Confucianism, the ideology that dominated in East Asian and Vietnam society. Moreover, intellectuals' class of Northern Vietnam still kept their loyalty to the former house Hau Le (Nguyen Thi My Hanh 66). Therefore, the tributary activity was not only just following monarch tradition to pay tribute to "Celestial Empire" but also was an effort conducted by Nguyen Anh, the first Emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty, to stabilize the country and gain the legitimacy from China.

The first action when gaining rulership in Vietnam by Emperor Nguyen Anh was dispatched a diplomatic mission led by Minister Le Quang Dinh as the chief envoy to request the bestowal of the royal title ("Kham Dinh Dai Nam" 306). From then on, the tributary activities

occurred regularly and consistently, throughout the period of 1802-1858. As statistics of Vietnamese tributary envoys to the Qing Dynasty shown:

**Table 1. Tributary embassies to China from 1802-1858 period**

Reign	Year	Chief envoy	Note	Number of embassies
Gia Long (1802 – 1820)	1804	Le Ba Pham	Pay gratefulness for the title given by Qing Emperor. Ebassies also brought Tribute year 1803 and 1805	4
	1807	Le Quan Dinh	Pay tribute	
	1809	Nguyen Huu Than	Pay tribute	
	1813	Nguyen Du	Pay tribute	
	1817	Ho Cong Thuan	Pay tribute	
Minh Mang (1820 – 1841)	1825	Hoang Van Quyen	Pay tribute	4
	1829	Nguyen Trong Quyen	Pay tribute	
	1833	Tran Van Trung	Pay tribute	
	1837	Pham The Trung	Pay tribute	
Thieu Tri (1841- 1847)				
Tu Duc (1847 - 1883)	1849	Phan Tinh	Pay tribute	3
	1853	Phan Huy Vinh	Pay tribute	
	1857	Nhu Ba Si	Pay tribute	

Statistical data indicates that between the years 1802 and 1858, the Nguyen Dynasty dispatched a total of eleven tributary missions to China. Three out of four Vietnam's Emperor sent tributary embassies to China, except Thieu Tri, who cannot pay tribute to the Qing dynasty due to the shortness of his reign. Particularly, in the tributary embassies in 1804, Emperor Nguyen Anh had prepared tributes for 2 years 1803 and 1805. According to Viet Nam Su Luoc written by Tran Trong Kim, tributes for this tributary trips includes:

- 600 taels of gold

- 3000 taels of silver
- 300 taels of silk
- 6 pieces of rhinoceros horn
- 300 pounds of ivory
- 300 pounds of fine cinnamon

This generous gesture not only shown Nguyen Anh respect to “Celestial Empire” but also implies effort of Nguyen Anh to gain recognition from China. In comparison with tributary activities of previous Dynasty, house Hau Le, according to “Viet Thuat” of Hoang Son Man of the Qing Dynasty records: "In the year of Quy Mao, the reign of Khang Hy (1663), the country of An Nam sent an envoy to pay tribute. The tribute ceremony includes: 4 sets of golden incense burners and flower vases, all weighing 209 ounces; The 12 silver basins all weighed 691 ounces; 20 sets of rhinoceroses and 20 ivory tusks. In comparison, the number of tributes of house Nguyen is far more valuable than Hau Le house. This emphasizes an importance of maintaining good China relations by the Nguyen Dynasty. In return, The Qing Dynasty itself also often bestowed rewards on the Vietnamese embassy when it came to court for tribute missions. For example: in 1804 the Qing Dynasty gave rewards to tributary embassy with “8 pieces of cotton cloth, 8 pieces of silk, 8 pieces of velvet, 8 pieces of long-haired velvet, 8 pieces of satin, 8 pieces of brocade, and 27 pieces of raw silk, big silk made in spring.” (“Quoc Su Quan Trieu Nguyen” 581). This give and take manner also represents an exchange of goods between the two sides driven by the natural economic and cultural development needs of two neighboring countries within the same region, not just only hierarchical arrangement.

Thieu Tri as aforementioned was the only Emperor of Vietnam, who did not pay tribute to the Qing Dynasty. This can be explained by his short live reign of 7 years. Besides, according to

Kham Dinh Dai Nam Hoi Dien Su Le, the Qing Dynasty had exempted tribute in the years of 1821 (Ming Mang reign), 1841 and 1845 of Thieu Tri reign. As the result, until Emperor Thieu Tri death, he had no opportunity to pay tribute like previous Emperors.

During Minh Mang and Tu Duc's reign the tradition of paying tribute to "Celestial Empire" occurred continuously and stably with the tribute period was 3 to 4 years each, with Ming Mang years of tribute was 1825, 1829, 1833, 1837, and 1849, 1853, 1857 for Tu Duc. This implies that the Nguyen dynasty maintained a consistent and respectful diplomatic relationship with China, adhering to the established tributary system and acknowledging China's traditional role as the superior state in the region. This also reflects the political and cultural norms of East Asia at the time, where tributary relationships were a standard aspect of interstate relations.

Comparing tributary mission of embassies with other diplomatic missions at the below table:

**Table 2. Vietnam Diplomatic's mission from 1802 to 1858**

Reign	Number	Mission of embassies						
		Funeral oration	Request for King title	Congratulation	Pay gratefulness	Tribute	Peacekeeping	Other
Gia Long	8	0	1	2	1	5	1	1
Minh Mang	7	1	1	1	1	4	0	0
Thieu Tri	2	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
Tu Duc	4	1	1	1	0	3	0	0

(Note: Some embassies mission could embark for multitask, for example the 1841 envoy led by Ly Van

Phuc had conducted two missions, informed the death of Emperor Minh Mang, and requested Kingship for Thieu Tri.)

Out of 21 embassies missions from 1802 to 1858, 12 missions were related to tributary activities accounting for more than 57% of diplomatic activities of the Nguyen Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty at the time. These actions emphasize the concern of the Nguyen Dynasty to gain legitimacy of “Celestial Empire”, from this recognition to bring stability and prosperity for a country, which was ravaged by war and division for hundreds of years, from Northern and Southern dynasties era (1533-1592), Trinh-Nguyen War (1627-1777), Tay Son rebellion (1776-1802). These tributary activities combined with the Nguyen Dynasty ideologically leadership had brought Vietnamese people at the time a short time of peacefulness and prosperity.

Besides the primary mission of paying tribute, sometimes the tributary embassy also brought goods with them to sell. According to the book "Histoire des Relations de la Chine avec l'Annam – Vietnam du XVIe au XIXe siècle," it reveals that the goods Vietnam brought to sell in China were typical products of our country, such as natural gold (生金), silver (銀), copper (銅), cinnabar (丹砂), pearls (珠), tortoise shells (玳瑁), coral (珊瑚), agarwood (沉香), combined sesame oil (蘇合油), jade (翡翠), white pheasant feathers (白雉), white deer (白鹿), rhinoceros (犀), elephant (象), female rhinoceros horns used as drinking cups (兕), mountain goats (羚羊), orangutans (猩猩), tropical monkeys (狒狒), rat-catching monkeys (蒙貴), snakes (蝮蛇), mangoes (菴羅果), jackfruits (波羅密), dried betel nuts (檳榔), pepper (胡椒), sandalwood (蘇木), ebony (烏木), salt (鹽), and lacquer (漆).

Moreover, Vietnam embassy was also responsible for purchasing goods for the Nguyen Dynasty. Records from the Nguyen Dynasty stated”: *On the 7th of March in the 7th year of Minh Mang's reign (1826), Hiep Tong Tran Bac Thanh, Nguyen Huu Than, reported on the return of the two diplomatic missions from the Qing Dynasty to Thang Long. When the two chief*

*envoys, Hoang Kim Hoan and Hoang Van Quyen, returned ahead of schedule, the four deputy envoys remained in Thang Long to oversee the goods. Nguyen Cong Thiep, the household steward, along with the deputy envoys, conducted an inventory of the acquired goods, categorizing them into various items. For lightweight goods such as silk and fabrics, totaling 14 crates, they were divided into 12 loads and transported by road starting from the 25th of March. Heavy goods, comprising 16 crates, were sealed and entrusted to the Bureau of Crafts for safekeeping, along with 53 chests of personal effects belonging to the two missions and their attendants, awaiting shipment to the capital via sea route.”*

In the return route, Vietnam embassy often went through Chinese Province, which had unique product. For example: High-quality silk products from Jiangnan, porcelain from Jiangxi, wine from Qiuju, herbal medicine from Beijing, tea from Hubei, forest products from Yunnan...etc, always included in the royal procurement list. Beside these regional products, Thai Hoa tea; golden-threaded fish; peacocks; horses; special fabrics such as sarabha cloth, wen cloth; brocades of five colors; Tianzhu paper; indigenous bamboo species such as bean bamboo, cloud bamboo, puff bamboo; drooping silk bamboo, chicken leg bamboo; musk; agate; copper ore; iron; white copper; diamonds, amethyst; turquoise; gypsum; amber; jade; red stone powder; black salt; dragon brain stone... also were popular products, bought by Vietnamese embassy (Nguyen The Long).

### **Tributary activities from 1858-1885 period.**

If the period from 1802-1885 was the period of prosperity and stability for both Vietnam and China. In Vietnam history the period from 1858-1885 was the period of turmoil and instability due to the Western influence, specifically by France (Nguyen Thi My Hanh 69). After the first attempt to colonize Vietnam in November 1st 1858, France had successfully colonized

Vietnam by Treaty of Hue (1884), ending the period of Vietnam as a Chinese vassal state, and beginning French colonial age in Vietnam. In China, Qing also facing the same issue as Vietnam, dealing with both internal strife and external pressures from Western powers. The Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860), the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), and other uprisings severely weakened Qing control and forced China into unequal treaties with various Western countries, this age also referred as a “Century of humiliation” (百年国耻)

In such a time of upheaval, the tributary activities were significantly affected. As the table below shows:

**Table 3. Tributary embassies to China from 1858-1885 period**

Reign	Year	Chief envoy	Note	Number of embassies
Tu Duc (1847-1883)	1861	Hoang Thien Tuong	Paid Tribute	5
	1868	Nguyen Thuat	Paid Tribue and request for assistance to deal with the remnants of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in the north of Vietnam	
	1873	Phan Si Thuc	Paid Tribute	
	1876	Bui Van Di	Paid Tribute and combine with congratulate the ascension of the new Qing emperor	
	1880	Nguyen Thuat	Paid Tribute	
Duc Duc (1883)				
Hiep Hoa (1883)				
Kien Phuc (1883-1884)				
Ham Nghi (1884-1885)				

Table 3 reveals that in comparison with the period of 1802-1858 the frequency and number of tributes of 1858-1885 period decreased significantly (from 11 times to 5 times). This

indicates a significant shift in the diplomatic and political priorities of Vietnam during the latter half of the 19th century, especially under the pressures of Western colonial encroachment and internal instability.

Similar to the periods before 1858, the tribute items presented during tribute missions or ceremonial offerings by the Nguyen dynasty's delegations to the Qing dynasty were not merely symbolic objects but carried genuine economic significance (Nguyen Thi My Hanh 100). This can be seen in the tributary mission of 1880, led by Nguyen Thuat. Goods such as elephant tusks, rhino horns, areca nuts, agarwood, phoenix wood, native silk sheets, sheets of fabric helped promote trade between China and Vietnam because they were so unique. The economic value of tributary activities can be shown more by “gift-returned” of the Qing Dynasty. According to Nguyen The Long, in the 1870 embassy, the Chinese emperor at that time return gifts to King Nguyen, including: embroidered silk fabrics, plain silk fabrics, each in 8 bundles, 8 gold bars, totaling 12 bundles, and 5 bundles of silk. The mandarins were presented with 3 gold bars, 8 bundles of plain silk fabrics, 5 bundles of each type of silk, 5 bundles of each type of green fabric, and 2 bundles of silk threads. Envoys and officials each received 5 bundles of plain silk fabrics, 5 bundles of silk, and 3 bundles of green fabric. In addition to the gifts from the Qing emperor, the Court of Rites also presented gifts to the king and mandarins of Vietnam. Specifically: offering the king medicinal pills, 40 ginseng pills, and 4 bottles of wine; offering the mandarins 10 pills and 4 bottles of wine; offering each attendant 5 pills and 1 bottle of wine. Clearly, the tributary items from the Nguyen dynasty and the reciprocating gifts from the Qing dynasty were all "specialty products" of each country, showing economic value of these embassies' trips.

The tributary activities of this period also had a new goals. One is requesting assistance of China to deal with remnants of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in the north of Vietnam (Nguyen Thi My Hanh 92). Secondly, they aimed to assess Western influence in China and understand China's strategies against Western invasion. This can be clearly implicated in the return of tribute embassy in 1868. The first concern of Emperor Tu Duc was “How Qing house deal with the Western?” (Nguyen 90). As the result, during the tribute mission of 1872, Emperor Tu Duc tasked chief envoy Phan Si Thuc with an additional assignment to present to the Qing Dynasty to seek a resolution to border conflicts (Historiography Institute of the Nguyen Dynasty, 1380).

After the French invasion of Tourane (1858), began the process of conquest Vietnam. Vietnam political attention was shifted from maintaining good relationship with China to deal with imminent threat from Western power, specifically France. China on the other hand also occupied with the expansion of Western power in China, hence could not pay more “attention” to Vietnam. There was a 7 years gap between tribute envoy from 1861 to 1868, this can be explained for the disruption of communication line between Vietnam and Beijing due to the Taiping Rebellion. These factors can be an explanation for the declination of tributary activities between Vietnam and China.

One of the noteworthy aspects of tribute activities during this era was the French intervention. The French presence during the tribute embassies of 1876 and 1880 suggests that these missions were not solely tributary in nature but also an attempt by the Nguyen Dynasty to gain assistance from the Qing dynasty. The tributary activity in this turbulent era can be summarized as disrupted and intervened by the French.

After Emperor Tu Duc passed in 1883, Vietnamese monarch was followed by series of short live reign. Specifically, “3 days Emperor” Duc Duc, 4 months Emperor Hiep Hoa, 8 months Emperor Kien Phuc, and lastly Ham Nghi Emperor, who only rule for 1 year. This era of turmoil and short-live reign can explain why there was no tributary activities conducted by these Emperors. After Tianjin treaty (1885), China had to abandon its “suzerain” on Vietnam and ending the tributary system, which had existed for thousand years (Tianjin Treaty, article one).

## Discussion

Historian Phan Huy Chu once said “:In state affairs, harmony with neighboring countries is a big thing...Our country Vietnam has land in the South that is deeply connected to China. Although the people building the country have their own scale, but internally it is imperial, but externally it is imperial. The king, still ensuring feng shui, commented that the logic of power must be like that” (Phan 533). From his comment we can understand that in state From his comment, we can understand that in state affairs, a small country should adopt a policy of showing submission to a stronger country; however, this “submission” was not mean to let other country completely dominate and let them decide their own fate. Rather, this approach is like recognizing the geopolitical realities by showing deference in certain respects. In his words “internally it is imperial, but externally it is imperial” can be understood as “Emperor at home, king abroad” (外王内帝) policy, which adopted by Sinosphere countries such Korea and Vietnam. The tributary activity can understand as a way to maintain good relations with a larger country like China in order to gain economic and trading benefits.

From the data recorded, it shows that the tributary activities between small country of Vietnam and the larger neighbor China was a significant concern of Nguyen diplomatic policies

during the period of 1802-1858. The number of tributary embassies was twice as much as (11 to 5) that of 1858-1885 period. This indicates that from the beginning of the Nguyen Dynasty the action of paying tribute to “Celestial Empire” was the center of political policies. This shows the importance of Chinese recognition in establishing the legitimacy of the Nguyen Dynasty. The action of Nguyen Anh, the first Emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty, to actively paid tribute for two years 1803 and 1805 in 1804, indicates the importance of Chinese recognition to the stability and legitimacy of the Nguyen Dynasty. The following Emperors from Nguyen Anh to Thieu Tri kept the tradition of paying tribute to “Celestial Empire”, this indicates the Nguyen Dynasty saw tributary activities as a way to consolidate power.

## **Conclusion**

Firstly, the tributary activities of Vietnam under the the Nguyen Dynasty towards the Qing Dynasty were essential for securing legitimacy and internal stability. By participating in this system, the Nguyen rulers affirmed their authority and aligned themselves with the established political order in East Asia, thereby reducing the risk of internal dissent and external threats.

Secondly, these tributary missions facilitated significant economic and cultural exchanges. The valuable goods presented as tribute, and the reciprocal gifts from the Qing Dynasty, underscored the economic importance of these interactions. The exchange of luxury items and culturally significant artifacts helped strengthen diplomatic ties and promote mutual understanding between the two nations.

Thirdly, the regular and respectful tributary relations were strategic maneuvers to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape. Amidst internal turmoil and external pressures, especially from Western colonial forces, maintaining a favorable relationship with the powerful

the Qing Dynasty was crucial. The Nguyen Dynasty used these tributary missions to seek support and assistance to deal with internal conflict and external threat.

In conclusion, the tributary activities between Vietnam and China during the Nguyen Dynasty era reflected not only diplomatic protocol but also strategic calculations aimed at maintaining stability, consolidating power, and gaining legitimacy. Despite facing numerous challenges, the Nguyen Dynasty upheld the tradition of paying tribute to the "Celestial Empire," underscoring the enduring significance of Chinese recognition in Vietnamese political affairs.

**Table 4. Regarding the diplomatic missions that were postponed**

Reign	Year	Chief envoy	Reason of postponed
Minh Mang	1821	Hoang Kim Hoan	Emperor Gia Long had just passed. Qing officials postponed the tribute mission, instructing it to be completed in the next cycle
	1840	Nguyen Dinh Tan	Emperor Minh Mang passed; the embassy must wait for next year
Thieu Tri	1842	Nguyen Thieu Tri	Postponed to combine with pay tribute mission
Tu Duc	1849	Phan Huy Vinh	
	1860	Hoang Thien Tuong	Due to the unsettled situation in Liangguang, the Qing officials notified us to postpone the tribute mission until the next cycle.

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