

Truong Buu Lam / INTERVENTION VERSUS
TRIBUTE IN SINO-VIETNAMESE
RELATIONS, 1788-1790

In this paper are studied the disruption and resumption of Sino-Vietnamese tributary relations in a period when a new dynastic power was arising in Vietnam.* The events of the period 1788-1790 highlight the basic interests of the two parties in the tributary system. For China it was a clever and economical device for dealing with a bordering country which the Chinese rulers did not consider practical to control directly and yet wanted to keep revolving within the orbit of China's influence. For the Vietnamese rulers tribute provided a way to remain relatively independent of their giant neighbor, avoiding both excessive cost and Chinese interference in their internal affairs. Yet the Chinese power on Vietnam's frontier remained a permanent threat, for it could move quickly to chastise a ruler who seemed to contravene the tributary relationship.

The Rise of the Tâyson Rebellion

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, Vietnam underwent one of the most turbulent periods of her history.¹ Since 1620 the country had been divided into two rival "principalities," governed by the Trinh family in

* With the author's permission but with a sense of shame, we have omitted the proper diacritic marks on Vietnamese transcriptions except for the circumflex. That this action will be welcomed by the printer and no doubt accepted by most readers is a reflection of American backwardness in Vietnamese studies-Ed.

the north, and by the Nguyễn family in the south. Both these families ruled on behalf of the emperor of the Later Lê dynasty (1428–1788), who apparently retained only religious and symbolic powers.² Toward the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the power and prestige of the two princely families and consequently of the Lê emperor declined. In both courts, the decline has been attributed to similar problems. First, power had been transmitted to a son of a favorite instead of to the legitimate son. Second, there had been abuse of power by favorite ministers and members of their families, leading to corruption and inefficiency in the administrative system. As a result, the country was practically ungoverned, and, as crops failed, rebellions broke out. The discontent was exploited by three brothers, Nguyễn Nhạc, Nguyễn Lu, and Nguyễn Huệ, who in 1771 raised the banner of revolt and called themselves Tâyson (Tây-son), after the name of their place of origin.³

The Nguyễn prince who ruled in the south was thus caught between these rebels and the Trinh in the north, who took advantage of this situation to seize the southern capital, Phu-xuân, in 1775. However, the Tâyson, having killed the Nguyễn prince and conquered the entire southern region, turned against the Trinh. Under the slogan “destroy the Trinh to restore the Lê,” Nguyễn Huệ, the third brother, launched a heavy attack against the north. In 1786 he restored the Lê emperor to power and married his daughter. Shortly afterward the emperor died, and Nguyễn Huệ settled the succession in favor of the emperor’s grandson, Lê Duy Ky. He then left the capital.

At that time, whereas the northern part of the country was still under the Lê emperor, the south had become three kingdoms: Nguyễn Nhạc, the eldest Tâyson brother, assumed the title of “central emperor” (Trung-uong Hoang-dê) and ruled the central region from his capital in Qui-nhon; Nguyễn Lu was given the title of Đông Dinh vương (the king who settles the east) and governed the region of Gia-dinh (near modern Saigon); Nguyễn Huệ received the northernmost region with its capital of Phu-xuân (the present Huế), the ancient capital of the Nguyễn princes. His title was Bắc Bình vương (the king who pacifies the north). Nguyễn Huệ deserved his title. Because he was the most powerful and the most able of the three brothers and because his realm bordered on the Lê emperor’s territory in the north, he considered it his responsibility to take care of the emperor’s affairs. For this reason, early in 1788, Nguyễn Huệ came to Hanoi to execute one of the Lê emperor’s ministers who had become too pretentious. We are told that his action, with or without reason, frightened the Lê emperor, who fled from the capital while his entire family sought refuge in

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China. Nguyễn Huệ felt he still lacked sufficient support to take the imperial title, so he installed a member of the Lê family as supervisor of the country's affairs, left one of his faithful generals in Hanoi, and returned to his capital in Huế.

It was at this point that the Ch'ing authorities in China became closely involved in Vietnamese affairs.

The Ch'ing Intervention of 1788

The Chinese authorities apparently were not very well informed about developments in Vietnam during the Tâyson rebellion. The first mention of the rebellion came in a report from the governor-general of Liang-Kwang received on October 29, 1787, informing the court that the Vietnamese king had lost the seal given to him by the Ch'ing emperor and that, because he had died, his heir now requested to be invested.⁴ The court agreed to grant the request provided that Vietnam send an embassy to Peking.

No embassy, however, came to the Chinese capital. This was not surprising, for at that time the Lê king had already been displaced. In July 1788 the prefect of T'ai-p'ing in the province of Kwangsi reported that almost one hundred people had come to Lung-chou, in his prefecture, to seek refuge. These people belonged to the family of the Vietnamese king and were pursued by the rebels who had seized the capital. The king himself had already fled from the capital. But, except for the capital, all other regions remained faithful to the Lê dynasty.⁵

Peking's reaction to this report was normal: orders were given to receive all the refugees. An order was also issued to Sun Yung-ch'ing, the governor of Kwangsi, and to Sun Shih-i, the governor-general of Liang-Kwang, to proceed to Lung-chou to make inquiries about the situation in Vietnam.⁶ China's main object was to maintain peace and order in the border regions. For this reason, the Grand Council decided to reinforce the troops along the frontier and to await the results of the investigations into the reason for the rebellion before taking any definite action.⁷ Ch'ing policy thus seemed to rely entirely upon the information and assessment of the governor-general of Liang-Kwang.

The policy recommended by Sun Shih-i was understandable, given the personality and career of this official.⁸ First, Sun Shih-i had become an official only at the age of forty-two, when he was appointed secretary in the

Grand Secretariat. Despite his relatively rapid ascent thereafter, he perhaps felt that he needed to distinguish himself by further achievements. Until his involvement in Vietnamese affairs, he had been active mostly in literary and administrative fields, having been one of the compilers of the *Four Treasuries*; he had variously served as clerk during the Burmese expedition, as financial commissioner, as governor, and finally as governor-general. What Sun lacked was some military exploit in his record. He probably could not but compare himself to the then governor-general of neighboring Fukien and Chekiang, Fu-k'ang-an, who, though first and foremost a civil official, had won fame on the battlefield. Sun's desire for military glory had been apparent at the time of the Taiwan expedition in 1787. As governor-general of Liang-Kwang, Sun had started making preparations for a military expedition, even though he had received no order to do so. When a campaign against the Taiwanese rebels was finally launched, it was commanded by Fu-k'ang-an.⁹

Shortly after the Taiwan expedition, Sun received the report from the prefect of T'ai-p'ing concerning the Vietnamese rebellion. Possibly he now saw an opportunity to seize. At any rate, he responded to the Vietnamese affair as quickly as he had to the Taiwan rebellion. Upon receiving the report and before any orders reached him, Sun hastened to Lung-chou. What he learned from the Vietnamese refugees confirmed what the prefect had reported. Perhaps it was also what he wanted to hear.

In his memorial Sun reported that the Vietnamese king was not among the refugees. He immediately drew the conclusion that the whole country had not fallen into rebel hands. Further he emphasized that many local officials remained faithful to the dynasty. For these reasons, he asserted, it was neither too late nor too difficult "to think carefully about a restoration." Intervention, however, had to be decided upon quickly in order to protect the people who still believed in the future of the Lê dynasty and to encourage them not to surrender to the rebels.¹⁰

Is it possible that Sun also suggested, in a secret and separate memorial, that advantage be taken of the situation to bring Vietnam under direct Ch'ing rule? Wei Yuan, the historian of Ch'ing military campaigns, seems to have believed so when he wrote that, in his reply to Sun, the emperor considered it not decent to "avail of this danger to gain territory," since the Lê kings had served the empire very faithfully for more than a hundred years.¹¹

Sun's report seems to have won the Grand Council over to the idea of intervention. Nevertheless, the court thought it would be better if the

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Vietnamese pacified the rebellion by themselves and the Chinese army followed the Vietnamese troops only in order to give them confidence. Therefore, it would be sufficient to dispatch a small army to Vietnam.¹²

While Sun was carrying out the imperial instructions on the frontier, at the capital the Grand Council tried to find a rationale for justifying Chinese intervention. The main argument of the advocates of direct intervention was that the Lê dynasty had served the empire respectfully for more than a hundred years: "We cannot bear to see this family destroyed."¹³ This feeling was based upon the time-honored principle "protect the weak and recover the lost." Because it was normal for the Chinese to consider the barbarians subjects of the emperor, they thought it legitimate to protect these barbarians and their ruler from rebellious elements. The aim of the expedition was thus to restore the Lê family to the Vietnamese throne.¹⁴

After much deliberation, the order to move across the border was given to Sun Shih-i.¹⁵ This order, however, was not without restraining provisions. The Chinese forces were told not to take any active part in the pacification. Sun Shih-i was to send Hsü Shih-heng,¹⁶ the commander-in-chief of Kwangsi, to back the Lê forces but not to intervene unless these forces were defeated. As for Sun Shih-i, he was ordered to remain on the frontier and direct all operations from there.¹⁷

On October 21, 1788, when the rains had stopped, the Chinese forces crossed into Vietnam. The expeditionary army was headed by Sun Shih-i (who either disregarded the orders to remain on the border or had received new instructions) and Hsü Shih-heng. This force of some 10,000 men moved from Kwangsi in the direction of Hanoi through the Chen-nan pass, while another army of 5,000 men under the command of Wu Taching, governor of Yunnan, advanced toward Hanoi through Meng-tzu and K'ai-hua.¹⁸

Less than a month later Sun entered Hanoi. The population lined the streets of the city to welcome the imperial army. On the same night the Lê king came to Sun's headquarters and they agreed upon a day for the investiture ceremony.¹⁹ Several days later the ceremony took place. The initial aim of the expedition was thus achieved. Upon hearing the news, the emperor conferred on Sun Shih-i the title of duke and on Hsü Shih-heng the title of viscount.²⁰ But these commanders declined the rewards on the grounds that they would not deserve them until they had captured the leader of the rebellion. However, by that time, Nguyễn Huệ was in Quang-

nam in the south, where he had fled as soon as he felt "the wind of the imperial army." Sun Shih-i decided to proceed to the rebel nest.²¹

The Grand Council, however, disagreed with his decision. Since the objective of "protecting the weak and recovering the lost" had been achieved, the court felt that Sun should return to China with his troops.²² The court gave several reasons for this view. First, there was the matter of cost. It had already been necessary to establish on the route from Yunnan to Hanoi about forty supply stations. Hanoi was separated from Quangnam by more than 2,000 li, and it would require over fifty-three additional stations and an additional 100,000 or more men to send an expedition that far.²³ Second, Chinese soldiers were not used to the climate of Vietnam, and it was feared that if they stayed there through the rainy season they would suffer from various diseases. Third, the court did not want the Vietnamese to misunderstand its real intentions. The intervention had been planned to restore the Lê king, and if the expeditionary army stayed in the country after this objective had been achieved it would raise doubts about China's motives.²⁴ Finally and perhaps most important, there were many signs that the Lê dynasty had by now lost the mandate of Heaven (about which more will be said later). And since the emperor never contradicted the will of Heaven, it was thought that he should withdraw his protection from the Lê dynasty.²⁵

But Sun Shih-i was reluctant to leave Hanoi. From Sun's memorials it is possible to speculate that his reluctance was due to the fact that the second army, from Yunnan, was about to join the main army in Hanoi.²⁶ It is conceivable that Sun Shih-i hoped this would induce Nguyễn Huệ to surrender,²⁷ particularly because, as he thought, the Nguyễn brothers were fighting among themselves.²⁸ Sun Shih-i therefore decided to disregard the imperial order and to wait.

He did not have to wait long. A few days after he had made this decision news came to him of a rebel advance. Upon hearing that Nguyễn Huệ himself led the rebel forces, the Lê king fled from Hanoi. Sun Shih-i finally decided to withdraw too. It was too late for an orderly withdrawal however. The retreat was a disaster for Sun's army. More than half his soldiers could not cross the Thi-cau river on the outskirts of Hanoi; under the weight of the army in full flight the bridge collapsed. Hsü Shih-heng and many of the army officers were left behind. As a result of this disaster, Sun Shih-i was removed from his post as governor-general of Liang-Kwang and was replaced by Fu-k'ang-an. Thus ended the first phase of Sino-Vietnamese relations in this period.

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The main question that arises in connection with this phase is why an apparent about-face occurred in Chinese policy toward Vietnam. The expedition to Vietnam had obviously been sent to restore the Lê king. But the Lê king had no sooner been restored than the emperor decided to drop him on the grounds that he had lost the mandate of Heaven.

There are two possible interpretations of this shift. One is that the edicts ordering the withdrawal were forged after the event in order to make Sun Shih-i wholly responsible for the disaster, which stemmed from his failure to withdraw. This theory presupposes that the Chinese initially intended that Chinese troops remain in Vietnam after the restoration of the Lê in order to control the country's affairs. In other words, the expedition had imperialist motives behind it. Such a possibility should not be ruled out, and, in fact, Vietnamese historians tend to accept this interpretation.²⁹ It would not have been the first time the Chinese had occupied Vietnam under the pretext of restoring a deposed king.³⁰

The second interpretation is that the Grand Council was not very eager to intervene in Vietnamese affairs and did so only under pressure from Sun Shih-i. It did not want Chinese troops to remain in Vietnam any longer than absolutely necessary and consequently ordered the withdrawal after the objective of restoring the Lê king had been achieved. This interpretation seems to me more acceptable for two reasons. First, it is likely that the court decided to intervene, despite its hesitation, because it felt that the emperor had certain obligations toward the tributary king and that these obligations had to be honored. However, once this had been done, the emperor may have considered his commitment fulfilled and wanted no more involvement in Vietnamese affairs. Second, whatever the precise reasons for the intervention, it is certain that the emperor's desire to terminate Chinese involvement in Vietnamese affairs stemmed from the court's judgment that the Lê dynasty had lost the mandate of Heaven. From the court's viewpoint, there were good reasons for this judgment. In the first place, it knew that the Vietnamese king had not dared to return to the capital of Hanoi before its reconquest by the Chinese army. Next, Sun Shih-i informed the court that among Vietnamese officials he had met no worthy people.³¹

To sum up, the expedition may have been necessary in order to observe certain principles in Chinese relations with tributary states. However, once these principles had been observed, the Chinese no longer had any reason to stay in Vietnam, especially in view of the unworthiness, as they saw it, of the dynasty they had restored to power.

If the second interpretation is correct, then it follows that Sun Shih-i did in fact receive orders to withdraw. If so, it must be asked how a commander like Sun could have disobeyed imperial orders. Several explanations may be advanced. First, he may not have had sufficient time to prepare his withdrawal; no more than six weeks had elapsed between his arrival in Hanoi and his expulsion. Second, it is possible that he counted on the capture of the rebel leader to counterbalance his disobedience. Moreover, it is conceivable that he relied upon his court connections and especially on Ho-shen, Ch'ien-lung's chief minister, to come to his rescue in case of failure. If so, he was apparently proved correct. Shortly after he was removed as governor-general, he was appointed president of the Board of War at the capital and was concurrently made a grand councillor. For his failure he merely lost his title of duke.

Third, Sun's disobedience may have been prompted by the fact that the expedition was a financially profitable affair. It has been suggested that the mid-Ch'ing campaigns were lucrative enterprises and that "the large allocations of imperial funds necessary in each case seem to have created a vested interest in the expansion or, more commonly, the prolongation of operations."³² The financial element could, in fact, have been an important incentive for the prolongation of the Vietnamese operation, for it is known that in addition to putting the Kwangsi treasury at the disposal of Sun Shih-i, the emperor had ordered the Board of Revenue to transfer to him 500,000 silver taels from neighboring provinces.³³ More important, Sun had received what amounted to a blank check for the expenditures of the campaign and particularly for taking care of the local population which had remained loyal to the dynasty.³⁴

Whatever the reasons for Sun's disobedience, it brought him defeat. After his expulsion and the flight of the legitimate king, Nguyễn Huệ became the actual sovereign of Vietnam³⁵ and he was now responsible for the country's relations with China.

The Settlement of the Incident

The appointment of Fu-k'ang-an, a famous military commander, as governor-general of Liang-Kwang³⁶ and of several veteran officers of the Taiwan campaign³⁷ to replace those who had been lost in Vietnam, seemed to inaugurate a warlike policy. However, although troops were

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massed at the frontier,³⁸ orders to move them never came. For this inaction there seem to have been three reasons.

The first is related to an earlier experience of an unsuccessful campaign against Burma. From 1766 to 1770 China undertook several expeditions designed to bring Burma under control, but all resulted in disaster.³⁹ The court's explanation was that the Chinese soldiers were exhausted by Burma's climate and by the diseases they had contracted there. The implication was that the same thing could happen in Vietnam, where climatic conditions were similar.⁴⁰

The second reason given by the court was that the Vietnamese people were rebellious. An expedition would be costly of men and money, and the best that could come of it would be the annexation of Vietnam. But then, what would China profit from the conquest of a country impossible to control, unless, as in Sinkiang, the imperial government should send there a large number of officials and troops? Furthermore, argued the court, in Vietnam, unlike Sinkiang, the military garrisons and the administrative apparatus would very soon turn out to be useless because in Vietnam "the history of past dynasties has demonstrated that Chinese occupation of that country has never lasted for more than one or two decades."⁴¹

Third, the court felt that even if China could control Vietnam directly it would be necessary to appoint a viceroy to administer the country. With this in mind, an imperial decree noted that in such a case, there would be no difference between a Ch'ing viceroy and Nguyễn Huệ, for the new Vietnamese ruler might now be viewed as an imperially appointed official. The Chinese emperor had indeed been entrusted by Heaven to administer the entire world and he delegated officials to take care of the internal affairs of the various distinct territories. The notion underlying this view was that "Heaven divided the territories but not the people."

Thus the court was in no hurry to send Chinese troops into Vietnam. The Ch'ing now felt no overriding obligation toward the Lê king because by twice fleeing from Hanoi he had shown himself to be an unworthy ruler. Peking, therefore, was now ready for a peaceful settlement of the Vietnamese problem. The court hoped that the appointment of a famous military leader to settle it would intimidate Nguyễn Huệ and induce him to offer his submission.⁴²

Nguyễn Huệ, on his part, was no less ready for a peaceful solution. Even before launching his attack against the Chinese expeditionary forces, he had been worried about China's subsequent vengeance.⁴³ His worry

was exacerbated by the fact that the Siamese, incited by the survivor of the former Nguyễn princes, Nguyễn Anh (who eventually was to unify and rule over Vietnam under the reign title of Gia-long), were threatening his new kingdom from the south and west.⁴⁴

Thus the way was paved for negotiations. A few days after Fu-k'ang-an's arrival on the frontier, an important embassy bearing tribute arrived from Hanoi to offer Nguyễn Huệ's submission.⁴⁵ It was exactly what both the court and Fu-k'ang-an had expected. The court, as we have seen, had desired a peaceful settlement,⁴⁶ whereas Fu-k'ang-an was particularly eager not to antagonize the court because he had been involved in irregularities in his former post.⁴⁷ Moreover, Vietnamese documents state that the governor-general was not indifferent to the numerous presents offered by Nguyễn Huệ.⁴⁸

In addition to all this, Nguyễn Huệ's submission and apologies were perfectly acceptable. The tone of his petition was respectful and obedient, as were the manners of his envoys. Nguyễn Huệ stressed many times that his attack on the imperial army had been nothing but an accident; it had occurred because in the early hours of the morning his soldiers could not distinguish the Chinese from the local forces. In other words, he would not have dared to attack the imperial troops.⁴⁹ Thus Chinese prestige was saved.

It is not surprising that Fu-k'ang-an imposed only two conditions for peace: all Chinese prisoners were to be handed back to China and Nguyễn Huệ himself was to come to the Chinese capital to offer his apologies and submission. Nguyễn Huệ accepted these conditions with one slight modification: he would come to the capital only in the following year in order to participate in the celebration marking the emperor's eightieth anniversary.⁵⁰ In the meantime he sent an important embassy to Peking, headed by his nephew, to present tribute.⁵¹

The Vietnamese crisis was thus virtually over, and the only condition to be fulfilled was Nguyễn Huệ's visit to Peking.

The Vietnamese King's Visit to Peking

It was in the tradition of Sino-Vietnamese relations that China require Vietnamese rulers who had opposed the Chinese to come to the capital to beg for pardon.⁵² It was also in the tradition that Vietnamese rulers were afraid to go to the Chinese capital. Other kings before Nguyễn

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Huê had declined such an invitation, sending in their stead a golden statue of a man. The gold statue may have been intended to replace the Vietnamese king who did not want to come to the capital, or it may have represented the Chinese general or generals who had been killed by the Vietnamese. Because the sending of this statue had always been connected with these two circumstances together, there is no way of knowing the intended symbolism.⁵³ Reluctance to come to China's capital may, in any case, have been rather characteristic of tributary kings—hence the infrequency of their visits.

Perhaps for this reason, the Ch'ien-lung Emperor was much flattered by and most enthusiastic about Nguyễn Huê's promise to participate in the celebration marking his eightieth birthday. The Ch'ing *Veritable Records* are full of his instructions concerning this visit. The president of the Board of Rites was ordered to compile a new chapter of protocol concerning the reception to be given to the king at every level.⁵⁴ The Chinese envoys to Vietnam were instructed to describe the king's clothes in order to enable the emperor to have such clothes made as presents for Nguyễn Huê.⁵⁵ The local officials all along Nguyễn Huê's route were told to impress upon him the achievements of the empire in order to reinforce his desire to "come to be transformed."⁵⁶ Fu-k'ang-an himself was ordered to escort the royal embassy and to make sure that all Nguyễn Huê's needs were satisfied.⁵⁷ Finally, the visit of the Vietnamese king was such an important event that all punishments for misdeeds committed by Ch'ing officials involved in the preparations for the visit were suspended.⁵⁸

At the same time, the emperor seemed to comply with the requests put forward by Nguyễn Huê, who appeared to be testing out Ch'ing good will. First, he asked his ambassadors to request some ginseng for his mother; both Fu-k'ang-an and the emperor sent it to him at once.⁵⁹ After that Nguyễn Huê sent an embassy to Peking with two other requests. The first was that the Chinese calendar, which the tributary states had to use and for which they had to send an embassy every year to the Chinese capital,⁶⁰ be sent to him. The emperor quickly consented.⁶¹ The second was that the trade between the two countries which had been suspended since the outbreak of hostilities⁶² be resumed.⁶³ In response to this request the emperor ordered that the frontier be reopened and emporia established in order to provide the Vietnamese population with all that it needed.⁶⁴

The sincere intentions of the Ch'ing court were further evidenced in the way its authorities handled the Lê refugees. The Lê king was ordered to

shave his head and wear Manchu dress. After that he was transferred to the capital, to be enrolled in a Chinese banner as a captain, with the third-grade rank in the official hierarchy.⁶⁵ The other refugees were sent to Kiangnan, Chekiang, or Szechwan: some were enrolled in the banners of the local governor-general and some became simple citizens, for whom means of subsistence were to be provided by the local officials.⁶⁶

In part these measures were motivated by the desire to take care of those Vietnamese who had remained faithful to China. In part, however, they stemmed from the desire to prevent any Vietnamese attempt to restore the Lê dynasty, so that Nguyễn Huệ could come to the Chinese capital free of worry and confident that China had no intention of restoring his rival.⁶⁷

Nguyễn Huệ did not fail to appreciate these evidences of a friendly attitude, but the internal situation in Vietnam could not by any standards be considered sufficiently settled to allow the king to be absent from his country for almost eight months. The king was thus faced with a dilemma. If he left Vietnam for an extended journey the Siamese, with the cooperation of his internal rival, the descendant of the Nguyễn princes, would probably seize the opportunity to make their move. If he failed to go to Peking the Chinese government would be deeply insulted and Sino-Vietnamese relations could be fatally injured. It is possible, though by no means certain, that Nguyễn Huệ solved his problem by the unique method of sending his double to Peking.⁶⁸

On May 28, 1790 (Ch'ien-lung 55), the Vietnamese embassy headed by the king—or his double—arrived at the Chinese frontier. They were immediately met by Fu-k'ang-an and proceeded to the capital. At Liang-hsiang, south of Peking, they were welcomed by the vice-president of the Board of Rites who, in the name of the emperor, offered the traditional tea and led them directly to the summer capital in Jehol.⁶⁹

During this trip there occurred three incidents that revealed Ch'ien-lung's magnanimous attitude toward his tributary king, Nguyễn Huệ.⁷⁰

It seems that, according to the regulations of the empire, all the correspondence of an ambassador to his country had to undergo Chinese censorship, and copies of this correspondence were even sent to the Grand Council. Fu-k'ang-an applied this rule to the first three letters sent by Nguyễn Huệ. However, as soon as the emperor discovered this, he ordered that Nguyễn Huệ's correspondence should not be censored, since this was hardly the ideal way of expressing confidence in dignitaries coming from remote countries.⁷¹

When the emperor learned that Nguyễn Huệ was accompanied by his

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son, he immediately invested the son as crown prince. Ch'ien-lung wrote to Nguyễn Huệ: "You did not mind covering the distance of more than ten thousand li to come to greet me. It is because you consider me your master and your father. If you regard me as your father, how can I not regard you as my son? Your son, by his coming, proves that his loyalty to me is only equal to the good education he receives from you."⁷²

The third incident occurred when the Vietnamese embassy arrived in Kiangsi. The emperor discovered, from a note sent in by the governor, that the daily expense of entertaining the embassy amounted to four thousand silver taels. At first unconcerned about these large amounts, the emperor became worried that if Nguyễn Huệ was so well treated by the local authorities, it would be difficult to improve upon that treatment at the capital.⁷³

Upon arrival at Jehol on August 20, 1790, Nguyễn Huệ was immediately given an imperial audience. From then on he accompanied the emperor at all public functions, which culminated in the celebration honoring the emperor's eightieth birthday. In his writings connected with the celebrations, the emperor did not fail to mention the presence of the Vietnamese king during these festivities.⁷⁴

Sino-Vietnamese relations during the reign of Nguyễn Huệ, as reflected in the number of embassies sent from Vietnam to China, appear to have been unusually close. From 1661 to 1911, over a period of 250 years, embassies were sent to China in only forty-five years—an average of about one embassy every five years. However, during the period from 1789 to 1793, that is, during Nguyễn Huệ's reign, there was at least one embassy every year.⁷⁵ But this frequency only reflects relations on the ceremonial level. As one Chinese historian has noted, Nguyễn Huệ's close contacts with China on the official level did not prevent him from pursuing an independent policy designed to further Vietnamese interests as he saw them, even when it antagonized the Chinese.⁷⁶

This policy was manifest in several instances. First, he reportedly gave certain Chinese pirates official Vietnamese ranks and then sent them to raid the South China coast. Second, he is said to have aided the rebel Triad Society (T'ien-ti hui) in Kwangsi. These moves were meant to pave the way for the reconquest of Liang-Kwang which, according to Nguyễn Huệ, had belonged to Vietnam in ancient times.⁷⁷ Third, instead of using Chinese characters as the official writing system, as previous dynasties had done, Nguyễn Huệ adopted the *nôm* characters, a combination of Chinese characters designed to transcribe the Vietnamese spoken language.⁷⁸

Fourth, he made preparations for conquering Siam, which was helping his internal rival, although Siam was also a tributary of China.⁷⁹

The Pattern of Sino-Vietnamese Relations

We have briefly surveyed Sino-Vietnamese relations during an eventful period in which the operation of the tributary system was particularly significant. Against this background let us now try to highlight certain characteristics of the tributary relationship.

The peculiarity of this relationship distinguished it from the kind of tie that could normally be expected between two independent states. It was a complex arrangement not clearly expressed in any treaty but containing such elements as personal relations between the rulers, an implicit obligation on the part of China to render assistance to a tributary in time of need, and a tacit acceptance of certain ceremonial duties by both sides.

Equally striking is the fact that the relationship was not between two equal states. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that China was the superior and the tributary state the inferior. The Vietnamese kings clearly realized that they had to acknowledge China's suzerainty and become tributaries in order to avoid active intervention by China in their internal affairs. Thus the Lê king as a tributary ruler turned to China for protection when his rule was endangered. This reaction was indeed normal, in terms both of legal justification and of military strategy. As suzerain, China was committed to protect the legitimate dynasty recognized by her. Again, among Vietnam's neighboring states, China was obviously the only one in a position to accord effective military aid. It was no less normal a pattern of conduct for Nguyễn Huệ, upon seizing the throne, to request the Son of Heaven to legitimize his rule. This was without any doubt the only way to secure peaceful relations with the Chinese empire. In short, it was in the interest of the Vietnamese kings to surrender part of their sovereignty in return for the assurance that in case of rebellion they would be protected by China and that in time of internal peace they would not be conquered and directly administered by China.

On the other hand, it was in the Chinese interest to keep Vietnam within the tributary system. China felt that she could not govern this area directly; at the same time, she wished to avoid trouble in frontier regions. Hence, however aware the Chinese may have been of their cultural and military superiority, they did not take the tributary status of their inferior

