

# Vietnam-China Trade Relations under French Colonial Administration in Late Nineteenth-Century Vietnam

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## Abstract

This article examines the evolution of Sino-Vietnamese commercial relations from 1860 to the end of the nineteenth century, against the backdrop of the French conquest of Vietnam and the imposition of a colonial administration. It situates the historical circumstances that enabled France to intervene in the trade between Vietnam and China—two countries that had long maintained a tributary relationship and continued the exchange of envoys until as late as 1882. By this period, however, such missions had lost their commercial significance and had become purely ceremonial. The interplay between commerce, military intervention, diplomatic negotiations, and the resort to force constituted the necessary prelude to the dramatic commercial treaties involving the three principal actors: Đại Nam (Vietnam), Đại Thanh (China), and Đại Pháp (France). The article further highlights the new features of Sino-Vietnamese trade under French colonial oversight, including statistical data on bilateral exchanges and the reconfiguration of trade routes between the two sides. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how colonial interventions reshaped long-standing regional trading patterns and altered the balance between tributary ritual and commercial pragmatism in late nineteenth-century East Asia.

**Keywords** Vietnam-China relations, nineteenth century, trade, trade tributary relations

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Vietnam–China trade relations in the nineteenth century were far more than conduits for economic exchange; they constituted a complex matrix in which political authority, military presence, cultural norms, and societal dynamics intersected across East Asia. Within this broader geopolitical and commercial landscape, the incursion of Western merchants—most prominently the French—and the imposition of a French administrative regime represented a decisive rupture, profoundly restructuring Vietnam’s traditional commercial networks and altering patterns of regional economic power.

In the latter half of the century, trade between Vietnam and China unfolded along two intertwined yet distinct trajectories. The first, rooted in longstanding practice, encompassed the tributary system, formally endorsed by monarchical authorities, and largely unregulated free commerce along both terrestrial and maritime routes. This channel experienced a marked decline, symptomatic of the erosion of dynastic authority, the inherent limitations of traditional bureaucratic institutions in regulating commerce, and the growing sway of extralegal actors. The second trajectory emerged under the aegis of French intervention, reflecting a deliberate strategy to penetrate the Chinese market via Vietnamese intermediaries and to assert economic influence within a competitive environment of expanding Western imperial presence in East Asia.

While prior scholarship has extensively mapped the tributary trade within the broader panorama of Vietnam–China commercial relations, this study foregrounds the role of French involvement, offering a critical, nuanced analysis of how French policy and administration actively reshaped the commercial architecture of Vietnam–China interactions in the late nineteenth century, setting precedents for colonial economic strategies and regional power negotiations.

## 1. Scholarship on Nineteenth-Century Vietnam-China Trade Relations

From the perspective of “state” versus private actors, existing scholarship reveals a clear imbalance, with research tending overwhelmingly toward state-centered relations. Within this framework, studies have focused chiefly on interactions at the highest political level—namely, court-to-court relations—particularly the tributary system and the forms of court-directed commerce associated with it. Such emphasis reflects the structure of the available sources, which consist largely of official records documenting diplomatic exchanges and state-regulated trade.

By contrast, commercial activities involving private merchants have received far less attention, largely because they left fewer formal traces in official documentation. As a result, the historiography of nineteenth-century Vietnam-China trade has been shaped primarily by materials that foreground state-led interactions, giving prominence to diplomatic and ceremonial dimensions over the more routine practices of private commerce.

Nevertheless, this article also reviews several studies that address aspects of private trade—an arena that was inherently unstable due to shifting court regulations and, at times, outright prohibitions. These works, though fewer in number, offer valuable insights into the ways private traders operated within (and sometimes beyond) the constraints imposed by the courts.

### 1.1. Scholarship on Vietnam-China trade in tributary relations

The Vietnam-China tributary relationship has become an academic platform attracting the research of many scholars, with numerous studies highlighting the crucial role of tributary relations in the exchange of goods between Vietnam and China throughout history, and particularly during the nineteenth century (Fairbank 1942, Yu 2009, Anderson 2013, Feng 2019, Li 2012, Nguyen 2022). Fairbank’s seminal study (1942) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the origins, de-

velopment, and eventual decline of the East Asian tributary system with China as the center. The author situates the tributary system within a cultural and ritualistic framework, emphasizing that it was fundamentally rooted in the perception of Chinese cultural superiority and the moral hierarchy of Confucian cosmology (Fairbank 1942, 129–132). Tribute was not merely a diplomatic instrument but a ceremonial practice through which neighboring states acknowledged the civilizational centrality of China. The material contributions of tributary missions were largely symbolic, valued more for their uniqueness and local specificity than for their economic worth.

The study also traces the evolution of commercial interactions within the tributary framework, as Fairbank (1942, 138) notes, “Tribute as a cloak for trade”. Trade initially developed along the overland Silk Road connecting China with Western regions through Russia, Central Asia. Subsequently, maritime tribute trade expanded through Southeast Asia and South Asia, culminating in the famous expeditions of the eunuch Cheng Ho in the early fifteenth century. Over time, the economic dimension of the tributary system became increasingly prominent, as commercial motives often surpassed the ritual and diplomatic aspects of tribute. This is evident in maritime tributaries such as Ryukyu and Siam, where tribute missions became more frequent than statutorily required, largely reflecting trade activity rather than ceremonial obligation.

The arrival of Western trade in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries further fragmented the tributary system. Commerce from European nations flowed into the pre-existing channels of Chinese maritime trade, increasing the volume of economic activity while leaving the Confucian bureaucracy intellectually unprepared to confront this new reality. Ironically, the heightened frequency of tributary missions in the early 19th century from countries like Ryukyu and Siam—stimulated by trade—reinforced traditional ceremonial forms, even as the underlying commercial logic eroded the authority of the system (Fairbank 1942, 145).

Despite this broader trend, certain states, notably Korea and Vietnam, maintained the ritualistic and cultural essence of tributary relations, continuing to observe the traditional ceremonial forms alongside their

commercial engagements. Their adherence illustrates the persistence of the cultural-ritual core of the system, even as the economic dimension increasingly dominated the practical functioning of Chinese foreign relations.

Feng Chao (2019) offers a comprehensive review of scholarship on the Chinese tributary system by Japanese and Chinese researchers, highlighting its multifaceted cultural, political, and economic dimensions. From a cultural perspective, he cites scholars such as Nishijima, Watanabe, Xing, He, and Huang, who interpret the system in terms of ritual practice, Confucian values, and symbolic authority, emphasizing China's central role in structuring the East Asian order. Economically, Feng draws on Hamashita's analysis, which frames the tributary system as an extensive network of trade and tribute linking China with neighboring states. Politically, these studies underscore a center-periphery configuration, wherein China exercised influence over peripheral polities through hierarchical relations and soft power. Collectively, these works suggest that the tributary system functioned simultaneously as a practical mechanism for interstate interaction and as a symbolic framework reflecting a China-centered regional order. Feng further notes that political science and international relations scholars have sought to interpret the tributary system through the lens of cultural and political hierarchies, drawing parallels with Westphalian conceptions of interstate order. In practice, he concurs with Fairbank that tributary relations were not uniform: certain groups, particularly in western regions, were more commercially oriented and eventually evolved into robust trade networks, whereas the East Asian group—including Vietnam and Korea—retained predominantly cultural and ritualized relations with China.

The Vietnam-China tributary model has also been examined by James Anderson from a realist perspective. While questioning Fairbank's assertion that tributary missions primarily served as a disguised vehicle for trade (Anderson 2013, 261), Anderson argues that the tribute relationship nonetheless created structured opportunities for commodity exchange. He emphasizes tributary relations as "fluid opportunities to negotiate the balance of status and authority existing between Chinese and

Vietnamese rulers” (Anderson 2013, 261), oriented toward three principal domains: commercial objectives, border security, and domestic political considerations (Anderson 2013, 260). Drawing on analyses of specific tributary missions, Anderson identifies historical fluctuations in the relative strength of the two states. His framework delineates periods of “political asymmetry,” including Strong China/Weak Vietnam during the pre-Qin empire (before 221 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), the Sui-Tang era (581–907), the Ming annexation (1407–1427), and the Southern and Northern courts period of Vietnam (1533–1592). Conversely, periods of Strong China/Strong Vietnam are associated with the Đinh-Trần dynasties (968–1400), the Later Lê dynasty (1427–1527), and potentially the Lê Trung Hưng period and early Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1858). Weak China/Strong Vietnam is identified during 907–960, following the Tang collapse and throughout the Five Dynasties period. Finally, the asymmetry of Weak China/Weak Vietnam prevailed from the Opium War to the French conquest of Vietnam (1840–1885).

Yu illustrates this “weak China” phenomenon with the temporary suspension of Vietnam’s tributary missions for sixteen years following the outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion in 1851, only to be restored in 1868. The symbolic nature of the tributary relationship is further underscored by the Qing court’s continued listing of Vietnam and Korea as tributaries in the 1899 edition of the *Ta Qing Hui Dian*, despite Vietnam’s recognition of French protection in 1884 and France and Japan’s acknowledgment of Korean independence in 1894 (Yu 2009, 85). Aware of China’s weakened position, Vietnam refrained from seeking Chinese intervention during the French assault on Đà Nẵng in 1858 or the subsequent campaign to occupy Cochinchina in 1859, and similarly did not inform China when ceding Cochinchina under the 1862 treaty or opening ports to trade in 1874, all while maintaining tributary missions after 1868 (Yu 2009, 107). Furthermore, Yu emphasizes that the early Nguyễn dynasty, conscious of Vietnam’s cultural distinctiveness and encouraged by the Qing’s rapid decline—a dynasty established by a foreign ethnic group—constructed its own vision of a “Đại Nam world order,” adopting Chinese institutions and culture yet retaining political independence (Yu 2009, 108).

Despite its symbolic character, the tributary system also possessed a functional dimension, particularly in facilitating trade. Economic considerations were a significant factor motivating the Nguyễn dynasty to maintain tributary ties with the Qing court. Unlike contemporary free-market conditions, both the Qing and Nguyễn dynasties restricted private trade. Consequently, the tributary system mediated state-regulated commerce: Qing merchants were permitted limited trade in Vietnam, whereas the Nguyễn court strictly prohibited Vietnamese merchants from traveling to China and even restricted personal travel abroad. Within these constraints, tributary missions became essential for procuring state-required goods, meticulously specified for envoys to acquire for imperial use, official gifts, or rewards. Envoys could face penalties for failing to obtain designated items (Yu 2009, 97–98). Contrary to assumptions that the Nguyễn dynasty engaged in trade with China for profit or commercial expansion, the primary objective of tributary missions was to obtain rare and unique commodities unavailable domestically. These goods—ranging from exotic items to luxurious objects—served not only the imperial household but also reinforced authority by being distributed as gifts or rewards to officials and envoys, thereby consolidating administrative and political networks (Yu 2009, 99).

Li Tana offers a nuanced portrayal of Vietnam-China commercial relations in the nineteenth century, concentrating primarily on the first half of the century, and identifies two principal channels of exchange: tributary commerce and unregulated trade along overland and maritime routes. Tributary trade was instrumental in the movement of goods, as missions not only transported tribute items serving state objectives but also carried substantial personal merchandise, occasionally surpassing the volume of official consignments (Li 2012, 73). Li notes that “members carried so much of their own cargos that they hired four to five thousand laborers at each courier station to transport their goods” (Li 2012, 73). Beyond the official mission pathways, she further underscores the overland and maritime networks that facilitated unregulated commerce between China and Vietnam, enabling the circulation of significant commodities and sustaining robust economic interactions across borders.

## 1.2. Literature on Private Trade Activities between Vietnam and China

Trade with China occupied a central position in Vietnam's foreign commerce during the first half of the nineteenth century, following the Nguyễn court's imposition of restrictions on Western traders due to concerns over national security and cultural conflicts. Commercial exchanges between the two countries were relatively vibrant, conducted primarily by sea, with Chinese merchants playing a particularly significant role. Statistical records of the Nguyễn dynasty indicate that in the first half of the nineteenth century, hundreds of Chinese vessels arrived annually at Vietnamese ports, carrying substantial quantities of goods and numerous passengers—including Chinese merchants seeking commercial opportunities or permanent settlement in Vietnam. Conversely, these ships also transported goods and Vietnamese passengers to China, possibly involving human trafficking (Nguyễn 1971, 252–280; Đỗ 2019, 115–140; Trung, 1981, 59–65).

According to Nguyễn Thế Anh, beginning in the reign of Gia Long (1802–1820), vessels belonging to Qing merchants were required to display distinctive identifying marks; moreover, ships arriving from different Chinese provinces—such as Hainan, Chaozhou, Guangdong, Fujian, and Shanghai—were instructed to fly different flags corresponding to differentiated tax rates. The state further regulated the weighing and measurement of ships as the basis for tax assessment, reflecting an early effort to systematize maritime trade supervision.

Under Minh Mạng (1820–1840), these regulatory measures were reinforced and extended. Western merchants were permitted to dock and trade only at the port of Đà Nẵng, a restriction motivated by the court's concerns over national security and cultural conflict. Several commodities were prohibited from export, including agarwood, aloeswood, gold, silver, and copper coins; conversely, certain goods imported from China could not be sold to private individuals because their purchase was monopolized by the state. These policies revealed an increasingly stringent framework designed to assert royal control over foreign commerce and

regulate both the movement of goods and the conduct of traders (Nguyễn 1971, 256-258).

Trương Thị Yên (1981, 64) indicates that the Nguyễn court granted Chinese merchants a number of privileges, including lax oversight of Qing vessels entering Vietnamese ports—particularly those carrying consumer goods intended for court use. Taking advantage of this leniency, many Chinese merchants evaded taxes and smuggled prohibited goods into Vietnam. She also notes that along the border regions with China, the Nguyễn court established *bạc dịch trường*—marketplaces intended to attract residents and merchants from both sides of the frontier to engage in trade and exchange goods. Particularly in Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn, the Court set up *giao tử vụ*, a form of banking institution modeled on Chinese practices that allowed transactions to be conducted using promissory notes. The establishment of such *giao tử vụ* in Cao Bằng, a key border region, suggests a deliberate policy to encourage and facilitate cross-border commercial activities (Trương 2006, 69-72).

Taken together, scholarship on nineteenth-century Vietnam-China relations shows that the tributary system functioned not only as a diplomatic framework but also as an important channel of commercial exchange. Tributary missions routinely carried both official gifts and private merchandise, enabling the circulation of goods within a stable yet flexible regional order. Alongside this tributary trade, private commercial activity between the two countries was remarkably vibrant. Following the Nguyễn court's restrictions on Western traders, China became Vietnam's primary external partner, with hundreds of Chinese vessels arriving annually at Vietnamese ports. These ships transported substantial quantities of goods and numerous passengers, including merchants seeking economic opportunities or long-term settlement, while also carrying Vietnamese products and travellers to China.

Yet, while the tributary system and private Sino-Vietnamese trade are well documented, the commercial activities introduced by the French—particularly under the early colonial administration—remain comparatively underexplored. The French presence introduced a nascent but significant layer of trade that interacted with and gradually reshaped

existing Vietnam–China networks, yet the extent, organization, and economic impact of these interventions require further scholarly attention. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of late nineteenth-century Vietnam–China commerce necessitates integrating the entrenched tributary framework with the emergent French commercial influence, highlighting both continuity and transformation in regional trade practices.

## **2. France and the Ambition to Connect Trade with China**

### **The Motives Behind the Conquest of Vietnam**

#### **2.1. France’s Ambition for Expanding Commerce in the Far East**

France’s engagement in trade with Vietnam—and more broadly with China and the Far East—formally commenced in the seventeenth century. Compared with other European powers, such as Portugal, the Netherlands, England, or even Denmark, which had established an early foothold in Asia, France’s entry into the region was relatively belated. It was not until 1664 that France founded the French East India Company, designed as a vehicle to penetrate Asian markets and to compete within the maritime trade networks already dominated by earlier European rivals (Thompson 1937; Cady 1954; Heijmans 2019; Cussen 2023).

Among the earliest French visitors to Vietnam whose accounts have proven invaluable—later serving as a reference and source of inspiration for subsequent French and foreign travelers—was the Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes (1591–1660). In his writings, de Rhodes highlighted Vietnam’s attractiveness not only for its abundance of natural resources and fertile lands but also for its strategic geographical proximity to China, a gateway that numerous European states of the period sought to access. He underscored Tonkin’s prime location as an ideal site for stimulating trade and ensuring the success of economic ventures. The region attracted a substantial presence of Chinese merchants, who brought porcelain and printed fabrics in exchange for silk and agarwood. De Rhodes

foresaw that, should European merchants establish trading bases in Vietnam, they would encounter exceptionally promising markets<sup>1</sup> (Desfosses 1883, 5).

Vietnam's rich natural resource and its geographical proximity to China left a strong impression on the missionaries, who played the dual role of merchant and missionary (Thompson 1937, 22). Consequently, they vigorously advocated the establishment of a French trading base in Tonkin, affirming that French commerce would find abundant opportunities for development in this region, yielding considerable profits. It is evident that the bombardment of Đà Nẵng in 1858 and the conquest of Cochinchina in 1859 formed part of an ambition that French colonial circles had been nurturing for over two centuries.

After securing the three provinces of southern Cochinchina, the French administration planned an expedition into the interior of southern China via the Mekong River. The Mekong Exploration Mission (1866–1868), initially led by Doudart de Lagrée and later by Francis Garnier, aimed to assess the river's potential as a commercial artery linking Cochinchina to Yunnan. Despite confronting formidable natural obstacles and severe health risks, the mission produced essential geographic, ethnographic, and scientific knowledge, shaping France's strategic and colonial ambitions in Indochina.

The vicissitudes that thwarted French colonial ventures in the Far East—ranging from an abortive invasion of Korea in 1866, through the Tientsin insurrection which claimed the life of the French consul, to the crushing humiliation of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871—proved insufficient to temper the nation's imperial ardor. Such unwavering determination was especially pronounced among fervent young actors like Francis Garnier, as well as among enterprising merchants such

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<sup>1</sup> By 1882, when France launched its second military campaign in Tonkin, the de Rhodes's observations were recalled at the Paris Conference on Commercial Geography, underlining the importance of Tonkin to France's ambition to trade with China. Castonnet-Desfosses, a member of the French Society of Geography, cited de Rhodes and other missionaries' regarding the favorable geographical position of Vietnam within the global commercial routes (Desfosses, 1883).

as Jean Dupuis, who ceaselessly pursued opportunities to extend French influence and secure footholds in the region.

The doctrine linking colonialism with the imperative of market expansion was clearly manifested in the first French attack on Tonkin, provoked by the merchant Jean Dupuis. In his correspondence with Admiral Dupré, then the Governor of Cochinchine, Dupuis argued that whoever first set foot in Tonkin would be able to secure easy lines of communication with southwestern China. In April and May of 1873, Dupuis began exchanging letters with the French Ministry of the Navy, urging attention to Tonkin on the grounds of its commercial connections with China. “This country”, he wrote, “borders China and constitutes the natural gateway to the wealthy southwestern provinces of the empire—a matter of vital importance for the future of French domination in the Far East” (Dupuis 1898, 27)

Central to France’s ambition to assert control over Vietnam was the dual impetus of rivalry with Britain and the allure of the immense wealth the latter had accumulated through resource extraction in its South and East Asian colonies—an enticement that made the prospect of colonial conquest particularly compelling. In practice, the British had long sought access to these lucrative Chinese markets, which represented significant commercial opportunities. Admiral Dupré further argued that, should Vietnamese authority over these territories collapse under the strain of internal upheaval, a foreign power could easily establish a foothold in Tonkin, thereby becoming France’s immediate competitor and neighbor in the Far East—or alternatively, China itself might consolidate its dominion over the Red River region. Moreover, France sought to be the sole European power sharing a border with southern China, the most densely populated and economically prosperous region of the Qing empire—a strategic position that would enhance French influence and access to trade in the Far East. To preclude such scenarios, Dupré contended that it was essential to secure a French presence in Tonkin “as the ally of Tu Duc, in order to restore his authority and ensure its respect” (Dupuis 1898, 28).

To avoid being sidelined like Belgium or Switzerland, the propo-

nents of the Tonkin expedition argued that France had to act decisively. They emphasized that France's commercial activity lagged behind other European powers: Germany was expanding its trade and merchant navy tonnage, while Britain already commanded an Asian empire of 250 million people, with India alone generating 3.2 billion francs in external trade. Remaining passive, clinging to the status quo, and engaging in fruitless quarrels would, in their view, effectively sign France's death warrant as a great power within a century. By establishing a foothold in Tonkin—at the mouth of the Red River—France could access the western provinces of China and eastern Tibet, control a vast flow of commerce, dominate eastern Indochina, create a new colonial empire, and secure recognition of its supremacy from over twenty million people (Desfosses 1883)

## 2.2 The French Conquest of Vietnam and Seeking Commercial Connections with China

Beginning with the attack on Đà Nẵng in 1858 and followed by the successive campaigns in Cochinchina (1859–1867) and Tonkin (1873–1882), France advanced step by step to dismantle Vietnam's territorial integrity and political autonomy, while simultaneously seeking to open a commercial route deep into southern China via the Red River. This vision was strongly fueled by the French trader Jean Dupuis, whose extensive experience in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands and close ties with Yunnan officials enabled him to obtain permission to navigate the Red River. Sailing under the dual insignia of the French flag and the banner of the Viceroy of Yunnan, Dupuis used the pretext of “bandit suppression” to transport goods and arms into Tonkin—an enterprise that violated Vietnamese regulations and escalated regional tensions. His reports portraying the Red River as a navigable corridor linking the East Sea to the mineral-rich interior of Yunnan elevated Tonkin into a strategic priority for policymakers in Paris, shaping the logic behind French interventions in 1873 and 1882 and ultimately paving the way for the full-scale conquest of the region.

Throughout this process, Qing China—despite its nominal suzerainty over Vietnam within the tributary framework—offered virtually no substantive intervention. Capitalizing on both Vietnam’s military vulnerability and China’s strategic hesitation, France coerced the Nguyễn court into a series of unequal treaties that steadily expanded French authority over Việt Nam.

After seizing Vietnamese territory by force, France compelled the Nguyễn court to sign treaties couched in remarkably euphemistic language, such as the “Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Cession between France, Spain, and Annam” (commonly known as the Treaty of Saigon, signed in 1862), followed by the Philastre Treaty of 1874 (often referred to as the Second Treaty of Saigon). Central to these agreements were provisions on commercial liberalization, including the opening of ports and the regulation of trade. At the same time, the treaties prominently affirmed Vietnam’s status as an “independent” state—a formulation that enabled France to avert potential diplomatic complications with China. In practice, this clause strategically positioned China at a disadvantage in the diplomatic confrontations that would unfold with France over the question of Vietnam.

Despite the confirmation of Vietnam as an independent state in the first article of the Treaty of 1874, in Article 2, France asserted its protective role over Đại Nam<sup>2</sup>: “If Đại Nam is invaded or disturbed by foreign enemies and the King of Đại Nam requests assistance, the King of France shall immediately provide support as circumstances require, with all expenses borne by France itself” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 8, 9). Likewise, Article 3 reinforced French protection in the sphere

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<sup>2</sup> In the main text, the modern term “Vietnam” is used for consistency. However, direct quotations preserve the historical nomenclature found in the original sources. Under Emperor Gia Long, the title “Việt Nam” was formally adopted in 1804; this was later changed to “Đại Nam” by Emperor Minh Mạng in 1838. Accordingly, excerpts from nineteenth-century Nguyễn documents cited in this article retain the designations “Việt Nam” or “Đại Nam,” depending on the period of the original text. The French colonial sources frequently use the term “Annam” to refer to Vietnam. In addition, “Annam” also refers to the central region of Vietnam, along with Tonkin (North) and Cochinchine (South).

of foreign relations: “The King of Đại Nam, in return for this promised assistance, agrees that any communication with foreign states must be discussed with France. If there have been prior relations and exchanges of envoys with a certain country, these may continue unchanged. However, should Đại Nam wish to conduct trade or negotiate commercial treaties with other states, such treaties must not contravene the existing agreements between Đại Nam and France. When concluding such treaties, the Nguyễn court must inform the French court in advance” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 8, 10).

The French government was determined to exclude China from discussions over Tonkin, treating the matter as a bilateral issue with Đại Nam alone. They even fabricated—or deliberately exploited—a supposed misunderstanding of the texts in order to pressure the Qing court into acknowledging that ‘Vietnam was an independent state, no longer a vassal of the Qing.’ This would facilitate the conclusion of the 1874 treaty, through which France sought to assert its protectorate over Tonkin and Annam<sup>3</sup>. In early 1882, Gambetta, then Prime Minister of France, made it clear to Marquis Tseng of China—who played a central role in Qing diplomacy with the West—that France would not accept “the Chinese government disputing a treaty that had existed and been in effect for nearly eight years”. In May of the same year, de Freycinet, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, reinforced this position, stating that measures related to the implementation of the 1874 treaty “concern only the two signatory nations, and therefore we have nothing to explain to the Chinese government” (Billot 1888, 6).

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<sup>3</sup> A story of diplomatic misunderstanding circulated at the time. Acting on behalf of the Qing, Prince Kong sent a letter to the French side rejecting certain clauses of the 1874 Treaty, particularly Article 2, which stipulated that “The King of France recognizes that the King of Annam exercises sovereignty and is not subordinate to any other state.” Prince Kong insisted that Vietnam remained a “vassal” of China. However, in translation from Chinese into French, the interpreter rendered the verb in the past tense rather than the present: instead of “Vietnam has been a Chinese vassal,” it was rendered as “Vietnam was a Chinese vassal.” The French consequently interpreted this as referring solely to the past and proceeded to ratify the treaty on March 15, 1874 (Chere 1978, 15).

Following the 1874 Treaty, France established a network of intermediary diplomatic representatives in Tonkin and Annam. Rheinart was appointed *Chargé d'affaires* in Huế, Kergaradec became Consul in Hanoi, Truc in Haiphong, while on the Vietnamese side Nguyễn Thành Ý served as Consul in Saigon. However, French envoys were not allowed direct access to the emperor and had to communicate through the *Thương bạc* officials<sup>4</sup>. Exchanges thus grew increasingly strained, as the Nguyễn court officials deliberately created obstacles, while Emperor Tự Đức himself displayed open hostility.

At the same time, the Nguyễn court continued to dispatch tribute missions to the Qing in 1873, 1877, and 1880, in accordance with the triennial custom of presenting gifts and reporting local conditions. These missions heightened French anxieties over potential Chinese intervention in Tonkin. Patenotre, the French commissioner in China, together with the envoy Burrée in Beijing, repeatedly reported to Paris urging measures to forestall Qing involvement, thereby facilitating France's control over Vietnam.

Meanwhile, in the northern borderlands, trade routes with China—especially at Lào Cai, where the Red River enters Vietnam—fell under the control of the Black Flag Army led by Liu Yongfu. Following their victory at Cầu Giấy in 1873, which forced French troops to withdraw from Tonkin, Liu earned the trust of the Huế court and was allowed to oversee the Sino-Vietnamese trade route along the Red River. A commercial survey led by Consul Kergaradec observed that the trade in salt—a state monopoly—was subjected to taxes levied by the Black Flags at six times the official rate; in addition, they imposed numerous other levies, payable in silver, opium, tea, or tin (Bradley 2014, 386). Determined both to avenge past military defeats and to open commercial routes, the French resolved to eliminate the Black Flags' influence. For their part, the Qing tacitly supported Liu Yongfu to safeguard southern

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<sup>4</sup> The *Thương bạc* was an institution established under the Nguyễn dynasty, tasked with overseeing commercial activities, collecting taxes, and undertaking diplomatic functions when necessary.

China, fearing that if Tonkin fell under French domination, it would directly threaten their southern frontier. Some Vietnamese historians have argued that the Qing viewed Vietnam as a defensive frontier: “Vietnam is a vassal of the Qing, a protective screen for China. Should Vietnam fall, China itself would be endangered. The French ambition does not merely aim to swallow a fragment of the Southern Land.” (Đặng 1962, 19).

In 1879, Jauréguiberry was appointed Minister of the Navy and Colonies. Together with Foreign Minister Fraycinet, and later Jules Ferry, he became a fervent proponent of establishing a French protectorate in Tonkin. Jauréguiberry sought to convince the French Parliament to act swiftly, both to curtail Chinese influence and to preempt the ambitions of other European powers—such as Britain, Germany, and Spain—keen to extend their commercial and diplomatic reach in Southeast Asia.

Although France had stationed permanent diplomatic representatives in Tonkin and Annam, relations between Huế and the French authorities steadily deteriorated. As Munholland observes, “Tự Đức preferred reconciliation with insurgents such as Liu Yongfu—or even Chinese intervention—over accepting the French” (Munholland 1979, 19). Within the treaty-based Western diplomatic framework imposed by France, the Nguyễn court was unable to secure any substantive concessions, despite Emperor Tự Đức’s hope that negotiation might lead to revisions of the imposed terms. Two missions to China between the two Tonkin campaigns (1877 and 1880) proved largely ceremonial, accomplishing little to forestall the second French invasion, which ultimately culminated in the 1884 treaty formally recognizing the French protectorate over Tonkin and Annam.

Not only did France impose pre-drafted treaties on the Nguyễn court without allowing any genuine negotiation, but the French authorities also pursued a policy of ‘gunboat diplomacy’ toward China, forcing the Qing to accept diplomatic terms under the pressure of military force.

After France occupied Hanoi in April 1882, Emperor Tự Đức appealed to the Qing court for support. In response, the Qing government dispatched additional troops to reinforce the regular military forces stationed in border provinces such as Cao Bang and Lang Son. It was pre-

cisely at this point that China officially entered the Sino-French negotiations concerning Tonkin.

These negotiations were marked by numerous misunderstandings and delays on both sides. Chinese representatives, such as Li Hongzhang and the Zongli Yamen<sup>5</sup>, often adopted a conciliatory and amicable tone toward French proposals, leading French envoys—including Bourée and later Tricou—to believe that their demands were broadly acceptable to the Qing court and to transmit correspondingly optimistic reports back to Paris. However, within the Qing bureaucracy, influential anti-French factions—most notably figures such as Marquis Tseng—actively sought to repudiate agreements, even those already concluded. This internal discord repeatedly derailed diplomatic progress and ultimately compelled France to resort to coercive measures, including targeted military operations along Qing territory and the imposition of indemnities as instruments of negotiation.

The negotiations between the two sides ultimately compelled China and France to sign the Tientsin Treaties twice—first in 1884 and again in 1885—thereby formalizing China’s withdrawal of its troops from Tonkin and its recognition of the treaties previously concluded between France and Vietnam. On 11 May 1884, the Tientsin Treaty was formally signed for the first time. It comprised four articles: In the first provision, France committed to respecting and safeguarding China’s southern borders adjoining Tonkin against any form of aggression. The second provision required China to immediately withdraw its forces from Tonkin and recognize the established relations between France and the Vietnamese court; the third provision made a formal commitment guaranteeing free trade between Tonkin and the southern provinces of China.

The draft of the Tientsin Treaty initially comprised three articles. Chinese negotiators, however, proposed an additional provision relating to the Harmand Treaty, signed between France and Vietnam on 25 Au-

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<sup>5</sup> In 1861, the Qing court established the Zongli Yamen as an institution in charge of foreign affairs. However, this body remained completely silent regarding the 1874 Treaty between Vietnam and France.

gust 1883. To preserve national honor and avoid perceived humiliation, China requested modifications to the earlier Franco-Vietnamese treaty. This concerned a clause stipulating that France would oversee Annam's relations with all foreign powers, including China. The phrasing of this clause caused offense in Beijing. To accommodate Chinese sensitivities, the French agreed to include a fourth article stating: "The French government undertakes not to use any language in the final treaty with Annam that might compromise the dignity of the Celestial Empire; this treaty shall supersede all previous agreements concerning Tonkin" (Billot 1888, 165). Nearly a month later, on 6 June, the Nguyễn court and France concluded the Patenôtre Treaty, a revision of the Harmand Treaty. Notably, the clause stipulating that "France shall represent Annam in its relations with all powers, including China" was amended by removing the final four words, "including China" (y compris la Chine), aligning with Article 4 of the 11 May 1884 treaty and ensuring that no language would compromise China's prestige in dealings with Vietnam.

However, subsequent developments did not unfold in accordance with the provisions of the treaty. Assuming adherence to the 11 May and 6 June treaties, on 22 June 1884 French forces advanced to Bắc Lệ, Lạng Sơn, intending to take over garrisons from the Chinese army. A sudden shock ensued: Chinese troops opened fire and refused to hand over the positions as stipulated by the Treaty. In a starkly unequal engagement at Bắc Lệ—800 French soldiers facing 10,000 Chinese troops (Billot 1888, 190)—the French were compelled to withdraw. Paris immediately engaged with Beijing and received a reply from Li Hongzhang, the signatory of the Tientsin Treaty, that anti-French factions had emerged, rejecting the agreement. Moreover, officials of the Zongli Yamen conveyed that no provision in the Tientsin Treaty stipulated the evacuation of Lạng Sơn or set a specific date for withdrawal from Tonkinese positions. Invoking Article 2, they argued that the arrangement should be considered preliminary, intended only to prepare for a "formal treaty" and, from their perspective, troop withdrawal would not occur prior to its ratification (Billot 1888, 193).

In addition, China accused France of having humiliated the Qing

court by destroying the imperial seal conferred on the Nguyễn court<sup>6</sup>, an act that contravened Article 4 of the Tientsin Treaty. France, in turn, charged China with unilateral treaty violations and demanded 250 million francs in indemnities, initially planning a strike against the Petchili Gulf, Port Arthur, and Wei-hai-wei.

Following China's violation of the 1884 Tientsin Treaty and its continued support for Qing forces and Liu Yongfu's Black Flags in Tonkin, France issued an ultimatum on 12 July demanding the immediate execution of Article 2—namely, the withdrawal of all Chinese troops from Tonkin—accompanied by an imperial edict published in the Beijing Gazette. China was also required to pay compensation for treaty violations and to reimburse the costs of maintaining French expeditionary forces, estimated at no less than 250 million francs.

While applying diplomatic pressure in Beijing, France simultaneously prepared a decisive naval lever intended to force Chinese compliance. On 13 July, Admiral Courbet was ordered to concentrate all available vessels at Keelung (Taiwan) and Fuzhou, though he was expressly instructed to use force only if attacked so as not to trigger a formal state of war that might compromise ongoing negotiations.

When the deadline expired on 1 August, France occupied the port and coal mines of Keelung, thus transforming the site into a strategic hostage designed to compel Chinese concessions over Tonkin. The subsequent Battle of Fuzhou (23 August) marked one of the most overwhelming naval victories in French colonial history. Despite China's numerical superiority—eleven warships, twelve armed junks, ten torpedo boats, and several fireships—the French squadron, composed of three cruisers, two gunboats, and two torpedo boats, destroyed or incapacitated virtually the entire Chinese fleet. China lost twenty-two vessels, forty of-

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<sup>6</sup> This event was also recorded by the Nguyễn court. After signing the treaty on 6 June 1884, the Nguyễn dynasty destroyed the seal previously granted by the Qing court in order to cast a new one. Prior to this, the French had requested that the seal be returned to the Qing. Nguyễn Văn Tường proposed its destruction to produce a new seal, and the French consented (see Đại Nam thực lục, Volume 9, 75).

ficers, and roughly 2,000 sailors and soldiers (Billot 1888, 236). Courbet then bombarded the shipyard, and within twelve hours all coastal defenses within artillery range were destroyed. The damage inflicted on Fuzhou equalled the war indemnity China would later owe France (Billot 1888, 238).

Subsequent operations consolidated French superiority, including the renewed occupation of Keelung on 4 October and victories at Kep and Chu on 8 and 10 October. The combination of naval dominance, the strategic seizure of Keelung, and French advances in Tonkin left the Qing court with no viable alternative but to negotiate. Ultimately, China agreed to sign the Second Tientsin Treaty (1885), to withdraw all forces from Tonkin, and—most consequentially—to abandon entirely its centuries-old suzerain relationship over Vietnam, thereby recognizing French dominion.

### **3. Vietnam - China Trade Relations from 1860 to the End of the Nineteenth Century**

#### **3.1. The Decline of the Tributary Trade Relations**

Between 1858 and 1885, the Nguyễn dynasty dispatched six embassies to China, in the years 1868, 1870, 1873, 1877, 1880, and 1882. The 1882 mission was primarily sent to seek military assistance rather than to present tribute. Thus, during the period from the French conquest of Cochinchina until 1885, tributary embassies were sent on average once every five years, less frequent than in earlier times when, over the fifty-six years from 1802 to 1858, the Nguyễn court sent twenty embassies, averaging one every three years. In 1868, the Vietnamese mission presented accumulated tribute for the three missed cycles (1856, 1861, 1865), which had been postponed because the Qing court was preoccupied with the Taiping Rebellion.

According to the *Khâm định Đại Nam Hội điển Sự lệ* (Imperial Commissioned Regulations and Precedents of Đại Nam), the Nguyễn dy-

nasty laid out detailed stipulations regarding the protocol and quantity of tribute items to be presented to the Qing court. Beginning in the twentieth year of the Minh Menh's reign, every four years a diplomatic mission was sent to the Qing court (Nội các triều Nguyễn 1993, 311) The prescribed tribute consisted of one pair of elephant tusks, two rhinoceros horns, 100 bolts each of chou silk (thick silk cloth), fine silk, plain silk, and cotton fabric; 300 lạng (approx. 11 kg) of agarwood, 600 lạng (approx. 22 kg) of tóo hương (aloeswood chips), and 45 cân (approx. 27kg) each of cardamom and areca nut (Nội các triều Nguyễn 1993, 312).

The tribute volume increased significantly in 1868 when the Nguyễn court had to provide the offerings for all three missed cycles, making the total four times the usual amount. This practice is recorded in both the Thanh thực lục [Qing Veritable Records (Qing shilu)]<sup>7</sup> and the Đại Nam thực lục [Dainam Veritable Records] (Hồ 2019, 77; Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2007, 1323). In 1661, under the reign of the Qing Emperor Shunzhi, regulations were established regarding the bestowal of rewards to Vietnamese envoys “500 taels of silver, two large embroidered dragon brocades, two decorated brocades, two pieces of damask, ten inner brocades, and ten outer brocades for the king; as well as clothing, silk, and fabric for the envoys.” (Hồ 2019, 39) Over time, this regulation came to be treated as an established convention for bestowing rewards on Vietnamese envoys.

From 1873 onward, with the embassies of 1873, 1877, and 1880, the tribute offerings were reduced by half, marking the visible decline and eventual dissolution of the centuries-old tributary relationship between Vietnam and China. By 1880, the once-vibrant trade activities of Vietnamese embassies had largely ceased. Deveria's *Histoire des relations de la Chine avec L'Annam-Việt Nam du XVIIe au XIX siècle* reports that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Annamese en-

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<sup>7</sup> Drawing from the Qing Veritable Records (Qing shilu), which comprise 4,433 fascicles spanning thirteen reigns of the Qing dynasty, Hồ Bạch Thảo extracted all entries related to Vietnam and compiled them into the two-volume work *Qing Veritable Records: Sino-Vietnamese Relations from the Seventeenth Century to the Early Twentieth Century*.

voys were permitted to open markets for several days, while envoys from Korea and Ryukyu could trade daily (Devéria 1880, 70). Trade was restricted to the official mission period and supervised by local authorities to ensure fairness. By the late nineteenth century, however, tribute missions had become largely ceremonial. The 1877-1878 embassy, for instance, received modest gifts—letters, silk, and animal hides—conveyed by the Governor-General of Guangxi, in stark contrast to the earlier extensive trade and tribute. The report’s language emphasized the Qing court’s status as a “great power” bestowing “special privileges” on a “small state,” reflecting the symbolic rather than material significance of the missions (Devéria 1880, 74-75).

The gradual decline in tribute missions and the symbolic nature of the gifts by the late nineteenth century underscore a broader shift in regional power dynamics. While the Nguyễn court maintained ritualized relations with the Qing, these exchanges no longer provided tangible protection against foreign encroachment. The diminishing material and diplomatic value of the tributary system coincided with the increasing pressure exerted by France through military and diplomatic means, signaling the erosion of Vietnam’s ability to rely on traditional Sinocentric frameworks and the ascendancy of European colonial influence in the region.

### 3.2. Vietnamese - French and Sino - French Trade Treaties

For France, trade relations with China held particularly significant importance. In most treaties concluded with the Nguyễn dynasty, the French side consistently included provisions on “opening seaports for commercial exchange” or “permitting French merchants to travel and trade freely”. In addition, France concluded separate commercial treaties with both the Nguyễn court and the Qing empire. With the former, this was the Treaty of 1874, signed after the completion of the Second Treaty of Saigon; with the latter, these were the Second Tientsin Treaty of 9 June 1885 and the Commercial and Boundary Treaty of 26 June 1887.

Immediately after the signing of the March 1874 treaty regulating the opening of ports to trade, France and the Huế court concluded, in Au-

gust of the same year, a commercial treaty comprising twenty-nine articles. This treaty strategically prioritized trade along the Gia Định-Yunnan route, thereby facilitating direct access to the Chinese interior through Yunnan (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, Vol. 8, 53). While this corridor was promoted for commercial exchange, the treaty simultaneously treated the Qing dynasty on equal footing with other foreign powers, applying identical prohibitions, customs duties, and trade regulations to Qing vessels as to those of other treaty nations (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 8, 53). Goods in transit through Đại Nam along the East Sea-Yunnan route were required to pay a single customs duty upon entry and were thereafter exempt from additional internal levies, although the court retained the right to issue regulations preventing counterfeit or prohibited goods from entering the domestic market (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 8, 53).

A detailed tax regime further specified that goods departing from Gia Định to other Đại Nam ports or directly to Yunnan were entitled to a half-rate tax reduction, contingent upon certification from the French military authority and the Đại Nam consulate in Gia Định (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 8, 54). Conversely, goods traveling from Yunnan or Đại Nam ports to Gia Định were required to temporarily pay the half-reduced tax, with refunds issued upon presentation of valid documentation or a full guarantor (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 8, 64). This system ensured proper tax collection, minimized fraud, and safeguarded merchants' rights while fostering trade along this strategic commercial corridor.

Crucially, the treaty imposed strict prohibitions on transporting firearms, weapons, or ammunition aboard ships along the Yunnan corridor, even for self-defense. Any exceptions required prior authorization from both Vietnamese authorities and the French consul, and such arms were only returned once the vessel had either departed the port or arrived safely in Yunnan (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2007, Vol. 8, 57). This provision highlights French strategic concerns that weapons might be smuggled into Đại Nam with potential support from the Qing court, reflecting a cautious balance between facilitating commerce along a vital continen-

tal corridor and maintaining security and control over military materials.

In November 1874, the French revised the August 1874 treaty by amending Article 6 on authority over tax administration and expenditure. In the August version, the article explicitly stipulated that customs duties payable by both Qing and Đại Nam merchant vessels were to be collected and managed solely by Đại Nam customs authorities, with all decisions regarding their expenditure made independently by Đại Nam officials. In the November supplement, however, this provision was entirely omitted, leaving the article to emphasize only the uniform application of duties and prohibitions, without explicitly reaffirming Đại Nam's autonomous control over tax management and revenue allocation. This alteration signaled a move away from underscoring sovereign fiscal authority toward a formulation prioritizing parity in trade practices among all treaty partners.

Overall, the treaty reflects a deliberate policy aimed at facilitating trade with Yunnan and the Chinese interior, upholding the principle of equal treatment for Qing merchants, and maintaining strict oversight over strategic commodities—particularly weapons—along this critical commercial corridor.

The evolution of import-export administration and the taxation of circulating goods, as reflected in the 1874 and 1884 treaties, reveals a clear transition from Vietnam's nominal authority, exercised with French assistance, to the establishment of full French control. This transformation marked a significant consolidation of French authority over trade regulation and customs revenue in Indochina. Under the 1874 Treaty, customs administration and the collection of duties formally remained under Vietnamese jurisdiction, albeit with the assistance of French personnel (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 8, 63). By contrast, the Patenôtre Treaty of 1884 explicitly stipulated that both customs administration and the collection of duties were to be managed exclusively by the French (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 9, 74).

France also concluded several treaties with China, which emphasized the establishment of a corridor facilitating bilateral trade. The Tientsin Convention of 9 June 1885, comprising ten articles, constituted the

foundational instrument that redefined Franco–Chinese relations following the conclusion of the Sino–French conflict in Tonkin (1884–1885). Although conceived as a peace treaty to end hostilities, it rapidly evolved into a framework for reorganizing the political and economic landscape along the Tonkin–South China frontier. The centrality of commerce is most clearly expressed in Articles 5 to 7, where provisions on cross-border trade, the opening of inland customs posts, and the establishment of consular and commercial representatives reveal the strategic economic logic that underpinned France’s conquest of Tonkin (*Ministère des affaires étrangères* 1885, 285–286).

A pivotal component of the treaty was the creation of formal overland trade routes accessible to both French (and French-protected) merchants and Chinese traders. Two strategic gateways—one at the upper reaches of Lào Cai leading toward Mengzi in Yunnan, and another beyond Lạng Sơn giving access to Guangxi—were designated as inland “treaty ports,” enabling regulated export–import activity under reciprocal administrative oversight. This marked the first time that Qing China agreed to open inland border points to a Western power, a development of immense importance for France, as Tonkin thus became the shortest commercial corridor linking Yunnan to the sea.

Beyond opening the frontier, the treaty authorized France to establish consulates at these commercial points, endowed with powers analogous to those enjoyed in China’s maritime treaty ports. This provision effectively enabled France to implant a permanent commercial–diplomatic presence at the very edge of southern China’s trading networks. By contrast, Chinese consulates in major Tonkinese cities could only be established with French approval, a clause designed to inhibit the extension of Qing administrative influence over France’s new protectorate (*Ministère des affaires étrangères* 1885, 283–286).

Through these measures—cross-border access, preferential trading arrangements, rights of residence for merchants, and the institutionalization of French consular authority—the Tientsin Treaty transformed Tonkin into a gateway for penetrating the vast markets of inland southern China. It thus functioned not merely as an instrument to terminate a war,

but as a blueprint for a transfrontier commercial regime that would, in the decades to follow, integrate Tonkin economically with Yunnan and Guangxi and solidify France's long-term strategic position in the region.

If the Tientsin Treaty of 1858 established the political and diplomatic framework that ended hostilities, formally terminated the Qing empire's long-standing suzerain relationship over Vietnam, and recognised France's authority in Tonkin, the 1887 Convention translated this new order into concrete mechanisms of cross-border trade, tariff regulation, and frontier administration.

The Commercial Convention of 26 June 1887 constituted the concrete and operational framework for regulating cross-border exchange between French-controlled Tonkin and the southern provinces of the Qing empire. While the 1858 agreement authorized only two trading points, the 1887 Convention expanded this to three official gateways: Longzhou in Guangxi, Mang-hao on the river route linking Lào Cai to Mengzi, and Mengzi itself, located deep within Yunnan's mineral-rich interior. This expansion from two to three entry points reflected France's strategic intent to establish Tonkin as a direct commercial interface not only with Guangxi but also with the economically promising uplands of western and southwestern China. At these designated posts, France was entitled to establish consulates and to extend full protection and residency rights to its merchants—privileges equivalent to those granted at China's maritime treaty ports (Pallu de La Barrière 1890,13).

Equally significant were the substantial tariff concessions codified in the Convention. Foreign goods entering China through these border posts were granted a 30 percent reduction on the standard maritime customs tariff, while Chinese goods entering Tonkin benefited from an even greater reduction of 40 percent. These measures were designed to enhance the competitiveness of merchandise circulating via the Tonkin route. The Convention also imposed a strict ceiling on inland transit taxes (likin) and legalized the export of native Yunnan opium, thereby countering the long-standing dominance of British Indian opium. Moreover, the authorization of river and overland navigation between Lạng Sơn, Cao Bằng, and Longzhou—subject only to a minimal duty—further in-

creased the attractiveness of the Tonkin corridor for traders in Guangxi and Yunnan (Pallu de La Barrière 1890, 14–19).

### 3.3 Vietnam – China Trade in the Age of French Colonial Administration

The French involvement in the Vietnam–China trade network from the 1860s to the late nineteenth century was documented by various French individuals from diverse professions, including merchants, military officers, physicians, and politicians. Although these accounts do not constitute a specialized or systematic synthesis, they nonetheless provide a relatively detailed perspective that, despite lacking coherence, allows us to grasp the overall landscape of the flow of commodities and commercial activities along the key routes connecting Vietnam and China under French rule.

#### **The sea and overland trading routes with China**

Under French administration, customs stations were established at both seaports and inland border crossings. Tax collection was placed entirely under French authority in accordance with the Treaty of 1884. Seaports existed in all three regions of Vietnam: Saigon in Cochinchina; in Tonkin: Hanoi, Hai Phong, Nam Dinh, and Móng Cái; in Annam: Tourane (Đà Nẵng), Faïfoo (Hội An), Quang Ngai, Qui Nhon, and Cam Ranh. Inland ports were established exclusively in Tonkin, all situated along the trade route with China, notably Lào Cai and Thái Nguyên (De Lanessan 1889, 409).

The commercial prospects that French policymakers envisioned for Tonkin must be situated within the broader dynamics of Sino–foreign trade in the late nineteenth century. In 1890, Pallu de la Barrière submitted to the French Parliament a comprehensive report on the Chinese market and the role of France within it. In this document, he outlined a forward-looking vision of France’s potential position in China’s vast domestic trading networks—one that could counterbalance the maritime commerce then dominated by the British.

By 1885, China's foreign commerce had already reached an enormous scale, rising from 118,988,134 Haikouang taels in 1870 to 153,205,729 taels in 1885, or nearly one billion francs (Pallu de la Barrière 1890, 20). Yet France's share remained negligible. Of this total, 118,959,571 taels belonged to Britain and its colonies, while France accounted for only a fraction (Table 1), limited largely to a few silk-buying houses in Shanghai. As contemporary observers remarked, France had "failed to enter the Chinese market," despite enjoying the same treaty rights as other powers. Structural weaknesses—including exorbitant domestic transport costs and a failure to adapt French manufactures to Chinese tastes—meant that France stood on the margins of an already well-established commercial order dominated by British shipping, British capital, and British Asian entrepôts (Pallu de la Barrière 1890, 23).

**Table 1. China's Foreign Trade in 1885 (Haikwan taels)**

Region / Country	Value (H. taels)
Great Britain & Colonies	118,959,571
Europe (excluding France)	9,822,717
Russia (Khiakhtha-Odessa-Manchuria)	4,147,023
Korea	145,437
Japan	6,755,215
Philippines	324,697
Cochinchina	304,699
Siam	579,953
Java	485,196
Turkey & Egypt	370,753
South America	4,168
United States	11,643,124

Source: Pallu de la Barrière 1890, 23

This marginal position was reflected clearly in the early export statistics of Tonkin and Annam. In 1887, out of nearly 10 million francs of exports from the two regions, only 167,000 francs were shipped to France, while more than 2 million francs went to Cochinchina and almost the entire remainder to China, primarily via Hong Kong—a British entrepôt that absorbed most of the regional commercial flows (de Lanessan 1889, 409). The hierarchy of export ports further underscored this trend. In 1886, Đà Nẵng led with over 2,700,000 francs, followed by Hà Nội (1,971,000 francs), Nam Định (1,642,000 francs), Hội An (Faifoo) (over 1,000,000 francs), Qui Nhon (872,000 francs), Hải Phòng (726,000 francs), and the inland port of Lào Cai with less than 110,000 francs (de Lanessan 1889, 409). Far from emerging as the arterial corridor linking Yunnan to the sea, Tonkin remained commercially peripheral, overshadowed by the older and vastly more efficient maritime circuits of southern China.

This pattern is best understood against the long-term shift from overland to maritime commerce in Sino-Vietnamese exchange. As Li Tana notes, in the early nineteenth century “the value of overland trade in the early 1820s was approximately five to seven times that of maritime trade at northern Vietnamese ports” (Li 2012, 74). But by the late nineteenth century, maritime routes had decisively supplanted the older caravan systems. Under French rule, de Lanessan’s 1887 data show that in Tonkin and Annam exports shipped through seaports were six times greater than those transported overland (de Lanessan 1889, 404). Hong Kong—integrated into a global network of steamshipping, credit, insurance, and Chinese merchant houses—proved far more attractive than any corridor through Tonkin. As a result, the commercial ambitions embedded in the Franco-Chinese agreements of the 1880s remained largely unrealized: Tonkin did not become the transit hub for Yunnanese trade that Paris had imagined, and French commercial influence in the region remained limited.

The observations of a military officer stationed in the frontier military territory of Tonkin and China partly explain why the Vietnam-China trade route shifted from overland to maritime channels. In his view, Chinese commercial competition was a “delicate” and “difficult” issue, often

magnified in the discourse of the French community in Indochina as a supposed attempt to “kill French trade.” (De Grandmaison 1898, 150). He described the predominance of Chinese merchants at border markets such as *Đông Đăng*, *Kỳ Lừa*, and *Cao Phong*, where they not only conducted trade but also established permanent markets and settlements — effectively creating “Chinese colonies” that monopolized exchanges with the local population. In his account, the upland Vietnamese were only marginally involved, providing small surpluses of subsistence crops, while cross-border trade was essentially controlled by Chinese networks. Yet he also recognized that such competition was merely a secondary obstacle, while the true impediments to French commerce lay in the irrational administrative barriers and tariff systems imposed by France itself.

The construction of the *Lạng Sơn-Đông Đăng* railway (1893–1895) introduced profound changes: the rice market expanded rapidly, and Chinese merchants were the first to exploit the new transport routes, but falling prices simultaneously pushed local peasants into economic crisis. The officer observed that the railway had been expected to redirect *Guangxi*’s trade flows toward Tonkin ports, yet in practice French goods remained uncompetitive, as imports from *Hong Kong* were cheaper and more efficiently distributed. He further warned that extreme measures such as sealing the border with prohibitive tariffs would jeopardize political stability, while the economic benefits were uncertain at best (de Grandmaison 1898, 252–254).

From the vantage point of a military administrator on the frontier, this analysis illustrates both the colonial ambition to control and reorient Sino-Vietnamese trade and the structural contradictions within French policy, especially when confronted with the transboundary strength and communal solidarity of Chinese commercial networks.

These advantages enabled higher trade volumes and attracted a greater number of trading firms, including European and Indochinese merchants, who preferred the security, reliability, and convenience of *Hong Kong* over mainland Chinese ports.

The limited direct trade with Chinese ports may also be attributed to the relative inefficiency of French commercial enterprises at the time.

Despite geographic proximity, French merchants had not yet fully exploited the potential of the China-Vietnam trade network, resulting in a situation where Hong Kong, rather than the Chinese mainland, remained the primary gateway for Indochinese goods. Consequently, until the end of the nineteenth century, Indochina's principal maritime trade route with China relied on Hong Kong, highlighting both the strategic importance of well-managed ports and the limitations of French commercial operations in maximizing market opportunities in mainland China.

At the time the French established their protectorate over Tonkin, the overland trade route to Yunnan—long envisioned as a major conduit for commerce—was effectively nonfunctional (de Lanessan 1889, 459). Geographic and hydrological constraints rendered the Red River route highly impractical: steep, uncultivable mountains flanked the river for over 150 kilometers, with sparsely populated highlands and rocky, shallow stretches navigable only by small boats during the low-flow season. French authorities further imposed strict customs and regulatory measures, while Chinese provincial officials actively discouraged trade along the river. In contrast, merchants continued to favor the longer route from Guangdong to Yunan, which, though more distant, passed through fertile, densely populated regions and offered more secure and profitable opportunities for commerce. Consequently, the practical overland connection to Yunnan remained minimal, despite the ambitions of the French administration.

One of the reasons why the overland connection to Yunnan via Lào Cai was weak is that Chinese merchants who had previously settled in Lào Cai were forced to abandon their homes and businesses due to insecurity. They subsequently relocated to Chinese territory, where they were warmly received by the local authorities, who were eager to establish a commercial center in a place that had previously been devoid of one. Consequently, Lào Cai by the late 19th century was no longer a “former market,” as its name suggests, but merely a transit point, with all substantial trade taking place in Song-Phong, on Chinese territory (de Lanessan 1889, 459)

The military doctor Edmond Courtois also shared the consensus, arguing that trade along the Red River up to Yunnan was inefficient be-

cause the region was sparsely populated and geographically rugged. He stated, “Placing great hopes on such a commercial route (the Red River), and on impoverished lands such as those through which the Red River flows in northern Tonkin and China, is clearly to expose oneself to serious disappointment. Moreover, the Chinese government has, in recent years, multiplied its efforts to divert Yunnan’s trade away from the Red River route and towards the Canton River (the Pearl River)” (Courtois 1891, 128).

According to Courtois, the route from Hong Kong and Canton into China would be considered the best one in the eyes of many specialists even though it was longer than the Red River route. For him, Pakoi was the truly important gateway into China. By the 1880s, this route had already become fairly busy, with most of the trade flowing toward Yunnan and Guangxi (Courtois 1891, 128).

### **Principal commodities of Vietnam–China trade**

According to the most straightforward commercial logic, the annexation of Vietnam was primarily aimed at opening the country to French goods, which could then be transported to China, turning Vietnam into a gateway for French merchandise to penetrate deep into the Chinese mainland. Immediately after the French conquest of Gia Định in 1859, French merchants swiftly relied on the Chinese trading networks to establish channels of import and export through the port of Saigon, thereby laying the foundation for the presence of French goods in Asian markets. Garnier observed that “five years ago, it was hardly possible to find in these three markets (Shanghai, Singapore, and Hong Kong) any products of French origin; today, Parisian goods, French manufactured items, and French foodstuffs have flooded them” (Garnier 1864, 28), noting that by 1863 the port of Shanghai had already received 22 French vessels, whereas previously France had been entirely absent.

From this reality, he asserted that Saigon could become a strategic gateway for French commodities to compete directly with British and German goods in a dynamic Chinese market, “where French products could compete successfully with those of England and Germany thanks to the

links between Vietnamese and Chinese ports” (Garnier 1864, 37–39).

Extending this vision further, Garnier connected the growth of Saigon to the prospect of global commercial integration once the Suez Canal was opened, envisioning that “Marseille, thanks to this great enterprise, will become the meeting point of all Eastern commerce... and there will be two obligatory poles belonging to France—Marseille and Saigon” (Garnier 1864, 44–45). In his view, the new maritime route would ensure that “the flag of France, French industry and commerce will attain an irresistible supremacy in one of the most important markets of the world: the Chinese seas” (Garnier 1864, 45).

Additionally, Garnier recognized the potential of exploiting local Vietnamese products for export. He emphasized the immense resources that Vietnam and the Indochinese–Yunnan hinterland could offer, ranging from the fact that “in 1863 six ships loaded with timber were dispatched to Shanghai” to the supposition that this region contained “the entire range of rare plants belonging to the Himalayan flora,” such as aloeswood, star anise, ginseng, precious timber, gutta-percha, styrax, and others (Garnier 1864, 22, 33). These examples illuminate Garnier’s imperial vision: Saigon was not merely a local port but a springboard for France’s penetration of China and, more broadly, a nodal point within a global strategy aimed at reshaping the balance of trade in the Far East.

Brunat, an official working for the Lyon Chamber of Commerce who had spent many years in Shanghai, evaluated China as a potential market for Vietnam, where a variety of Vietnamese exports could find favorable reception. The first and most important commodity was silk. In 1884, according to customs statistics, approximately one thousand peculs (approx. 60,500 kg) of silk were exported to China; however, these figures were certainly inaccurate, as smuggling continued on a large scale. From Tonkin, exports also included raw cotton and cotton fabrics to China, Annam, and Cochinchina. Chinese traders held Thanh Hóa cotton in particular high regard, which was then shipped to Hainan, where the bales were re-sorted before being sent on to Guangzhou (Brunat 1884, 41).

According to Brunat, legumes were also a potential export product to China. Dried legumes in general, and beans (*haricots*) in particular,

were already being exported from Tonkin to China in substantial quantities; peas (pois) were likewise used for oil production. Timber from the region served not only domestic needs but was also partially exported to China. Brunat emphasized that this trade would undoubtedly expand once forest exploitation in mountainous areas could be conducted under safer conditions (Brunat 1884, 49). Northern Vietnam also abounds in bamboo, widely used for multiple domestic purposes, with part of the harvest exported to China. Furthermore, rattan—an article in high demand in China—grows well in Tonkin, representing a crop with considerable potential for further development.

Tonkin also produced and exported honey and white beeswax to China, with the finest products originating from Thanh Hóa (Brunat 1884, 51). In addition, exports included live pigs, salted or smoked pork, lard, live or dried chickens, preserved eggs, and salted fish. Finally, an extremely important commodity not to be overlooked was salt, which had long sustained significant trade with neighboring Chinese provinces. These provinces had previously relied almost entirely on supplies from Tonkin. Although recent conflicts had disrupted this commerce, it was expected to recover and expand once secure transportation routes to Yunnan were reestablished.

Calixte, a merchant based in Haiphong, was well acquainted with the Tonkinese products favored by the Chinese and commonly exported, identifying several key commodities. Sharks were abundant along parts of Tonkin's coast, where coastal inhabitants actively traded with inland provinces. After butchering and drying the fish, they extracted a layer of fat that was processed into a dark yellow oil, used partly for food but primarily for lighting and the production of soft soap. The most valuable product, however, was shark fins, sun-dried and highly prized by the Annamites, who sometimes made notable sacrifices to obtain them. Properly prepared, this delicacy could also appeal to Europeans. The Chinese valued it even more, and exports to China were steadily increasing, promising substantial revenues (Imbert 1885, 19-20).

Mushrooms constituted another important export. They grew widely, especially in the regions around Hanoi, Nam Dinh, Thai Binh, and

Thai Nguyen. Two main types—common mushrooms and forest mushrooms (*tongris*)—belonged to the same family as those consumed in Europe. Like other foodstuffs, they were sun-dried. Mushrooms were in high demand among the Chinese and were becoming increasingly appreciated by Europeans as well (Imbert 1885, 49).

The Vietnamese, who favored fried meats, dried a wide variety of foodstuffs, including fish, shark fins, game, and vegetables. Among these, dried shrimps (*chevrettes sèches*) were particularly significant, consumed in large quantities by both the Chinese and the Vietnamese, with especially strong demand in China. This trade with the southern Chinese provinces continued to expand, as dried shrimps were abundant and highly esteemed (Imbert 1885, 60).

More precise data on the quantities of goods were provided by politicians, especially after 1886 when the French customs institutions were established in all parts of Vietnam. The official data presented by de Lanessan indicate that, in trade between Tonkin and Annam with foreign countries, the value of transactions conducted via maritime routes was six times higher than that conducted overland (de Lanessan 1889, 404). The value of exports via land borders in 1887 amounted to approximately 1 million francs, an increase of more than 800,000 francs compared to 1886. The majority of these exports passed through Lao Cai, destined for Yunnan. They included the following products: salt, 363,740 francs; tobacco, 136,779 francs; raw cotton, 183,431 francs; spun cotton, 15,280 francs; European fabrics, 29,338 francs; indigenous fabrics, 39,081 francs; clothing made of silk or cotton, 44,007 francs; peanut oil, 10,887 francs, etc. All of these goods were of foreign origin, usually Chinese. In reality, they merely transited through Tonkin; therefore, they should be distinguished from exports by sea, the majority of which were produced domestically. Only the latter should properly be included in the official export figures (de Lanessan 1889, 405). Overland, Chinese goods from Guangdong entering Tonkin and then being re-exported to Yunnan were a fairly common phenomenon.

Among the export commodities of Tonkin, raw silk (*soie grège*) and reeled silk, frisons, and other silk by-products were the leading items,

accounting for nearly 40% of the total export value. In 1887, the export of raw silk amounted to approximately 3,200,000 francs, an increase of 800,000 francs compared to the previous year. However, when comparing with 1886, it should be noted that the customs administration in Tonkin and Annam was still in the process of being fully established, so some goods that were not declared in 1886 were recorded in 1887. Silk production in Nam Dinh—the largest silk-producing province in Tonkin—remained stable.

Cinnamon ranked second, mainly exported through the ports of Tourane and Faïfoo in Quang Nam, Annam. This province was the only one where locals cultivated cinnamon, but the bark from cultivated trees was less valued than that from wild trees in nearby mountains. Part of the cinnamon bark was exported directly to China, while the remainder was shipped by coastal vessels to Hai Phong or Nam Dinh before being exported. The total value of cinnamon exports from Annam and Tonkin in 1887 was nearly 2 million francs.

Cu nau was also a high-value product, with exports totaling 714,000 francs, primarily through the ports of Tourane, Faïfoo, Nam Dinh, and Hai Phong, all directed to China, where this dye material was highly prized.

According to Governor-General Paul Doumer's statistics, the most valuable export from Indochina was foodstuffs, primarily rice. Rice exports increased from 727,749 tons in 1893 to 915,635 tons in 1900, with Tonkin contributing 63,226 and 168,622 tons, respectively (Doumer 1902, 300). In 1899, China absorbed 504,000 tons out of a total export of 894,000 tons of rice from Cochinchina and Tonkin (Doumer 1902, 302). Although Tonkin's export volume remained significantly lower than that of Cochinchina, its growth rate was remarkably higher, nearly tripling over this period, reflecting the region's emerging role in the Indochinese rice trade. All rice exported from Tonkin was routed through Hong Kong, from where a substantial portion was subsequently re-exported to Guangdong (Doumer 1902, 301), highlighting Hong Kong's role as a strategic entrepôt facilitating trade between Indochina and southern China.

Among Indochina's rice-importing territories, Hong Kong consistently ranked first, with imports reaching 409,150 tons in 1899, while direct rice exports to China in the same year amounted to only 14,448 tons—a disparity that represented the largest gap observed during the 1897–1900 period, reflecting both Hong Kong's dominant role as a transshipment hub and the relatively limited direct trade with mainland China. Most of the rice exported to Hong Kong was later re-exported to southern China (Doumer 1902, 301). This pattern underscores the indirect nature of Indochina's rice trade with China, mediated through colonial commercial hubs, and suggests that while Tonkin's absolute export figures were modest, its relative growth and integration into broader regional trade networks were significant. This distribution reflects a key structural feature of regional trade: British-controlled Hong Kong offered far more efficient import mechanisms, legal protections, and commercial infrastructure than Chinese ports.

#### **French competition in the Chinese market**

Western economic engagement in China during the late 19th century was characterized by intense competition and the pursuit of strategic market advantages. While the French presence in the region predated many developments, they were comparatively latecomers in terms of trade activity. Nevertheless, France enjoyed a distinct strategic advantage: direct geographic proximity to China, a benefit no other Western power possessed. This unique position offered opportunities to influence trade networks and regional commerce despite the challenges posed by established competitors.

Colonel Bouais, author of *De Hanoi à Pékin*, was both a military officer and a diplomat, serving as one of the commissioners appointed to the negotiations with China to delimit the frontier between China and the northern provinces of Tonkin. He offered a broader perspective on the potential of Sino-Vietnamese trade relations once France became China's neighbor, with a land border extending nearly one thousand kilometers. During his survey of the Chinese market in the early 1890s, he recognized the importance of this vast market and outlined what France

needed to do in order to develop commercial relations with such a neighbor. The French, he argued, already had a model to emulate—Hong Kong—which the British had transformed from a barren rock into a prosperous city (Bouinai 1892, IX). There, the number of British merchants far exceeded that of the French, whose attitude he criticized as indifference toward all affairs (Bouinai 1892, XII).

Following the French conquest of Vietnam, France's trade with China experienced a notable increase, particularly in exports. In 1888, French exports to China amounted to approximately 135 million francs, of which 115 million consisted of silk, while imports from China remained relatively modest. Despite this growth, France still ranked only fourth among European powers in China, excluding Japan as an Asian competitor. Ahead of France were England, with 297 trading houses and 3,682 nationals; Germany, with 71 trading houses and 607 nationals; and the United States, with 29 trading houses and 1,020 nationals. France itself had 19 trading houses and 467 nationals, while Russia, limited by the geographic situation of Siberia and its privileged position in Mongolia under the 1881 treaty, maintained only 11 trading houses and 119 nationals. Spain, Italy, and Austria held only very secondary positions (Bouinai 1892, 163).

While the British invested in and transformed Hong Kong, a rocky island, into a bustling commercial port, the French saw only economic stagnation in China.

In his visit to China in late 1890, Bouais remarked upon the decline of the Chinese empire, pointing to its filthy cities and economic stagnation. He described how navigation on the Yangtze River was obstructed by sandbanks that posed serious concerns for riverine transport. The Chinese, however, for defensive purposes, regarded these sandbanks as a "heaven-sent barrier"; they neither wished to dredge them nor allowed Europeans to undertake the task. He further noted the silting of canals, despite the fact that thousands of boats had once traveled along these waterways to reach Tientsin (Bouinai 1892, XV).

In July 1889, the voyage of the small steamship *Laokay* from Hanoi to Lao Cai, undertaken by Marty and d'Abbadie, drew considerable at-

tention in both France and Britain, highlighting the strategic significance of Tonkin's waterways. French observers emphasized the potential of the Red River as a conduit for trade into Yunnan and southwestern China, portraying this as a major commercial achievement. British newspapers, however, responded with a competitive lens, acknowledging French successes while simultaneously critiquing them. The *Daily Press* questioned the river's year-round navigability yet recognized the French accomplishment in establishing access to southwestern China. The *China Mail* underscored that French ambitions—exploiting coal mines and using the Red River to penetrate Yunnan—posed a challenge to British interests, while also satirizing the limitations imposed by French fiscal policies (Courtois 1891, 127). British and French media closely monitored each other's commercial activities in China, openly reflecting their rivalry. Implicit in these accounts is a broader Anglo-French competition: Britain viewed French efforts both as a benchmark and as a rival claim, particularly regarding control over inland trade routes to China, contrasting the longer but more commercially viable route through Guangdong and Guangxi that British merchants preferred. This episode thus reflects not only logistical and economic considerations but also a keen awareness of imperial rivalry in East Asia at the close of the nineteenth century.

Many French newspapers frequently referred to “our rivals,” implying that other European powers often discovered more convenient and easily developed trade routes into the Chinese market, whereas France had to struggle with routes that, although shorter in appearance, were fraught with economic risks due to isolation and inaccessibility (de Lan-*essan* 1889, 461). The conquest of these new routes, therefore, was less a matter of genuine economic practicality than a demonstration of French resolve and determination.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the Vietnam-China trade relationship against the complex backdrop of historical, political, military, cultural, and eco-

conomic developments in Vietnam within East Asia, all occurring under the watchful eye of Western capitalist powers. The French pursuit of access to the Chinese market emerged as a significant motivation for their conquest of Vietnam. The Patenôte Treaty of 1884 consolidated French authority by placing customs administration and tax collection entirely under French control, marking a decisive shift in the management of trade.

By 1880, Vietnam-China commerce still retained many traditional forms, including tribute trade and largely unregulated cross-border trade, alongside commercial activity under French supervision. However, exchanges conducted within the tribute system had greatly diminished in economic significance, serving primarily ceremonial and formal purposes. Cross-border trade, particularly in frontier regions, was occasionally manipulated or disrupted by outlaw bands, illustrating the challenges of maintaining security and order in the absence of centralized control.

The final two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the end of tributary trade. Overland routes of commercial exchange across the Sino-Vietnamese border also weakened, as Chinese merchants retreated further into the Chinese interior under France's tightening control. At the same time, maritime routes, bolstered by modern steamships, emerged as the dominant conduits of commerce.

Starting from 1886, customs data became more complete, showing that the commercial exchange between Vietnam and China was conducted primarily via maritime routes. The Vietnamese exports to China with the highest value were rice, silk, and cinnamon, mainly shipped through Hong Kong to reach China. Overland trade accounted for only about 10% of the total export value, and Vietnam (Tonkin) primarily served as a transit point for Chinese goods—moving from Guangdong through Vietnam and then being re-exported to Yunnan. Both the volume and value of trade increased in the period between 1886 and 1900, with rice remaining the principal export to China. Hong Kong continued to serve as the primary outlet for Vietnamese goods, while direct trade with inland China remained very limited.

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