Vietnam-China Relations in the 19th Century: Myth and Reality of the Tributary System

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This study examines the nature of the tributary relations between the Nguyen dynasty and the Qing dynasty in the 19th century from Vietnam's point of view.

The Nguyen dynasty, founded in 1802, was incorporated into the Qing tributary system. The Nguyen dynasty formally recognized the Qing dynasty as its suzerain, and itself, the vassal. For the Nguyen dynasty, it was a practical arrangement that came with political, economic, and cultural benefits. The Nguyen dynasty remained subordinate in form to the Qing dynasty for practical reasons. In actuality, however, it regarded itself as being in equal standing to the Qing dynasty. Thus, its rulers called themselves emperors and used their own reign titles.

To sum up, even though Vietnam and China were linked as a vassal state and a suzerain state, respectively, the Vietnamese believed that China and Vietnam were equals.

Keywords: Chinese world order, tributary relations, tributary system, Dai Nam world order, equal diplomatic relations (*bang giao*), Vietnamese envoy to the Qing (*nhu Thanh su)*

Vietnam-China Relations in the 19th Century: Myth and Reality of the Tributary System[1]

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I. Introduction

Without a handle on Vietnam's political relations with China, one cannot get an accurate understanding of the 2,000 years of Vietnam's pre-modern history. This is evident in the following outline of the history of Vietnam-China relations.

From the late 2nd century BCE until its independence in the first half of the 10th century CE, Vietnam was under China's direct rule. This 1,000-year stretch in Vietnamese history is commonly referred to as the "period of Chinese rule." Then, for another millennium—from the early 10th century to its colonization by France in the late 19th century—Vietnam was a part of what the Chinese call the "Chinese world order" in which Vietnam was China's tributary. Vietnam's tributary relations with

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[1] I would like to thank the Korea-Japan Joint History Research Committee that made work on this article possible.

China helped the two countries maintain political amity. It was also through the tributary system that Vietnam readily adopted Chinese culture. This period can thus be referred to as the "period of tributary relations." Even during this period, China tried to invade Vietnam on a number of occasions. After staving off the Chinese invaders, the Vietnamese court would send emissaries to China in order to restore friendly relations and avoid further clashes.

This paper traces the history of Vietnam-China tributary relations, focusing on Vietnam's relations with China during the Nguyen dynasty (1802-1945), from Vietnam's perspective.

It is widely known that prior to the imperialist conquests of Western powers, East Asia's pre-modern interstate system was made up of China at the center as the suzerain state and China's neighbors as its vassal states. It goes without saying that this tributary system was founded on China's political and cultural superiority. That is, the traditional Sinocentric world order was founded on China's neighbors' recognition of China's supremacy and their accommodation of China's requests.

What we do have to clarify at this point is that in some sense, the "Chinese world order" was merely a unilateral, nation-centered conception on the part of China. For it to have been an "objective political truth," China's tributaries would have had to agree; however, this was not the case (Schwartz, 1968, p. 276). According to the Chinese, China's lesser neighbors, drawn to China's superior culture and material abundance, joined the Chinese world order on their own accord. While such a claim is not completely unfounded, the Chinese world order had more to do with China's military might (Cheon, 1971, pp. 235-238; Inoguchi, 1975, pp. 45-47). In other words, when China was weak, the tributary system was difficult to maintain; and accordingly, the Chinese world order was but an illusion. For example, when the Qing dynasty was defeated in the Sino-French War (1884-1885) and the Sino-Japanese War (1894), it signed a treaty with France and Japan, respectively, and recognized Vietnam as a protectorate of France and Joseon as a fully independent state. Nevertheless, the 1899 version of *Ta Qing Hui Dien* still lists Vietnam and China as tributaries of the Qing dynasty (Fairbank & Teng, 1960, pp. 182-183), highlighting the illusory nature of the Chinese world order.

In this sense, examining the reality of Vietnam-China tributary relations is essential to understanding the nature of the pre-modern East Asian international order. Officially, the rulers of the Nguyen dynasty acknowledged Vietnam's tributary status vis-à-vis China and referred to themselves as China's vassals. Domestically, however, they called themselves emperors. Sometimes, they would go a step further and point out the barbarian nature of the tributary system by referring to Chinese tributaries as non-Chinese dynasties. Furthermore, Vietnam went so far as to fashioning its own world order after the Chinese tributary system, ruling over its smaller neighbors or at least believing to be doing so.

Nevertheless, because much of the research conducted thus far centers on China, there tends to be a misunderstanding that the relationship between the suzerain and vassal states of a tributary system as being akin to the relationship between the colonizing and colonized states of modernity.[2] Although this paper is about 19th-century Vietnam-China tributary relations, I hope that it contributes to the correct understanding of the Korea-China political relations, which bear similarity to Vietnam-China relations during the same period.

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[2] *Betonamu chugoku kankeishi* (A history of Vietnam-China relations) (1975) edited by Yamamoto Tatsuro is a notable compilation of studies on the tributary system from a non-Sinocentric viewpoint. This paper is based extensively on the two studies in the book: Takeda Ryoji's "Guencho shoki no shin to no kankei" (Vietnam's relations with the Qing in the early period of the Nguyen dynasty) and Wada Hironori's "Guencho chuki no shin to no kankei" (Relations of Vietnam with the Qing in the middle period of the Nguyen dynasty).

II. The Nguyen Dynasty's Adoption of the Qing Tributary System

The history of 19th-centrury Vietnam began in 1802, when Nguyen Phuc Anh brought an end to the Tay Son Rebellion—the largest peasant movement in Vietnamese history—and founded the Nguyen dynasty. This was when Vietnam's territorial boundaries became what we associate with present-day Vietnam.

In 1527, Mac Dang Dung usurped the throne of the Le dynasty (1428-1778) but was toppled in 1592 by Le restoration forces. Thereafter, Vietnam found itself in a period of north-south conflict between the Trinh and Nguyen families, two pillars of the restoration movement. The north-south conflict came to an end in 1771 by three brothers of the Nguyen family that led a peasant movement in a region called Tay Son in south-central Vietnam. Many members of the Nguyen family of Phu Xuan (present-day Hue) perished during the peasant movement. Nguyen Phuc Anh, who survived, evacuated to the Mekong delta. He endured 20 years of hardship during which he gradually expanded his power base. In June 1801, he finally managed to take Phu Xuan, the ancestral home of the Nguyen family. In June the following year, Nguyen Phuc Anh pushed northward, and in one month, on July 20, he captured Thang Long (present-day Hanoi), thereby completing the unification of Vietnam.

Before his march north, Nguyen Phuc Anh proclaimed himself emperor on May 1802 in Phu Xuan and adopted "Gia Long" as his reign title (*DNTL*, Part I, Vol. 17, pp. 1a-2a; *Quoc-su di-bien*, 1965, p. 1). The name "Gia Long" means from Gia Dinh (present-day Ho Chi Minh City and the surrounding areas) to Thang Long—i.e., all of Vietnam, demonstrating Nguyen Phuc Anh's firm resolve to unify Vietnam.

Nguyen Phuc Anh, upon proclaiming himself emperor and adopting a reign title, sent Trinh Hoai Duc as "*nhu Thanh chinh su*" (chief envoy to the Qing) to Guangdong to request the Qing dynasty's assistance in settling the lingering issue of the Tay Son Rebellion. Trinh Hoai Duc's delegation took gifts and Nguyen Phuc Anh's sovereign credentials (國書). The delegation also took the royal letter (勅書) and golden seal (金印) from the Qing court that Nguyen Van Toan, the last ruler during the period of the Tay Son Rebellion, had abandoned in the course of his retreat in addition to three Qing pirates they had been holding as captives. The delegation arrived in Guangdong in July (*LTST*, Vol. 11, pp. 4b-5a; Suzuki, 1996, p. 351), marking the first official contact between the Nguyen dynasty and the Qing dynasty.

The French translation of the sovereign credentials has been passed down through the years. According to the translation, Nguyen Phuc Anh referred to himself as "roi du royaume Nam-Viet" (King of the Kingdom of Nam-Viet) (Mayborn, 1972, pp. 375-376). Suzuki Chusei argues that "roi" (king) appears to be an incorrect translation of what must have been either Chief of Nam Viet (南越國主) or Head of Nam Viet (南越國長) (1966, p. 351). At that time, Nguyen Phuc Anh had not been officially invested by the Qing court, and thus, unable to refer to himself as "king." Therefore, Suzuki's claim seems reasonable.

The other issue was the country name "Nam Viet." The name was so designated to mean that the new dynasty was in control of a greater expanse of territory than the Tran dynasty (1225-1400) or the Le dynasty (1428-1788), ruling over An Nam (Chinese name for Vietnam; at that time, An Nam signified the regions under the influence of the Trinh family) to Viet Thuong (Ngyuen family's territory that encompassed present-day Hue to southern Vietnam) (*LTST*, Vol. 11, p. 2a; Choi, 2004, p. 131).

However, the Qing court did not raise the issue of the country name[3] when it was informed that Trinh Hoai Duc and his party had arrived. Instead, it only sent word to the delegation that the Nguyen family had not yet unified Vietnam nor was it one of the Qing dynasty's vassal states. Accordingly, the Qing court made it known that it could not accept Nguyen Phuc Anh's tribute. Nguyen Phuc Anh did not give up. This time, he sent Nguyen Quang Dinh as the chief envoy. Nguyen Quang Dinh requested the Qing court's recognition of Nam Viet as the country name as well as the Qing emperor's investiture of Nguyen Phuc Anh. The Qing court did not take issue with the investiture but did indicate that it was outright impossible for them to recognize the country name Nam Viet. Their reasoning was that it was the same name as Nam Viet (207-111 BCE) founded by Trieu Da. The name did not bode well for China given that Trieu Da's Nam Viet had ruled over two now-Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi. After negotiations, the Qing court suggested the name "Viet Nam," reversing the two syllables, thereby attempting to demonstrate its authority as the suzerain. As for the Nguyen dynasty, they were satisfied because the "Viet" of Viet Thuong—the dynasty's ancestral home—came before "Nam." Hence, the Nguyen dynasty accepted the Qing court's proposal, and thus, issue of the county name was resolved (Suzuki, 1966, pp. 353-358; *DNTL*, Part I, Vol. 23, pp. 1b-2a).

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[3] This is probably due to Nguyen Phuc Anh's title change to Chief of Nong Nai (農耐國長) by the Governor-General of Guangdong. Cf. Suzuki Chusei, 1966, p. 353. Nong Nai is the former name of Gia Dinh Prefecture.

Once the issue of the country name was settled, the friendly relations between the two nations became official. To borrow the expression of *Dai Nam thuc luc*, the two countries established formalities and protocols of "*bang giao*" (equality in diplomatic relations) in 1803 (Part I, Vol. 23, p. 3a). Soon thereafter, the Qing court sent an envoy to Viet Nam to install Nguyen Phuc Anh as king. The investiture ceremony was held in present-day Hanoi in January 1804, and Nguyen Phuc Anh became the King of Viet Nam (*DNTL*, Part I, Vol. 23, p. 3b; Suzuki, 1966, p. 358). The ceremony was held in Hanoi instead of Hue, the capital. It thereafter became customary to hold investiture ceremonies in Hanoi until the Qing court accepted the request made by Emperor Tu Duc (1848-1883) to move the ceremonies to Hue.

Once the two dynasties formalized their ties, Nguyen dynasty's tributary schedule was arranged as follows: one tributary payment every two years and one dispatch of tributary envoys every four years. This essentially meant that two tributary payments were lumped into one, and it was sent to China through the tributary delegation dispatched every four years (二年一貢，四年一次遣使，兩貢竝進). It was the same setup as that of the Tay Son regime (*DNTL*, Part I, Vol. 23, p. 4b; Suzuki, 1966, p. 358). In addition to the regular missions, the Nguyen dynasty also sent special missions, including those to offer congratulations (慶賀), request investiture (請封), offer thanks (謝恩), and notify the Qing court of a death in the Nguyen royal family or pay respects when there was a death in the Qing royal family (進香). The Qing dynasty sent a delegation to inform the Nguyen court that it should begin paying tributes starting in 1803. The Qing delegation asked that for 1803 and 1805, the mission to offer thanks (謝恩使) to be sent in 1804 replace the regular tributary mission. The Nguyen dynasty obliged (*DNTL*, Part I, Vol. 23, pp. 4a-b). However, sometimes, the mission to offer thanks was incorporated into a tributary mission, and at other times, the Qing court ordered the cancellation of missions to offer congratulations and those to announce death in the royal family. Hence, the number of special missions was limited. Furthermore, in 1839, toward the end of the reign of Emperor Minh Mang (1820-1840), the tribute scheme changed to a quadrennial (四年朝貢一次) one, the same as that of Liu Qiu (Okinawa) and Siam. Thus, the tributary missions became even less frequent. Moreover, the Qing court reduced the tribute amount for the Tay Son regime and the Nguyen dynasty compared to what the Le dynasty had been required to present. And then in 1939, this already reduced amount was halved. Accordingly, by then, the material significance of the tribute had already diminished substantially (*DNTL*, Part II, Vol. 207, pp. 41b-42a; Suzuki, 1966, p. 358).

Although the tribute amount and the frequency of the tributary missions had decreased over the years, the tributary relations between the two countries remained intact. However, the Qing court suspended the Nguyen dynasty's tributary missions when the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) erupted. The suspension lasted 16 years (Fairbank, 1968, p. 269; Wada, 1975, p. 566). More specifically, the tributary relations were suspended after a regular tributary mission in 1852, immediately after the outbreak of the rebellion. They were then restored in 1868 (*DNTL*, Part IV, Vol. 38, pp. 44a-b; Wada, 1975, pp. 566, 581). Thereafter, the Nguyen court sent a total of four missions to the Qing dynasty—in 1870, 1872, 1876, and 1880 (Wada, 1975, p. 581). Then in 1883, Emperor Hiep Hoa (r. July-November 1883) attempted to send a delegation to the Qing court for investiture. His aim was to solidify his power amidst the chaos in the Nguyen court. The problem was that the land route was no longer accessible as the French army was in control of the Tonkin region. Emperor Hiep Hoa did get Qing's permission to send a delegation by sea, but the mission came to naught as he was poisoned and killed by Ton That Thuyet and Nguyen Van Tuong, powerful court officials (Wada, 1975, 584-585). The very last delegation the Nguyen dynasty sent to the Qing dynasty was to request the investiture of Emperor Kien Phuc (1883-1884), the successor of Emperor Hiep Hoa.[4] However, he too, was never invested by the Qing court as he died of an illness only half a year upon assuming the throne. The eighty years of tributary relations between the Nguyen and Qing dynasties,[5] established in 1803, came to an end with the Treaty of Hue (or Patenôtre Treaty) of 1884, which put Vietnam completely under France's colonial rule.

One can ask why the rulers of the Nguyen dynasty maintained tributary relations with the Qing dynasty, recognizing the authority the Qing emperor and referring to themselves as vassals of the Qing dynasty. As mentioned earlier, the Chinese claimed the reason lay in China's cultural superiority and material abundance. From Vietnam's perspective, however, the claim was, by and large, groundless. Be that as it may, the cultural aspect could not be completely dismissed.

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[4] According to *Dai Nam Thuc Luc*, the Nguyen dynasty's tributary relations with the Qing dynasty broke off completely with Emperor Kien Phuc's ascension to the throne (Part V, Vol. 1, pp. 25a-b). However, Wada Hironori, based on Chinese sources, argues that this was not the case (1975, pp. 589-590).

[5] The discussion on this issue is based extensively on Yu, Insun (1987). Jungwol guangye-wa jogong jedo: Gasang gwa silsang (Sino-Vietnamese relations and the tributary system: Myth and reality). *Yeoksa Hakbo,* 114, 107-114.

Not only the sovereigns of the Nguyen dynasty—most notably Emperor Gia Long—but also the Vietnamese intelligentsia held Confucianism in high regard and considered China the very source of knowledge. For example, it is said that Emperor Gia Long discussed the deeds of the rulers and subjects as well as the institutions of the Han and Tang dynasties with his attendants during meetings. Afterwards, they are said to have talked about *Mingshi* deep into the night (*DNTL*, Part I, vol. 43, p. 4a; Takeda, 1975, p. 502). It is a well-known fact that Emperor Minh Mang was more immersed in the study of Confucianism than any other sovereign of the Nguyen dynasty.[6] His successor, Emperor Thieu Tri (1841-1846), also held such high regard for Confucianism and the literati that he personally came up with the questions for the civil service examinations. Accordingly, one of the most important tasks of the envoys dispatched to the Qing was the acquisition of Chinese books, especially the very latest ones. This is evident in Emperor Minh Mang's order to a delegation to the Qing court. The envoys were even ordered to acquire traditional verses (古詩), traditional paintings (古畫), and rare books by classic writers (古人奇書). They were also asked to acquire the annals of the Qing dynasty if at all possible, regardless of cost and even if they were just copies (*DNTL*, Part II, Vol. 69, pp. 29b-30a; Takeda, 1975, p. 499).

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[6] There is a classical study on Emperor Minh Mang's policies regarding the adoption of Chinese culture and institutions. See Woodside, Alexander B. (1971). *Vietnam and the Chinese model: A comparative study of Vietnamese and Chinese governments in the first half of the nineteenth century.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Needless to say, acquiring Chinese books was not just only for intellectual gratification. They were important references in setting up Nguyen dynasty's political and legal institutions. For instance, in 1815, Emperor Gia Long compiled and distributed *Quoc Trieu Luat Le* (Code of Our Dynasty), better known as *Hoang Viet Luat Le or the Gia Long Code* in English. *Hong Duc Luat Le and Ta Qing Tiao Lu* are claimed to have been used as references (*DNTL*, Part I, Vol. 51, pp. 3a-b), but in reality, *Quoc Trieu Luat Le*, save for a very few select parts, is almost an exact copy of *Ta Qing Lu* (Qing Code).

In terms of culture, another important mission for the *nhu Thanh su* (envoys to the Qing) was promoting the Nguyen dynasty as a civilized country. Therefore, in selecting envoys, importance was placed not only on diplomatic prowess but also on the cultural sophistication of the candidates. This is evident in a royal edict issued by Emperor Minh Mang in 1840 (*DNTL*, Part II, Vol. 218, p. 33a; Woodside, 1971, p. 115). In the edict, he set forth that envoys to the Qing must be accomplished linguistically and in terms of literature. He went on to say if a greedy and vulgar person were selected as an envoy, it would only invite the disdain of other countries. The reason was that the envoys had to compete with Chinese and Korean scholars in poetry writing (Woodside, 1971, p. 115). The ability to write well was considered an important criterion in the selection of tributary envoys to China not only by the Nguyen dynasty but also by the successive dynasties of Vietnam (Woodside, 1971, p. 115; Wolters, 1979a, p. 436).

The heads of the Nguyen dynasty were worried that their envoys to the Qing might tarnish Vietnam's reputation. That is why before dispatching the envoys to the Qing in 1809 and 1817, Emperor Gia Long met with the them in person. He gave the envoys direct orders: place great importance on national honor and strictly observe "*bang giao*." As Takeda Ryoji points out, the emperor's careful instructions and interest in the envoys was not out of great admiration for the Qing court but to avoid the Qing court's derision and contempt (*DNTL*, Part I, Vol. 37, p.

11b; *DNTL*, Part I, Vol. 55, pp. 6b-7a; Takeda, 1975, p. 497).

As long as the Nguyen dynasty considered itself a civilized kingdom, it complained when it received treatment it construed as being beneath its standing. In 1840, the Nguyen dynasty's Ministry of Rites reported that in the previous year, the Qing dynasty had placed Nguyen envoys below those from Cao Li (Korea), Nan Zhang (present-day Laos), Siam, and Liu Qiu. The Ministry of Rites then asked the emperor how the Nguyen dynasty should respond. Emperor Minh Mang replied that it was a faux-pas on the part of the Qing dynasty's Ministry of Rites. He explained that putting Cao Li, a nation of letters, before the Nguyen dynasty might be acceptable. However, he said it was unacceptable that Nan Zhang—a tributary of the Nguyen dynasty, and Siam and Liu Qiu—barbarian countries (夷狄), were allotted positions of higher standing. He went on to say that if the same thing happened again, it would be better for the Nguyen dynasty to leave the tributary system and suffer the consequences (*DNTL*, Part II, Vol. 220, pp. 8a-b; Takeda, 1975, pp. 496-497). Emperor Minh Mang, more than any other Vietnamese sovereign, believed that Vietnam was a civilized country. Therefore, he must have been terribly insulted. It is not known why the Ministry of Rites of the Qing dynasty put the Nguyen delegation in a position even lower than that of Nan Zhang. However, as Emperor Minh Mang pointed out, it certainly was a faux-pas. The tributary states are listed in *Qingshi Gao's* "Vassal States" section in the following order: Cao Li, Liu Qiu, Viet Nam, Burma, Siam, and Nan Zhang (*Qingshi Gao*, 1998, pp. 14575-14701). An interesting point to note is that in the "Monograph on Foreign States" (外國傳) of *Mingshi*, the tributary states are listed in the following order: Cao Li, An Nam (Vietnam), Japan, Liu Qiu, and Lu Song (Philippines). That is, An Nam comes before Liu Qiu. However, the Qing dynasty put Liu Qiu before An Nam. This makes us wonder whether Qing-Nguyen relations might not have been as close as had been once thought.

A noteworthy point here is that the cultural aspect thus explained was only a part of the reason why the Nguyen dynasty adopted the Qing tributary system. More importantly, the Nguyen dynasty looked at the tributary system as a means to avoid confrontation and strengthen amity with the Qing, thereby keeping itself safe. According to Professor Phan Huy Le, President of the Association of Historical Studies of Vietnam, Vietnam was subject to fifteen instances of foreign aggression up until 1975 (1988, p. 495). Eleven of them had occurred before the 19th century, and save the single invasion by Siam in 1785, it was China that had been responsible for all of them. The Nguyen dynasty had not yet experienced any Qing aggression. Nevertheless, its leaders must have been worried about the possibility given that the latest instance had occurred in 1788, merely 10 years prior to the dynasty's founding. A case in point: Nguyen Phuc Anh dispatched Trinh Hoai Duc to the Qing court before launching an attack on Hanoi. He did so to prevent Qing intervention by clearly demonstrating that the Nguyen dynasty would continue to be the Qing dynasty's tributary state. However, the reality was that the Qing dynasty had already entered into decline. Moreover, it was preoccupied with the White Lotus Sect Rebellion (1795-1805), and thus, did not have the wherewithal to become involved in Vietnam's problems. That is why the Qing dynasty was quick to accept Nguyen Phuc Anh's tribute and invested him as the ruler of Vietnam.

The Nguyen dynasty considered the Qing dynasty to be a threat. It was, thus, only natural that Nguyen's sovereigns were interested in the goings-on at the Qing court. Accordingly, it was established protocol for envoys to the Qing to be summoned immediately upon return to answer questions concerning the Qing court's state of affairs (*DNTL*, Part I, Vol. 58, pp. 11a-b; Takeda, 1975, p. 498). It goes without saying that the Nguyen emperor would have also inquired about the envoys' observations regarding the political and social changes in the Qing empire and their potential influence on Vietnam.

Emperor Minh Mang, above all others, was especially interested in what was happening in the Qing empire and strove to obtain as much information as he possibly could. He ordered the envoys to the Qing to submit detailed reports of what they saw there. These reports were officially known as the “Su Trinh Nhat Ky” (Daily Chronicle of the Envoy’s Journey). In April 1832, Emperor Minh Mang pointed out that contrary to his intentions, the three envoys to the Qing had only written about the general state of affairs in the Qing empire. He ordered that future envoys must clearly record in detail the affairs of the Qing state and people but that they need not list place names that were already known (*DNTL*, Part II, Vol. 79, pp. 17a-18b; Woodside, 1971, pp. 118-119). According to Dai Nam Thuc Luc, Emperor Minh Mang did not find the information supplied by his envoys to the Qing to be sufficient. In October of the same year, he ordered a government official in Hanoi to purchase the official government gazette of the Qing dynasty from Qing merchants and bring the book to him (*DNTL*, Part II, Vol. 85, p. 30a; Takeda, 1975, p. 499). The most recent official government gazette of the Qing dynasty did not include information concerning the heavy snowfall that hit Yanjing (燕京) in January of that year and the human fatalities it caused. Emperor Minh Mang issued a directive to record information concerning the event; that is how enthusiastic he was about collecting information on the Qing. In a nutshell, the Nguyen dynasty, by paying tribute to the Qing court, aimed to alleviate the potential threat posed by the Qing dynasty by fostering friendly relations, and concurrently, prepared itself should the Qing threat materialize.

There was another important reason why the emperors of the Nguyen dynasty wanted to maintain tributary relations with the Qing dynasty: solidifying their domestic authority. Because Vietnam had long been influenced by Chinese culture, Vietnamese rulers considered investiture from the Chinese emperor a matter of course. Accordingly, Nguyen Phuc Anh, for example, could not ignore existing customs. As a matter of fact, investiture from the emperor of China had a decisive effect on the legitimacy and authority of the ruler. In effect, Nguyen Phuc Anh rushed to become invested by the Qing emperor before unifying

Vietnam not only because he wanted to prevent Qing intervention but also because he needed to legitimize his rule.

The following case demonstrates the importance of being invested by the emperor of China. Mac Dang Dung, who had usurped the throne from the Le dynasty in 1527, was able to receive recognition from the Ming court. This allowed the Mac dynasty to hold on to power for some time. When it was forced to flee Thang Long in 1592, the Mac dynasty based itself in Cao Bang, a province near China. Thanks to the protection provided by the Ming dynasty as well as the Qing dynasty the succeeded it, the Mac dynasty could sustain itself until 1677, albeit merely as a regional power. In contrast, the Ho Quy Ly regime (1400-1407), which failed to be recognized by the Ming court, was quick to collapse. In the meantime, Le restoration forces sent a delegation to the Qing court, making an appeal concerning the wrongdoing of the Mac regime and requested the dispatch of Qing troops (Chen, 1985, p. 845). This was an attempt to establish the Le dynasty as the sole, legitimate regime of Vietnam for the domestic audience.

As mentioned earlier, Emperor Hiep Hoa of the Nguyen dynasty sought the investiture of the Qing emperor in order to solidify his position. At the time, Hiep Hoa was in an extremely precarious situation. Emperor Duc Duc (r. 20 July 1883 - 23 July 1883), succeeded the throne upon the passing of Emperor Tu Duc. However, he was dethroned by Ton That Thuyet and Nguyen Van Tuong in just three days. Although Emperor Hiep Hoa had assumed the throne, the effective power of the royal court rested in the hands of Ton That Thuyet and Nguyen Van Tuong; Emperor Hiep Hoa had no idea when he might be dethroned. Under such circumstances, what Emperor Hiep Hoa wanted was investiture by the Qing emperor. As per Article 2 of the Second Treaty of Saigon the Nguyen dynasty had signed with the French in 1874, Vietnam was recognized as a wholly independent state (*DNTL*, Part IV, Vol. 50, p. 8a). Accordingly, dispatching a tributary mission was in violation of the treaty. Regardless, Emperor Hiep Hoa did send a delegation to the Qing court, thereby demonstrating just how symbolically significant investiture by China really was.

Economic interests comprised another crucial reason behind the Nguyen dynasty's adoption of the Qing tributary system. In contrast to the present, both the Qing and Nguyen dynasties limited free trade among individuals. Accordingly, the tributary system, through the goings and comings of Chinese and Vietnamese envoys between the two countries, played an important role in fostering government-run trade enterprises. The Qing dynasty, albeit in a limited manner, did allow some of its merchants to trade in Vietnam. In contrast, the Nguyen dynasty forbade all Vietnamese merchants from entering the Qing empire. In fact, the Nguyen dynasty, unlike the Qing dynasty, banned its people from leaving Vietnam for personal reasons. The first strict order—Prohibition on Crossing National Borders for Personal Affairs and Prohibition on Going Overseas (違禁下海律)—was issued in 1816 by Emperor Gia Long (*DNTL*L, Part I, Vol. 54, p. 9b; Takeda, 1975, p. 532). The prohibition was put into place because rice, salt, gold, silver, cooper, water buffalo horns, ivory, and other goods banned for export were being smuggled into China. The Qing court, in turn, had in place strict export bans on iron, black lead, and sulfur. Under such circumstances, the Nguyen court had no choice but to obtain necessary goods via the tributary envoys to the Qing dynasty.

Before Nguyen envoys departed for the Qing court, they received a list of items they were required to obtain, either by purchasing them or receiving them from the Qing court as imperial gifts. As aforementioned, one of the most important items on this state shopping list was books. The list would also include ginseng, medicinal ingredients, Chinese teas, and paper. Envoys unable to acquire the listed items were punished upon their return. A case in point is the dismissal in 1830 of Nguyen Trong Vu, Nguyen Dinh Tan, and Dang Van Khai upon their return from the Qing court (*DNTL*, Part II, Vol. 65, pp. 9b-10a; Takeda, 1975, p. 498). Before departure, the envoys were instructed by Emperor Minh Mang to inform the Qing Ministry of Rites that the Nguyen dynasty was lacking ginseng and that they desired to be given ginseng instead of the customary imperial gifts. The envoys were also ordered to purchase dark blue jade (蒼璧), yellow octagonal jade badges (黃琮), yellow jade tablets (黃珪), and blue jade tablets (青珪). Upon their return from the Qing court, the envoys were punished. The reasons were that one, they brought shame to the Nguyen dynasty by saying they needed ginseng to fulfill filial duties, and two, the jade products they had bought turned out to be made of glass. The acquisition of goods was undertaken not just by regular delegations but also by special missions. It is said that in December 1847, Emperor Tu Duc sent a special delegation to inform the Qing court of the death of Emperor Thieu Tri. Emperor Tu Duc gave the delegation a list of items to be purchased, including jade goods (玉器), toys (玩器), antiques (古器), porcelain (瓷器), and other rare goods. However, a government inspector (科道, 감찰관) argued that the court should maintain its simplicity and modesty as it had just gotten a new emperor. He went on to assert that the special delegation is being sent to announce a royal death, and thus, it would be impossible for the delegation to acquire any luxury goods. The list was thus discarded (*DNTL*, Part IV, Vol. 1, pp. 31b-32a).

One point that needs mentioning here is that contrary to what the Chinese thought, the Nguyen dynasty did not engage in a government-run trade enterprise via its tributary envoys because it was attracted to the vast array and abundance of goods found in China. Emperor Minh Mang explained that as different areas produce different types of goods, it was only natural that people had been engaged in trade throughout the ages (*DNTL*, Part II, Vol. 218, pp. 33a-34a). In other words, he regarded the enterprise simply as a means for Vietnam to get Chinese goods that were unavailable in Vietnam and for China to obtain Vietnamese goods it could not find in its country.

The goods acquired by Nguyen envoys to the Qing were all stored at a government agency responsible for the imperial household's spending and expenses. The goods stored were not consumed solely by the royal family. The emperors presented some of the rare and precious goods as rewards or gifts to government officials and to the envoys themselves. That is, the goods were utilized by Nguyen emperors as a means of strengthening their hold on power (Woodside, 1971, p. 267).

Ultimately, the Nguyen dynasty's adoption of the Qing tributary system was prompted by real gains. While the Qing dynasty attached importance to suzerain-vassal relations comprising the tributary system, for the Nguyen dynasty, they were only matters of formality. The rulers of the Nguyen dynasty referred to themselves as emperors within Vietnam and took on reign titles. Also, as explained in the following section, the Nguyen dynasty maintained its own world order in which it was the suzerain state, and its neighbors, the tributary states. In short, Vietnam was not dependent on China; it was a completely independent state unto itself.

III. Nguyen Dynasty's Path of Independence and Autonomy

The previous section demonstrated that the rulers of the Nguyen dynasty adopted the Qing tributary system for political, economic, and cultural reasons. Regardless, the Nguyen dynasty was still the Qing dynasty's vassal state and the ruler of the Nguyen dynasty was still the Qing emperor's vassal. However, on the part of the Nguyen dynasty, this was only a matter of appearance; in reality, the Nguyen dynasty considered itself equal to the Qing dynasty.

The rulers and the intelligentsia of the Nguyen dynasty respected Chinese culture and tried to emulate it. Nonetheless, they did not have any respect whatsoever for the Qing dynasty or its people. They referred to the Qing dynasty as the "Northern Dynasty" (北朝) or the "State of Qing" (淸國) and called its people the "northern people" (北人) or the "Qing people" (淸人). They also frequently called the Chinese the "Tang people." This designation seems to reflect the Nguyen dynasty's disdain toward the Qing dynasty, which was founded by an alien nation. It was thus only natural that the Vietnamese could not fully comprehend uniquely Chinese concept of "everything under heaven"—i.e., the world (天下)—nor that of the "son of heaven" (天子) (Woodside, 1971, p. 19; Choi, 2004, p. 38). Nevertheless, Emperor Gia Long called Vietnam "Middle Kingdom," applying a traditional Chinese concept (*DNTL*, Part I, Vol. 26, p. 22a; *DNTL*, Part I, Vol. 38, p 12a; *DNTL*, Part I, Vol. 44, p. 19a; Woodside, 1971, pp. 18-19; Takeda, 1975, p. 543).

In describing its relations with the Qing dynasty, the Nguyen dynasty used "tributary" as the official term. Domestically, however, the Nguyen dynasty used the term "*bang giao*" (state-to-state exchanges) as mentioned earlier. The envoys were called "*nhu Thanh su*." The expression uses the word "nhu," which literally means "to go." *Bang giao* simply means diplomatic relations between two states. The expression does not insinuate any form of hierarchy. The Nguyen dynasty regarded not only its relations with the Qing dynasty but also the relations between all dynasties of Vietnam and China as *bang giao*. This is evident in *Bang Giao Luc*, compiled and published in 1819 by Le Thong. The book, which opens with a royal directive from Emperor Han Wu Di to Trieu Da, is a collection of official documents and verses exchanged between the envoys of the two countries up to 1826. (Le, n.d., A. 614-A. 691/1-2).

The term "*bang giao*" came into use during the Tay Son dynasty[7] and settled into fixed usage during the Nguyen dynasty. Nonetheless, Le Thong was accurate in considering China-Vietnam relations even prior to the Nguyen dynasty as having been *bang giao*. Since Dinh Bo Linh—the founder Dinh dynasty (966-980)—all the rulers of the dynasties of

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[7] *Bang Giao Hoa Thoai* by Ngo Thi Nham is a collection of diplomatic papers sent to the Qing court between 1789 and 1799.

Vietnam, not just those of the Nguyen dynasty, were invested by the emperor of China. Nevertheless, they were also called "emperor" within Vietnam, and each had his own unique reign title.[8] Vietnam's dynasties did not seek the approval of the emperor of China in designating their country's name either. Moreover, the term "*nhu*" was used to refer to the envoys to Chinese dynasties: *nhu* Song, *nhu* Yuan, *nhu* Ming, and so on. Finally, there is no mention of "tribute" (貢) in *Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu* (Chen, 1984-1985, pp. 180, 390, 556). The instances in which "paying of tribute" (入貢) was used, it was only in reference to the envoys sent to Vietnam by its neighbors, such as Champa and Chenla (present-day Cambodia).

In fact, Vietnam's sovereigns and government officials considered Vietnam to be on equal footing as China and did not assume a position of servility famous figure in this regard was Le Van Huu, a renowned historian of the late 13th century. Le Van Huu was working on *Dai Viet Su Ky* when a Mongol invasion was looming. The central issues the book explores are the independence of Vietnam's dynasties and their equality vis-à-vis the dynasties of China. It is said that Han Gao Zu, upon unifying China, dispatched an envoy to invest Trieu Da as king. Trieu Da put himself in equal ranks as Han Gao Zu and asked the envoy, "Who is wiser: Han Gao Zu or me?" (*Shiji*, 1982, p. 2698). This is why Le Van Huu begins the history of Vietnam with Trieu Da's founding of Nam Viet. Le Van Huu deems 966 CE, not 939, to be when Vietnam became completely independent. Ngo Quyen defeated the Southern Han forces in 938 and declared himself king the following year in 939. However, for Le Van Huu, it was in 966—when Dinh Bo Linh put an end to the Twelve Lords Rebellion, unified Vietnam, and assumed the throne—that Vietnam became truly independent. According to Le Van Huu, Ngo

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[8] Trieu Da of Nam Viet was the first ruler to use the title "emperor." He called himself "emperor" and treated China's Han dynasty as Nam Viet's equal. Dinh Bo Linh adopted the title "emperor" following Trieu Da's precedent (*TT*, p. 80).

Quyen cannot be considered to have achieved true independence for Vietnam because he declared himself king, not emperor.

Another example commonly referred to concerning Vietnam's equality vis-à-vis China in the early modern period is *Binh Ngo Dai Cao* (A Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Wu) written by Nguyen Trai in 1427 (Nguyen Trai, 1972, p. 319; O'Harrow, 1979, pp. 168-169). The proclamation describes Vietnam and China "the north" and "the south," respectively, and emphasizes that Vietnam's emperors had ruled over their empire in the south in the same way that China's emperors had ruled over their empire in the north. Simply put, Vietnam and China were portrayed as distinct and equal states. In 1849, the second year of the reign of Emperor Tu Duc of the Nguyen dynasty, a high-ranking official named Nguyen Dang Khai wrote to the emperor requesting changes to the dynasty's tributary relations with the Qing dynasty. He recommended that rather than Vietnam's emperors go to Hanoi for investiture, Qing envoys should come to Hue, the capital city of the Nguyen dynasty. The reasons he cited were as follows: the royal journey to Hanoi was costly and had a negative effect on the Nguyen dynasty's reputation (Xu, n.d., Vol. II, p. 180). In other words, Nguyen Dang Khai was suggesting that if Vietnam's emperors are to be invested, they should do so in the comfort of their own palace. Nguyen Dang Khai's recommendation can be regarded as being intimately tied to the aforementioned sense of parity Vietnam had vis-à-vis China.

Nguyen Dang Khai could express his dissatisfaction over Vietnam's unequal relations with China in such a blunt manner because he was but a king's attendant. The sovereigns of the Nguyen dynasty themselves, however, were not in a position to be as open. Yet, that by no means meant that they readily accepted and were comfortable with the Qing tributary system. A case in point is the fact that Nguyen Phuc Anh did not engage in any discussion whatsoever with the Qing court concerning his ascension to the throne or the designation of his reign title. He did ask for the Qing dynasty's approval regarding the naming of his kingdom.

However, this was only because Nguyen Phuc Anh wanted to change the existing name "An Nam," which had come from the Tang dynasty's designation of Vietnam as its protectorate. He requested that the name be changed to "Nam Viet." The Qing dynasty did not accept it and suggested "Viet Nam" instead. While Nguyen Phuc Anh accepted the Qing dynasty's suggestion in consideration of maintaining friendly relations, he must not have been satisfied; in 1812, he unilaterally changed the name to Dai Viet without informing the Qing court *(Quoc su di-bien*, 1965, p. 81).

"Dai Viet" comes from "Dai Co Viet," the country name designated by Dinh Bo Linh. In 1054, Thanh Tong of the Ly dynasty removed the "Co" and called the nation "Dai Viet." Thereafter, Dai Viet remained the country name used by Vietnam's dynasties. However, because the name had not been approved by China, the Chinese called Vietnam "An Nam." The name of the kingdom was altered once again in 1838 to Dai Nam (Great South) by Emperor Minh Mang, the successor of Emperor Gia Long. The name was to go into official use the following year (*DNTL*, Part II, Vol. 190, pp. 1a-2a; *DNTL*, Part II, Vol. 200, pp. 8a-b; Q*uoc su di-bien*, 1965, p. 278). The reason for the name change was that the dynasty had come to comprise a vast empire whose territories extended to the South China Sea; the name "Dai Nam" was more appropriate. It was also reasoned that there were other instances in which the name of a nation had been altered to a more beautiful-sounding one, citing the instance in which the Qing dynasty, originally Manchuria, changed its name to "Ta Qing" (Great Qing). It was a logical argument. In reality, however, the name change to Dai Nam was perhaps more of an expression of Minh Mang's antagonism toward the Qing dynasty and his reaction to the "Ta Qing" designation. The following year, Minh Mang had a jade imperial seal made, just like that of the emperor of China. The seal read the "Royal Seal of Dai Nam's Son of Heaven" (大南天子之璽), and was affixed to all domestic papers as well as diplomatic papers addressed to foreign countries save those to the Qing dynasty (*DNTL*, Part II, Vol. 200, pp. 16a-b). In 1844, Emperor Thrieu Tri, too, ordered the production of an imperial seal. The seal was to read “Royal Seal of Dai Nam’s Emperor” (大南皇帝之璽) and be affixed to royal edicts.

Upon Emperor Minh Mang’s proclamation of a new name for the kingdom, all books published under royal orders came to bear “Dai Nam.” *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* is a good example. The Qing dynasty was vaguely aware that Vietnam was using “Dai Nam” rather than “Viet Nam,” the name it had authorized. Nevertheless, the Qing dynasty remained silent on the matter and did not interfere (Takeda, 1975, p. 495). This is most likely due to the fact that the Qing dynasty did not have the wherewithal to get involved; it was preoccupied with its fair share of internal and external problems, including its defeat in the Opium War and the Arrow War as well as the upheaval of the Taiping Rebellion. As a matter of fact, no envoys dispatched between China and Vietnam throughout the 16-year period of the Taiping Rebellion.

It may very well be that even in the absence of internal and external troubles, the Qing dynasty would have stayed out of the Nguyen dynasty’s matters. Perhaps because of its rapid decline toward the end of the 18th century, right before the founding of the Nguyen dynasty, the Qing dynasty, unlike the Ming dynasty, regarded Vietnam as being even less important than Liu Qiu. As described earlier, this was evident in order in which the tributary states were listed in *Qingshi Gao*. The differences in the titles of the envoys sent to invest the sovereigns of these two countries are also very telling. While officials from the central government were sent to Liu Qiu, all the envoys sent to the Nguyen dynasty were judicial commissioners of Guangxi province, who were, in effect, provincial officials (Wada, 1975, pp. 554-555). The Qing dynasty and the Nguyen dynasty eventually drifted apart as the former appointed provincial officials to take charge of matters pertaining to the latter.

As the two dynasties became increasingly distant, they also grew increasingly ignorant of one another’s internal state of affairs. A telling example is a rumor that spread in China around the time of the Opium

War—that Vietnam had overwhelmingly defeated the British in 1808. The fact of the matter was that Vietnam and Great Britain had not even fought. Nevertheless, the Chinese firmly believed the groundless rumor. They looked down upon the British navy and even held serious discussions about enlisting the help of the Vietnamese navy to fend off the British (Wade, 1975, pp. 559-561). Eventually, the Chinese did find out that there had not been any war between the Vietnamese and the British. Regardless, Chinese ignorance and non-interference must have intensified the Nguyen dynasty's already existing sense of independence and equality vis-à-vis the Qing dynasty.

As explained, the Vietnamese took great pride in the fact that they had adopted Chinese culture, and was, therefore, civilized. The Vietnamese were even of the opinion that they may not just be equals but actually superior to the alien nation that had come to rule China. The Nguyen dynasty called the people of Qing "Tang people," and this appears indicative of the former's attitude of condescension toward the latter. The following example clearly demonstrates how little the Vietnamese thought of the people of the Qing dynasty. Before the founding of the Nguyen dynasty, Hy Tong (1675-1705) of the Le dynasty issued an edict in 1969 demanding that all Chinese entering Vietnam don Vietnamese hairstyle and dress. His reasoning was that their Manchu style of hair and dress would be offensive to established aesthetics and traditions (*CM*, Vol. 34, pp. 3154-3155; Fujiwara, 1970, pp. 52-53).

The Nguyen dynasty's antagonism and critical attitude toward the Qing dynasty was even more intense. The Nguyen dynasty's sovereigns even went so far as to call the Vietnamese the "Han people" (漢人) or the "Han nation" (漢民). It goes without saying that they regarded the people of the Qing dynasty as alien and barbaric (夷狄) and considered themselves a truly civilized nation. Emperor Minh Mang's sense of cultural superiority was especially pronounced. In 1830, he told his attendants that according to *Qing Hui Dian*, the Qing court officials were following the hair and dress styles of barbarians (蠻夷). He went on to advise that his attendants should avoid dressing like the Qing as the Qing attire and hairstyle went against tradition and looked impudent (*DNTL*, Part II, Vol. 70, p. 2a; Takeda, 1975, pp. 539-540). Emperor Minh Mang also took great pride in his knowledge and skills in writing verse. He analyzed Emperor Qian Long's verse. In a poetry discussion session with his attendants, Emperor Minh Mang commented that although Emperor Qian Long wrote many poems, he only depicted beautiful landscapes (情景) and failed to use refined poetic language (詩語) (*DNTL*, Part II, Vol. 159, p. 29b; Takeda, 1975, p. 541). It is impossible to imagine the head of a vassal state criticizing not only the suzerain state's institutions but also the suzerain emperor's poetry. Nevertheless, Emperor Minh Mang did so. His stance is reflective of the Nguyen monarchs' generally low opinion of Qing institutions and culture. It is also indicative of their belief that the Nguyen dynasty is the true successor of Chinese culture.

The weakening of the Qing dynasty may have also factored into the Nguyen emperors' contempt toward it. In April 1840, Emperor Minh Mang projected the outcome of the Opium War. He explained that he had already learned that Qing dynasty was growing weak. The British had sent their navy to patrol the islands off the coast of Guangdong the year before, but there was no word of the Qing dynasty sending even a single ship to ward off the British. If the British were to return for another attack, the Qing dynasty would not be able to repel them. Emperor Minh Mang thus concluded that the Qing court would blame Lin Ze Xu and would most certainly surrender to the British (*DNTL*, Part II, Vol. 212, p.33b; Woodside, 1971, p.280; Wada, 1975, p.564). The emperor's prediction proved to be exactly on the mark. Lin Ze Xu was dismissed and replaced by a new appointee. It seems as though Emperor Minh Mang was able to make such forecasts using the information in the daily chronicles of the envoys to the Qing and other such sources.

As the Qing dynasty became increasingly enfeebled, Emperor Tu Duc chose to go down an increasingly autonomous path. That is, he did not ask for the Qing dynasty's help when the French first invaded. As is well known, France began its invasion of central Vietnam in 1858. By the following year, in 1859, France had invaded the Citadel of Gia Dinh in the south, and by early 1862, France had control over the three provinces in the east. Emperor Tu Duc did not inform the Qing court. He took matters into his own hands and signed the First Treaty of Saigon, ceding the occupied territories to the French. France advanced further and took over the three provinces to the west as well, and thus, colonized all of southern Vietnam. The fact that Vietnam did not seek China's help may have had to do with the fact that the two countries had not been exchanging envoys since the onset of the Taiping Rebellion. Whatever the reason, Emperor Tu Duc did not even think about asking the Qing dynasty for assistance when the French invaded, not once, but twice.

France did not end its aggressions there. With the goal of invading northern Vietnam as well, France dispatched Francis Garnier in 1873, using the Jean Dupuis incident as an excuse. With just a small force, Garnier managed to take Hanoi as well as the key cities of the Tonkin Delta—Hung Yen, Hai Duong, and Nam Dinh. However, not long after, he was killed in an ambush. At that time, France was dealing with various domestic issues and did not have the means to expand the scope of the war in Vietnam. Consequently, after negotiations, it concluded the Second Saigon Treaty with the Hue Court. It was no different this time around either; Emperor Tu Duc had no intentions of seeking the help of the Qing dynasty nor did he share the contents of the treaty with the Qing. Unlike in the 1860s, the exchange of envoys between the two countries had resumed. This suggests that the Nguyen dynasty's stance may have had something to do with the Qing army's incompetence, which had become abundantly clear toward the end of the Taiping Rebellion.

Prior to the Garnier incident, the Nguyen dynasty asked for the Qing dynasty's help when Wu Kun and Huang Chong Ying—rebel leaders—and their forces fled to the northern region of the Tonkin Delta after the Taiping Rebellion had been more and less suppressed. However, the Qing troops were not only unable to capture the opposition forces but actually inflicted damage on the peasants in the region. Upon Wu's death, the Nguyen dynasty appointed one of Wu's men to a government post and had him wipe out Huang's force. The strategy was successful. It is obvious the incident made Emperor Tu Duc realize that the Qing dynasty was unreliable and motivated him to take matters into his own hands. But then again, this probably was a natural course of action for the Nguyen dynasty to take; after all, it regarded the Qing tributary system only as a matter of formality.

At the time of the founding of the Nguyen dynasty, there was even more to Vietnamese cultural pride, which was reinforced by the rapid decline of the Qing dynasty—a dynasty founded by an alien nation. This pride had a major influence on the establishment of Vietnam's own world order comprising its neighboring empires. One Japanese scholar described the Vietnamese world order as a "Chinese empire in the South" (Tsuboi, 1983, pp. 149-165). "Chinese empire in the South" may seem like a reasonable moniker for the Nguyen dynasty's world order given that it was modeled after the Chinese tributary system. However, because it is reminiscent of "Little China"—an appellation for Vietnam that had been in use until the early 1950s, the expression may not be altogether appropriate. Rather, "Dai Nam world order," which I had devised in one of my previous works, may be more apt (Yu, 1994, pp. 81-87). The reasoning is that although the Nguyen dynasty had adopted Chinese institutions and culture, it was an independent state, not a part of China. This understanding appears all the more convincing by the fact that Emperor Minh Mang and Emperor Thieu Tri affixed diplomatic papers with imperials seals that read "Dai Nam."

Not long after it had gained independence from China, Vietnam began to apply the Chinese concept of "the civilized versus the barbarian" on its smaller neighbors and treated them accordingly. For instance, Le Hoan, the founder of the Early Le dynasty (980-1009), is said to have refused tributes from the king of Champa claiming that the latter had failed to observe proper decorum (Chen, 1984, p. 194). It is also recorded that Chenla (present-day Cambodia) had paid tribute in 1012, in the early years of Ly Thai To's reign (Chen, 1984, p. 210). The successive dynasties of Vietnam continued to rule over the neighboring empires with a sense of political and cultural superiority but not in a systematic fashion. It was not until the Nguyen dynasty, and in particular, during the reign of Emperor Minh Mang, that the Vietnamese world order was fully conceptually systematized. *Ming Menh Chinh Yeu*, which records Emperor Minh Mang's political ideologies, features the first instance of a separate section on Vietnam's tributary system under "*nhu vien*," which literally means "accommodate the distant." Also in *Dai Nam Hoi Dien Su Le*, published in 1855, there is a separate section on "*nhu vien*" in addition to a section on "*bang giao*" that deals with Nguyen dynasty's relations with the Qing dynasty.

The concept of "*nhu vien*" was first used during the reign of Emperor Gia Long. In 1815, he listed 13 countries as "tributaries (來貢國) from distant lands (遠方)": England, Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Tran Ninh (plateau in eastern Laos), Myanmar, France, and two other countries, which the Vietnamese called "Water Haven" and "Fire Haven." In reality, however, this list should have included Cambodia and comprised 14 countries. The reason being, after the listing of the 13 countries, there is also mention of Cambodia presenting a golden bowl and addressing Emperor Gia Long as "*thien hoang de*" (emperor) (*Quoc su di-bien*, 1965, p. 88). Emperor Gia Long believed that these countries were paying tribute in admiration of his virtues and in recognition of his authority. This was akin to what the emperors of China believed about China's tributaries. The following account in *Quoc su di-bien* provides evidence of Emperor Gia Long's belief: "Not only neighboring countries, such as Myanmar, Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Fire Haven, but also savage alien nations, such as France and England, which the Qing dynasty and the Siamese fear, all came to submit to Emperor Minh Mang's virtue and authority" (*Quoc su di-bein*, 1965, p. 312; Wada, 1975, p. 562). Ultimately, the leaders of the Nguyen dynasty were touting Vietnam's cultural superiority over its neighbors. A case in point: in the "Monograph on Foreign States" of *Dai Nam chinh bien liet truyen so tap*, "Cao Mian," a Chinese term that refers to Cambodia, was altered to "Cao Man" (the country of the upper barbarians) (*LTST*, Vol. 31, p. 1a). In the meantime, Vietnam's sense of cultural superiority was also reflected in its insistence on the duty to enlighten alien savages through the observation of proper decorum. Emperor Minh Mang, for instance, noted that although Fire Haven did not use written scripts, its customs were simple. He bestowed the tribal chief with the name "Vinh Bao" and raised his status to king in the Nguyen dynasty's tributary system (*LTST*, Vol. 32, pp. 35a-b).[9]

It goes without saying that through the Dai Nam world order—modeled after the Chinese tributary system, Vietnam stipulated rules and restrictions for its vassal states that were similar to those set forth by China for its tributaries. Accordingly, Vietnam devised detailed regulations regarding when and for which occasions tributary envoys should be sent to Vietnam, what they should bring as tributes, how many envoys there should be in each delegation, and the specific routes the delegations should take. Naturally, the Nguyen dynasty also bestowed its tributaries various gifts in accordance with their respective standing in the Dai Nam world order.

However, it cannot be denied that the Dai Nam world order was even more of a one-sided conception on the part of the Nguyen dynasty than the Chinese tributary system was on the part of the Chinese. The reason is that Vietnam was considerably smaller than China. The rulers of the Nguyen dynasty were aware of this and tried to strengthen its authority by maximizing the number of its vassal states. As a result, two tribal groups the Nguyen dynasty itself could not even clearly identify—Water Haven and Fire Haven[10] —were labeled "countries." Along the same line, Emperor Gia Long, in 1815, listed not only Great Britain and France but also Myanmar as the Nguyen dynasty's tributary states. Myanmar had had no contact with the Nguyen dynasty until some time between 1822 and 1823. When a Vietnamese merchant ship became marooned in Myanmar in 1822, Myanmar used it as an opportunity to dispatch its first delegation of envoys to the Nguyen dynasty to request the latter to sever diplomatic ties with Siam. Myanmar's request shows that it considered itself Vietnam's equal and not a vassal state (*LTST*, Vol. 33, p. 2a-3b; *Minh Menh Chinh Yeu*, Vol. 25, pp. 9a-b; Woodside, 1971, p. 239).

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[9] It is listed as "Water Haven" in *Kham Dinh Dai Nam Hoi Dien Su Le, vol. 8,* and Woodside follows this nomenclature.

Siam was listed in the same category as countries such as Fire Haven and Water Haven in *Dai Nam chinh bien liet truyen so tap*, among others. Yet, this too, was but a one-sided classification on the part of the Nguyen dynasty. In 1809, the king of Siam sent a delegation to the Nguyen dynasty to notify the Vietnamese of the death of Siam's viceroy. The royal attendants wanted to turn the envoys away, citing that their literary style was arrogant and insolent. Emperor Gia Long, on the other hand, permitted the envoys' entry out a sense of superiority, pointing out that it was probably just because the envoys were not well versed in Chinese characters (*LTST*, Vol. 33, pp. 2a-3b; *DNTL*, Part I, Vol. 39, pp. 19a-b; Woodside, 1971, p. 259). In letters written by Sima's king, Emperor Gia Long is referred to as the "Buddha King of the Country of Vietnam" (Viet Nam Quoc Phat Vuong). Emperor Gia-long accepted the title without objection (Woodside, 1971, p. 259). Ultimately, for all intents and purposes, the Nguyen dynasty was aware that Siam was its equal and that it was not in a position to argue about formalities.

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[10] Cf. *DNTL*, Part III, Vol. 5, pp. 6b-7a, and Woodside, 1971, p. 238. These two tribes sent envoys only for the purposes of trade. Moreover, they did not even have a word for "tribute" in their language (Tsuboi, 1983, p. 159).

If the Nguyen dynasty did indeed have tributaries in the true sense of the word, the only ones that would fall under the category would be Vientiane (present-day Cambodia) and Luang Prabang (present-day Laos). King Ang Chan of Cambodia was invested as the King of Cao Mian as per Emperor Gia Long's orders. At the same time, it was decided that Cambodia would pay tribute once every three years (*LTST*, Vol. 31, p. 6b; Woodside, 1971, p. 240). Thereafter, however, Cambodia became embroiled in a long, drawn-out fight over the throne and split up into two factions. One faction relied on Siam and the other on Vietnam, with each faction paying tribute to the corresponding suzerain state. Then in 1863, Cambodia became a protectorate of France. Chao Anou of the Kingdom of Vientiane was an influential leader. He wanted to break Vientiane free of Siamese control and waged war against Siam in 1827. Chao Anou, however, suffered a major defeat and requested the Nguyen dynasty for assistance. Emperor Minh Mang accepted the request and sent Chao Anou back to Vientiane with a convoy of military escorts. Again finding himself subjected to pressure from Siam, Chao Anou fled to Tran Ninh. However, Tran Ninh's King Chao Noi handed Chao Anou over to Siam. In seeing the fall of the Kingdom of Vientiane, the Kingdom of Luang Prabang realized that it needed to secure an alliance in order to counter Siam's power. Luang Prabang thus sent tributary envoys to the Nguyen dynasty in 1831 and 1833 despite the fact that the two countries were not on close terms. Nonetheless, Luang Prabang was unable to completely break away from the Siam's sphere of influence (Hall, 1981, p. 476).

In short, the Dai Nam world order was very unstable; it was certainly no match for the Chinese world order, not by a long shot. Be that as it may, it is undoubtedly noteworthy that the Nguyen dynasty, as a gesture of resistance against the Qing dynasty, devised its own world order.

IV. Conclusion

Ngo Si Lien, who compiled *Dai Viet Sy Ky Toan Thu*, lamented the fact that after the death of Ly Bon, who had led a revolt against Chinese rule in 541, Ly Phat Tu succeeded the throne only to surrender to the Sui dynasty: “The North and the South each takes turns being the more powerful. When the North is weak, we are strong. When the North is strong, we are weak. This is simply the way of the heavens and the earth” (Chen, 1984, p. 153).

Unlike during the reign of Ly Phat Tu, at the time of the founding of the Nguyen dynasty, Vietnam was strong and China’s Qing dynasty was weak. Nevertheless, the emperors of the new dynasty adopted the Qing tributary system and were invested by the emperor of the Qing. The Nguyen dynasty’s acceptance of Qing investiture seems to have derived from a precedent set by China during Vietnam’s Le dynasty. When Mac Dang Dung usurped the throne of the Le dynasty, China’s Ming dynasty—which was weak at that time—tried to intervene in Vietnam’s affairs through the use of force. Although Nguyen dynasty had unified Vietnam for the very first time, there was still social instability. Therefore, investiture from the Qing court was important for the Nguyen dynasty’s domestic power consolidation. Furthermore, as aforementioned, the civil war that ensued after the Mac family usurped the throne led to a scarcity of Chinese books within Vietnam, leading to a surge in the demand for them.

This is not to say that the Nguyen dynasty was submissive to the Qing dynasty. A case in point: the Nguyen dynasty got the country’s name changed from “An Nam”—given by China some time back—to “Viet Nam.” The sovereigns of the Nguyen dynasty went even further, at least domestically, and treated Vietnam and China as equals. As with the rulers of past dynasties of Vietnam, they called themselves “emperor,” used reign titles, and termed the dispatch of envoys to the Qing “going to the Qing” (如清).

In some respects, it can be said that this sense of being China's equal became more systematized during the Nguyen dynasty. A telling piece of evidence may be the fact that it was during the Nguyen dynasty that diplomatic relations with China came to be called "*bang giao*" for the first time in Vietnam's history. The systemization of Vietnam's sense of equality during the Nguyen dynasty owes itself to the interplay between the following three factors: cultural advances, Qing dynasty's decline, and the fact that the Qing dynasty was founded by Manchus.

As the he Qing dynasty grew weaker, the diplomatic relations between the Qing dynasty and the Nguyen dynasty became increasingly tenuous and the Nguyen dynasty became more independent in its decision-making and actions. The Nguyen dynasty also had a sense of cultural superiority over the Qing dynasty as the latter had been founded by an alien nation. The Nguyen dynasty did not seek the Qing dynasty's help when the French invaded in the 1860s and the 1870s. It also designated "Dai Nam" as the country's name over "Viet Nam," the latter being the country name that had been authorized by the Qing dynasty. The Nguyen dynasty also came up with its own world order of sorts and considered its neighbors to be its tributaries. These are all intimately tied to the three factors aforementioned.

In sum, although 19th-century Vietnam recognized the authority of the Qing dynasty as the suzerain state through the Qing tributary system, it was mere formality. The reality was that Vietnam was a fully independent country. It was the same as Joseon's case. Although Joseon paid tribute to the Qing dynasty, it was not the Qing dynasty's vassal state; Joseon was a separate, independent country. We frequently make mistakes because we are fettered by formalities. True historians should not make such mistakes, and only by not erring in such a way will they gain credibility.

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