

# Role of the Vietnamese Diplomatic Envoys in Trade between Vietnam and China during the 18-19 Centuries.

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## Abstract:

After gaining independence in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnam (formerly known as Đại Việt) established diplomatic relations with China based on a “universal order” relationship, wherein China was the “suzerain” and Vietnam was the “tributary state.” Consequently, Vietnam was required to periodically send envoys bearing tribute to Chinese dynasties and perform other diplomatic missions. This activity persisted from the 11<sup>th</sup> century until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, from the Lê-Trịnh era (17<sup>th</sup> century onwards), the envoys sent by Vietnam to China also undertook commercial activities assigned by the Vietnamese court. Based on Vietnamese and Chinese historical sources, this paper provides an overview of the method by which the Vietnamese court, from the Lê-Trịnh era to the Nguyễn dynasty (17<sup>th</sup> century to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century), dispatched envoys to China; the routes taken by these envoys through established pathways connecting China and Vietnam since the 14<sup>th</sup> century; and discusses the role of Vietnamese envoys in concurrent commercial activities during their missions to China in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The paper also lists the tribute items and some goods that Nguyễn dynasty envoys brought to China for tribute or trade, as well as the goods that the envoys purchased for the Vietnamese court.

**Keywords:** *Vietnam, China, envoy missions, tribute, commercial activities*

**Received: 25.8.2024; Accepted: 15.12.2024; Published: 31.12.2024**

**DOI: 10.59907/daujs.3.4.2024.405**

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## Envoy missions dispatched by the Vietnamese court to China from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century

In the book “*Bắc sứ thông lục*” (北使通錄: Report on the Missions to China,) written by Lê Quý Đôn (黎貴惇, 1726-1784), an official of the Lê court (黎朝) and a renowned historian of 18<sup>th</sup> century Vietnam, there is an account of the reign of Cảnh Hưng (景興, 1740-1787) sending an envoy mission to pay tribute to the Qing dynasty in the Gengchen year (1760), providing extensive information on the diplomatic relations between Vietnam and China from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

According to a regulation issued by the Ming dynasty (1368 - 1644) in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of Hongwu reign (1374), once every three years, Đại Việt (大越), Vietnam’s official name at the time, had to send a mission to China to pay tribute.

After defeating the Ming dynasty, the Qing Emperor Kangxi (康熙帝, r. 1661-1722) adopted the old practice of *tam niên nhất cống* (三年一貢: tribute to be paid every three years) for the Đại Việt court in 1663. However, as requested by the Lê court in 1668, Kangxi revised it to *lục niên lưỡng cống* (六年兩貢: tributes to be paid twice every six years). (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 1967)

Although there are no comprehensive records of all the envoy missions dispatched by the Lê court to China, based on information from the *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí* (歷朝憲章類誌: Rules of the dynasties were written according to classification) (Phan Huy Chú 1992), cross-referenced with other research works like *Sứ thần Việt Nam* (Vietnamese envoys) (Nguyễn Thị Thảo et al. 1996) and *Les bleu Trịnh (XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Philippe Truong 1999), it can be tentatively identified that during the period when the Trịnh lords (鄭主代) held power in northern Vietnam, at least 38 envoy missions were dispatched to China (under the guise of Lê dynasty envoys).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As follows:

- During the reign of Trịnh Tùng (1570-1623), there were 4 envoy missions.
- During the reign of Trịnh Tráng (1623 - 1657), there were 5 envoy missions.
- During the reign of Trịnh Tạc (1657 - 1682), there were 5 envoy missions
- During the reign of Trịnh Căn (1682 - 1709), there were 4 envoy missions.
- During the reign of Trịnh Cương (1709 - 1729), there were 5 envoy missions.
- During the reign of Trịnh Giang (1729 - 1740), there were 5 envoy missions.
- During the reign of Trịnh Doanh (1740 - 1767), there were 6 envoy missions.
- During the reign of Trịnh Sâm (1767 - 1782), there were 3 envoy missions.
- During the reign of Trịnh Cán (1782), there were no envoy missions.
- During the reign of Trịnh Khải (1782 - 1786), there was 1 envoy mission.
- During the reign of Trịnh Bồng (1787 - 1788), there were no envoy missions.

The main tasks of these envoy missions were to deliver tribute regularly and to purchase goods and items for the needs of the Lê-Trịnh court.

In Đàng Trong (Inner Region / Southern Region), despite establishing a separate court, the Nguyễn lords (阮主代), as subordinates of the Lê dynasty, could not independently send envoys to the Qing court. It was not until 1701, after a prolonged cessation of conflicts between the Trịnh and Nguyễn factions, demarcating the Gianh River as the boundary between northern and southern Vietnam, that Nguyễn Phúc Chu (阮福澗, 1675-1725) sent Hoàng Thân and Hưng Triệt with a national letter and tribute to China, requesting the Qing dynasty to recognize him as the ruler of a separate state, distinct from the political entity ruled by the Lê-Trịnh in northern Vietnam. The Qing dynasty did not accede to this request, fearing the growing power of southern Vietnam. (Hội đồng trị sự Nguyễn Phúc tộc, 1995) This was the only envoy mission dispatched by the Nguyễn lords to China in over 200 years of their rule in southern Vietnam.

During the Tây Sơn period (西山朝, 1788-1802), existing historical sources indicate only four envoy missions to the Qing court, in 1789 and 1792. The first mission led by Nguyễn Quang Hiển and Vũ Huy Tấn in 1789 bringing the submission letter to China and carrying back the seal of *An Nam quốc vương* (安南國王: King of Annam). (Trần Trọng Kim, 1954: 364) After the ceremonies of recognition from the Qing court was held in Thăng Long, the Annam court sent two envoys as tribute and gratitude in return the special gifts which emperor Qianlong bestowed to King Quang Trung on the occasion of formal recognition. The biggest envoy and delegation, led by King Quang Trung<sup>1</sup> himself, accompanied by Ngô Văn Sở, Đặng Văn Chân, Phan Huy Ích and hundreds of attendants, went to Beijing to participate in the celebration of Emperor Qianlong's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. (Nguyễn Duy Chính, 2016), (Nguyễn Duy Chính, 2018: 31-43). The fourth mission arrived in 1792, with Vũ Vĩnh Thành as chief envoy, to report the conquer of the rebellious Laotians and request to revise the tributary periods. On the orderly range of the Qing's tributary system, Korea was on

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the diplomatic mission to Qing China in the Gengxu year (1790), earlier Vietnamese historical sources recorded that King Quang Trung did not personally travel to China that year. Instead, he sent someone to impersonate him. However, these Vietnamese historical records do not consistently identify the person who played the role of King Quang Trung. Some sources mention Ngô Văn Sở, while others cite Phạm Công Trị or Nguyễn Quang Thùy. However, according to Nguyễn Duy Chính, who has spent many years researching the relationship between the Tây Sơn dynasty and the Qing dynasty (China), using original sources from the Qing dynasty, cross-referenced with Western historical records and collections of poems and prose by the envoys in the 1790 mission, it is asserted that King Quang Trung himself personally traveled to China in 1790, rather than sending an impersonator as previously recorded by Vietnamese sources. (Nguyễn Duy Chính, 2016), (Nguyễn Duy Chính, 2018: 31-43)

top number 1, then Ryukyu, Annam, Siam, Burma...<sup>1</sup> The special reception of King Quang Trung in Beijing inspired the Tây Sơn's court to demand for a higher level. Thus, Emperor Qianlong elevated Annam from 3-year to 2-year tribute period in 1792 and Annam became the 2<sup>th</sup> level on the range of tributaries (only lower than Korea).

In the reign of Nguyễn Quang Toàn (King Cảnh Thịnh) from 1792 to 1802, the Tây Sơn court sent at least 4 more envoys to China led by Ngô Thị Nhậm in 1793 (in conferring kingship of King Cảnh Thịnh), Nguyễn Quang Dụ in 1796 (for the abdication of Emperor Qianlong and the coronation of Emperor Jiaqing), Nguyễn Quang Tuấn, Ngô Thời Vị for the death of Ex-Emperor Qianlong in 1799, Lê Đức Kính, Nguyễn Đăng Sở, Vũ Duy Nghi in 1802 (annual tribute and special assistance).<sup>2</sup>

In 1792, Emperor Qianlong issued another imperial edict on the timing for paying tribute for the Tây Sơn court (Philippe Truong, 1998) and reiterated by another edict in 1803 after King Gia Long had established the Nguyễn dynasty (1802-1945). (Nội các triều Nguyễn 1993: 305) The later decrees read as follows:

- The court of Annam<sup>3</sup> must send tributes to China once every two years, and an envoy mission must attend to the Qing court once every four years. (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 1968, 65)

- A delegation must be sent to Beijing whenever a Chinese emperor dies (to make ritual offerings) or a new emperor is enthroned (to congratulate).

<sup>1</sup> According to Trần Trọng Kim, the fourth embassy, led by Vũ Vĩnh Thành and Trần Ngọc Thị as chief and deputy envoys, went to Qing in 1792, sought to arrange a marriage with a Qing princess for King Quang Trung and to request the return of Liangguang (Guangdong and Guangxi) to Vietnam. (Trần Trọng Kim 1954, 383). However, these statements were untrue. Explicitly, the mission was sent to report the conquer of the rebellious Laotians and request to revise the tributary periods. On the orderly range of the Qing's tributary system, Korea was on top number 1, then Ryukyu, Annam, Siam, Burma... After the mission of Vũ Vĩnh Thành, An Nam was upgraded to the second level of tribute, only after Korea. (Nguyễn Duy Chính, 2016), (Nguyễn Duy Chính, 2018: 31-43)

<sup>2</sup> Lay Chung-cheng (賴淙誠), Diplomatic Relations between China and Việt Nam under the Qing Dynasty: Annual Trade and Border Issues [清越關係研究-以貿易與邊務為探討中心 (1644~1885)], (Ph.D. dissertation, Taipei, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> The national name of Vietnam from the 10<sup>th</sup> century to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was 大越 (Đại Việt). In 1804, King Gia Long, the founder of the Nguyễn dynasty, changed the national name to 越南 (Việt Nam). In 1838, King Minh Mạng changed it to 大南 (Đại Nam). From 1945 onwards, the national name reverted to Việt Nam. However, in Chinese historical sources, Vietnam was often referred to as 安南 (An Nam), and the Vietnamese king was called 安南國王 (An Nam quốc vương / King of An Nam).

The Vietnamese court were also required to dispatch missions to China on the following occasions:

- To notify the death of a king of Vietnam;
- To request the Qing court to confer kingship on a new king and a follow-up mission must be sent to China afterward to show gratitude for this;
- To congratulate the Qing emperor and the royal family on his birthday;
- To procure supplies for the court;
- To escort Chinese criminals for repatriation;
- To pursue criminals who had fled to China.

Under the reign of King Tự Đức, the court also dispatched officials to China to seek help to fight local bandits or to collect information on European countries (such as Đặng Huy Trứ's missions Hong Kong in 1865 and 1867-1868) (Phạm Tuấn Khánh, 1995: 85-90,) and Phạm Thận Duật and Nguyễn Thuật's mission to Tianxin in 1882). (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 1976: 161)

After the fall of Huế capital (July 5, 1885), there came the outbreak of Cần Vương (勤王: Rescue the King) movement, and King Hàm Nghi sent his men to China to ask for reinforcement to fight the French (Nguyễn Quang Bích to China in 1885 and 1887). (Phạm Đức Thành Dũng et al., 2000: 528) These missions, termed "official missions" instead of "envoy missions" in the Nguyễn dynasty records, were aimed at various purposes.]

Based on two primary historical sources compiled by the Nguyễn dynasty historians, *Đại Nam thực lục* (大南寔錄: Veritable Record in Đại Nam,) and *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* (欽定大南會典事例: Repertory of the Administrative Regulations in Đại Nam,) along with collections of *sứ trình thi* (poems composed during the mission) were studied and presented in *Di sản Hán Nôm Việt Nam thư mục đề yếu* (Essential Bibliographies in Han and Nôm Script, 3 volumes) in Vietnamese and French, published in 1993 by Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm (Institute of Hán - Nôm Studies) and L'École Française d'Extrême-Orient (E.F.E.O) (Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm - Học viện Viễn Đông Bác Cổ Pháp, 1993), and cross-referencing other studies like *Chân dung các vua Nguyễn* (Portraits of the Nguyễn kings) (Đỗ Bang et al., 1996), *Các sứ bộ do triều Nguyễn phái sang nhà Thanh* (The Missions to Qing's China, sent by the Nguyễn court) (Bửu Cầm, 1966: 46-51), *Những ông nghè ông cống triều Nguyễn* (Holders of doctoral degree and successful examinees at Village level under the Nguyễn dynasty) (Bùi Hạnh Cẩn et al., 1995), *Khoa cử và các nhà khoa bảng triều Nguyễn* (Examinations and laureates in the Nguyễn dynasty) (Phạm Đức Thành Dũng et al., 2000), *Sứ thần Việt Nam* (Vietnamese envoys) (Nguyễn Thị Thảo et al., 1996) and *Les ambassades en Chine sous la dynastie des Nguyễn (1804-1924) et les bleu de Hué* (Philippe Truong, 1999), it

is identified that during the Nguyễn era, under the reigns of Gia Long (1802-1820), Minh Mạng (1820-1841), Thiệu Trị (1841-1847), Tự Đức (1848-1883) and Khải Định (1916-1925) at least 47 missions were sent to China for various purposes. (Table 1)

**Table 1: Statistics of the missions to China during the Nguyễn era.**

Reign	Number of missions	Mission's Purpose						
		Asking for kingship conferment	Paying tribute	Manifesting gratitude	Congratulation	Purchasing goods	Other purpose	Unknown
Gia Long	9	1	3	1	2		1	1
Minh Mạng	15	1	4	1	1	3	1	4
Thiệu Trị	4	1		1		1		1
Tự Đức	16	1	7		2	1	3	
Khải Định	3					3		
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>

*Source: Compiled by the author from the Nguyễn dynasty historical records.*

Because of domestic turmoil and the resistance against the French invasion, no missions were sent to China in the era from King Dục Đức to King Duy Tân (i.e. from 1883 to 1916). After the *Giáp Thân Treaty* (1884), diplomatic relationships between Đại Nam and China came to an end due to the French colonialist's pressure. The missions to China in the years 1921, 1924 and 1925, under the reign of Khải Định, did not have any diplomatic significance. They went just as far as Guangdong to commission porcelains.

The above statistics show that very few envoy missions were dispatched by the Vietnamese court to China solely for commercial transactions (only 8 missions). However, the demand for foreign trade to meet the consumption needs of the royal family, court, and military was significant. The limited number in the above statistics does not accurately reflect the commercial activities between Vietnam and China during this period. In reality, most envoy missions sent to China for diplomatic purposes also engaged in commercial transactions on behalf of the Vietnamese court. The following evidence will support this observation.

## Commercial activities of Vietnamese envoys during missions to China

### *The Envoy route from Vietnam to China and vice versa*

According to the book *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ*, the envoy route from Vietnam to China began from Huế capital, traveling by land through Hanoi, Bắc Ninh, and Lạng Sơn, then crossing Ải Nam Quan (南關隘: Nam Quan border gate) into Guangxi and further into the interior of China. Along the route, each province the envoy passed through had to dispatch local soldiers to escort them. The return trip followed the same path but in reverse order. (Nội các triều Nguyễn, 1995: 315-316)

Conversely, envoys from the Qing dynasty to Vietnam traveled by land through Ải Nam Quan to Bắc Thành (Hanoi), then by water to Huế capital, passing through Bắc Thành, Nam Định, Đồn Thủy (in Thanh Hóa Province), Hồ Xá (in Quảng Trị Province), and finally reaching Huế. They would return by the same route, sometimes traveling by land to Bắc Ninh and then by water back to China. (Nội các triều Nguyễn, 1995: 315-316)

In the *Histoire des Relations de la Chine avec l'Annam-Vietnam du XVI<sup>e</sup> au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (History of relations between China and Vietnam from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century) by Devéria, originally the first interpreter of the French delegation in China and a correspondent of the School of Oriental Languages in France, published in 1880 in Paris (France), there is a record of a decree issued by the Qing dynasty in 1667 regarding the envoy route from Annam (Vietnam) to China. According to the decree, the envoy from Annam (had to pass through Thái Bình prefecture into Guangxi Province (China).

In 1726, Emperor Yongzheng decided that from then on, Annam's envoys with tribute would be issued a travel pass by the governor of Guangxi, allowing them to travel to Beijing by water, passing through the provinces of Huguang (Hunan and Hubei), Jiangxi, and Shandong. Upon their departure from the capital, they would be issued a new travel pass to return by the same route. (Devéria, 1880: 60) In 1797, the governor of Liangguang reported that An Nam's envoys carrying tribute had arrived, and this time, they altered the usual route, traveling by water through Liangguang, to Qiaojing (Guangdong), then overland to Shajing (Jiangxi), and from there to Beijing. (Devéria, 1880: 61) In 1804, An Nam's envoys traveled overland through Ải Nam Quan, to Pingxiang Prefecture (Guangxi), and from there traveled by water to Beijing. (Devéria, 1880; 61)

In addition, Devéria's book also features the map "Itinéraires de Chine en Annam" (Journeys from China to Annam). This map is noted as "Based on a Chinese map drawn during the reign of the Mongol emperors, reviewed, corrected, and published by Tschou-sse-peun in 1579." The annotations on this map reveal that from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, traffic between China and Annam (Vietnam) and vice versa was conducted through three different routes:

- The Guangxi - Lạng Sơn route (by land).
- The Yunnan - Lào Cai route (by land).
- The Guangdong - Hải Dương route (by water).

According to Devéria, there are three routes from Guangxi to Annam (Vietnam):

\* *First route:* From Pingxiang (China), crossing Ải Nam Quan, it takes one day to reach the Pha Lũy station in Văn Uyên Prefecture (Annam); or, passing through the northern part of Thoát Lãng Prefecture (Annam) to reach Lạng Sơn Prefecture in one day, from there it takes another day to reach Đông Kinh (東京, now Hanoi). Additionally, from the north of Wenzhou (China) through Guimenguan, it takes one day to reach Tân Lệ Village (Annam), then crossing the Nhị Thập River, another day to reach Bảo Lộc District, and one and a half more days to reach the banks of the Xương River, which must be crossed, and then one more day to reach the south of Thị Cầu in An Việt District, then to Đông Kinh either by land or by water. (Devéria, 1880: 78-79)

\* *Second route:* From Siming Prefecture (China), crossing Motianling mountain to Siling prefecture (China), then one more day through Bianjiang to Lộc Bình Prefecture (Annam). To the west of this prefecture, there is a road leading to Lạng Sơn Prefecture in one day. If traveling east, one must cross the Tianli River, then after one and a half days to reach An Bắc Prefecture (Annam). From there, walking for one and a half days to Hao Quân Cave; after another day on foot, one arrives at Phong Nhãn District. From here, there are two roads: the first goes to Bảo Lộc District, then crosses the Xương River to reach the south of Thị Cầu in An Việt District; the second goes into Lạng Sơn Prefecture (Annam) and after one day on foot also reaches Thị Cầu, then to Đông Kinh either by land or by water. (Devéria, 1880: 79-80)

\* *Third route:* From Longzhou District (China), one day to Pinger bordergate. Crossing this bordergate, another day to reach Thất Uyên Prefecture (Annam). From there, two more days to reach An Việt District, then one day on foot to Từ Sơn Prefecture, and then through the districts of Đông Ngạn, Gia Lâm and others, crossing the Phú Lương River (i.e. Red River) to enter Đông Kinh. (Devéria, 1880: 80-82)

From Yunnan to Annam, there are two routes:

\* *First route:* From Mengzi, crossing Lianhua Falls, one enters Annam through Shilongguan, then descends to Chenglan Cave (China), crossing the right bank of the river. Continuing on foot for four more days reaches Thủy Vĩ Prefecture (Annam), then eight more days to Văn Bàn Prefecture. From here, it takes five more days to Trấn An District, and another five days to Hạ Hoa District. From Hạ Hoa, it takes three days to reach Thanh Ba District and another three days to Lâm Thao Prefecture, located in the Phú Lương River



basin, with the Thao River to the north and the Đà River to the south. From Lâm Thao, it continues to Sơn Vi District, two more days to Hưng Hóa Prefecture, encountering the ancient city of Đa Bang, then the Bạch Hạc Junction connecting with the Phú Lương River, and following this river downstream to Đông Kinh. (Devéria, 1880: 82-83)

\* *Second route:* From Heyang Pass (China) in the right bank river basin, it takes ten days to reach Bình Nguyên Prefecture (Annam), five more days to Phú An District, continuing one day to Tuyên Giang Prefecture or Tuyên Hóa Prefecture, and then two more days to Đoan Hùng Prefecture. From Đoan Hùng, it takes five more days to reach the Tam Kỳ Giang Junction, then following the Phú Lương River to Bạch Hạc and downstream to Đông Kinh. (Devéria, 1880: 83-84)

From Guangdong to Annam, the journey follows a maritime route. From the ports of Guangdong Province, passing by Lianzhou Island (China), then along the northern coast of Annam to Hải Đông Prefecture (Annam). Alternatively, from the Leizhou Peninsula, the ship passes by Bạch Long Vĩ Island (Annam), then enters the interior of Annam through one of five estuaries: Bạch Đằng, An Dương, Đồ Sơn, Đa Ngư, and Thái Bình; then following one of the rivers: Bạch Đằng, Hoàng Kinh, Phú Lương, Hồng Hà, Thái Bình... passing through various prefectures and districts such as Nghi Dương, Bình Hà, Nam Sách, Thượng Hồng; or Kiêu Thoại, Tân Minh, Tứ Kỳ, Khoái Châu, Kinh Môn, Hạ Hồng... to reach Đông Kinh. (Devéria, 1880: 84-86)

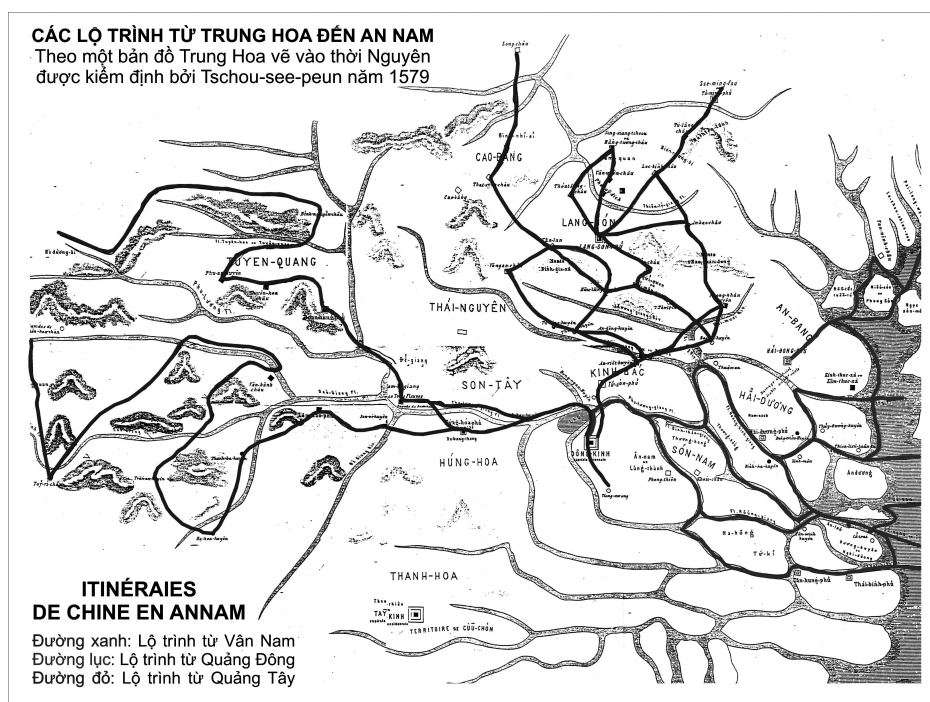


Figure 1. Map showing three routes from China to Annam (Vietnam) in Devéria's book.

The traffic routes between China and Vietnam mentioned above were largely opened by the Chinese during their military invasions of Vietnam, from the Han dynasty (221-206 BCE) to the Qing dynasty. Vietnamese envoys from the Lê dynasty (1427-1788) to the Nguyễn dynasty (1802-1945) also utilized these routes to conduct diplomatic missions to the Qing court.

### *Trade activities of Vietnamese diplomatic missions to China*

As previously mentioned, the Vietnamese court dispatched missions to China for various purposes: diplomatic, political, and commercial. This paper does not focus on “đi công vụ” (official missions) or purely commercial trips (mainly to Guangdong and Hong Kong for purchasing goods) but examines the dual-purpose commercial activities within the diplomatic missions sent by the Vietnamese court, primarily during the Nguyễn dynasty, to the Qing dynasty in China.

#### *Trade authority of the diplomatic missions*

During the Nguyễn dynasty, the envoys sent to China had multiple responsibilities. Besides their primary tasks such as paying tribute, expressing gratitude, and celebrating important events, they were also tasked with procuring goods for the court. The responsibility of dispatching envoys to China fell to Bộ Lễ (禮部: Ministry of Rites). However, the court also included officials from other ministries and departments, such as Bộ Hộ (戶部: Ministry of Finance) and Phủ Nội vụ (內務府: Imperial Household), to handle various duties abroad, the most crucial being the acquisition of goods to meet the needs of the royal family and the court. Thus, the missions were not solely composed of envoys (one chief envoy and two deputy envoys) but also included a retinue of attendants and porters responsible for carrying the envoys’ sedan chairs and the tribute goods.

The *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* records that in the early Gia Long reign, “the court established the regulation of sending envoys to the Qing dynasty every four years. If the mission coincided with celebratory events, requests for titles, expressions of gratitude, or offerings of incense, Bộ Hộ and Phủ Nội vụ would be notified to prepare everything accordingly. The court would also notify Hanoi to procure necessary items and draft an official communication to Guangxi province to confirm the entry date. Before departing, the court would select three envoys (one chief envoy, two deputy envoys) and appoint eight attendants and nine porters.” (Nội các triều Nguyễn, 1993: 305) During the early Minh Mạng reign, the number of personnel in each mission increased: three envoys, three secretaries, nine attendants, and fifteen porters (totaling 30 people.) (Nội các triều Nguyễn, 1993: 306) This increase was to assist in transporting goods to and from China. However, the added personnel caused additional expenses and logistical challenges for the Qing authorities in providing supplies, services, and escort for the missions within China. Consequently, in the 6<sup>th</sup> year of Minh Mạng reign (1825), “the

Qing court requested that each mission be limited to 20 people: three envoys, eight attendants, and nine porters.” (Nội các triều Nguyễn, 1993: 306)

Some have argued that diplomatic missions did not engage in commercial activities and that the items brought back by envoys from China were not goods but gifts from the Chinese court to the Vietnamese court. In my view, this argument is inaccurate, as numerous historical records detail the commercial transactions conducted by the Nguyễn dynasty diplomatic missions in China:

- The *Châu bản triều Nguyễn* (阮朝硃本: Official records of the Nguyễn dynasty) (vol. 15: 212-213) reflects: “On March 28<sup>th</sup>, the 7<sup>th</sup> year of Minh Mạng reign (1826), Nguyễn Hữu Thân, Hiệp tổng trấn Bắc Thành (北城協總鎮: Defense Command Lieutenant Governor of Northern region) reported that, on March 18<sup>th</sup>, two diplomatic missions<sup>1</sup> returned to Thăng Long (昇龍, now Hanoi). The two deputy envoys Hoàng Kim Hoán and Hoàng Văn Quyền returned ahead via the post, while the four deputy envoys stayed in Thăng Long to inspect the goods. Nguyễn Công Thiệp from Bộ Hộ, along with the deputy envoys, inventoried the purchased goods; selected lightweight items such as silk and brocade ... totaling 14 crates, divided into 12 loads, transported overland to Huế capital from March 25<sup>th</sup>. The heavier items, totaling 16 crates, were sealed and handed over to Cục Tạo tác (造作局: Section of Manufacturing), along with 53 chests of personal belongings of the two missions and their attendants, awaiting shipment to the capital by sea.” (Cục lưu trữ nhà nước, 1998, vol. I: 420)

The *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* mentions that in 1841, the Qing emperor issued an edict exempting the Nguyễn dynasty from the biannual tribute for the years Xinchou (1841) and Yishi (1845). (Vương Hồng Sển, 1993: 154) In practice, although no official tribute missions were sent, the Nguyễn dynasty still dispatched a mission led by Lý Văn Phúc to report the death of King Minh Mạng and request the Qing to confer kingship for King Thiệu Trị in 1841.

Subsequently, the Nguyễn court sent a mission led by Trương Hảo Hợp to express gratitude in 1845. This mission was also tasked with the commissioning of mirror paintings illustrating the contents of King Thiệu Trị’s poems *Ngự đề danh thắng đồ hội thi tập* (御題名勝圖會詩集: The King’s poems about the beautiful landscapes accompanied by painting), published by the Cabinet of the Nguyễn dynasty (阮朝內閣) in 1845. Among them, twenty poems praised the twenty scenic spots in the capital city, known as the *Thần kinh nhị thập cảnh thi vịnh* (神京二十景詩咏: Poems about twenty beautiful sights of Huế), such as Thiên Mụ Temple, Thiệu Phương Royal garden, Tịnh Tâm Lake, Ngự Bình Mountain, etc. Each

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<sup>1</sup> The missions led by Hoàng Kim Hoán and Hoàng Văn Quyền, both of which traveled to China in 1825.

poem in the *Thần kinh nhị thập cảnh thi vịnh* was accompanied by a detailed woodblock illustration of the selected scenic spots. The designs for these woodblocks were created by artists in *Họa tượng cục* (畫匠局: Section of Painting), and engraved and printed by the cabinet of the Nguyễn dynasty. Chinese painters were engaged to copy these woodblock prints on to mirror, together with the poems and these words in Han script: 紹治乙巳恭錄 (Respectfully copied in the Yisi year under the reign of King Thiệu Trị). These mirror paintings are now hanged on the walls of Hòa Khiêm Palace (inside Tự Đức mausoleum) and Long An Palace (at Huế Royal Antiquities Museum).

When the Trương Hảo Hợp mission returned to Huế capital in the Bingwu year (1846), they were penalized for the burden they placed on porters (leading to some deaths due to overexertion). Trương Hảo Hợp received the heaviest penalty, losing his position as *Tả Thị lang Bộ Lễ* (禮部左侍郎: Deputy Minister of Rites) and being reassigned to serve as *quyền Tuần phủ* (權巡撫: Acting Governor) of Lạng Sơn Prefecture, close to the border with China. (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 1972: 139)

The *Đại Nam thực lục* states:

*“In the 1<sup>st</sup> year of Tự Đức reign (1848), the cabinet entrusted purchasing orders to the mission to the Qing court<sup>1</sup>, and instructed them also to buy goods from China. Among them were objects made of precious stones, antiques, porcelain and toys. Mandarin Đỗ Danh Thiếp made a presentation to the King Tự Đức that His Majesty is truly honest, living a frugal life, and avoiding all luxuries. As the whole country is now in mourning, people are all dressed simply in white; it would surely not be frugal if envoys, who are sent to announce the national mourning, tried to seek out precious objects and unusual toys to purchase. Please withdraw all those orders. The King praised his forthrightness and followed the advice.”* (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 1973: 58-59)

- The *Châu bản triều Nguyễn* (209-214) records: in the 21<sup>st</sup> year of Tự Đức reign, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, “*Trần Đình Túc and Nguyễn Huy Tế submitted a list of items they had purchased in Hong Kong for presentation during the Grand Celebration of the Empress Dowager’s 60<sup>th</sup> birthday (i.e. Queen Mother Từ Dũ)*”. (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, 1979: 104) Previously, these two officials were sent to Hong Kong to apprehend a fugitive named Lê Duy Định, who had fled there and gathered followers to procure weapons against the court. They were also tasked with purchasing goods.

- In the *Histoire des Relations de la Chine avec l’Annam-Vietnam du XVI<sup>e</sup> au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Devéria reflects on some events related to the purchase of goods by Vietnamese envoys:

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<sup>1</sup> This envoy headed by Bùi Quỳ, with Vương Hữu Quang and Nguyễn Thu as deputies, to announce the funeral of King Thiệu Trị and to ask for the conferment of kingship to King Tự Đức.

+ In 1775, when the Annam envoy passed through Nanjing, they wanted to buy silk. The Qing dynasty did not object to this, but since it was a private transaction without the recommendation of the Qing court, Chinese merchants raised the prices excessively, causing disputes among the Annam envoys. The authorities had to intervene, and henceforth, envoys had to submit a list of items they wished to purchase to the local authorities, who would then assist in procuring the goods. (Devéria, 1880: 70)

+ In 1794, the king of Annam, who was fond of Chinese industrial products, ordered embroidered robes from Jiangnan province. The king dispatched an envoy with the authority to execute this task. The envoy carried documents certifying that the items were for the king. The Chinese emperor, fearing that the demands from the king of Annam would continue to increase and that the number of brokers would cause trouble, issued the following decree:

*“Annam sends tribute items every two years, with envoys traveling frequently. If the king of Annam wishes to purchase clothing for himself, he should have his envoys buy these items when they are sent to China. If the king needs to purchase anything in Nanjing, he must inform the governor-general of Liangguang to request permission from the Chinese emperor for the Annam envoy to alter their route and travel by water through Nanjing. If the king has no need to purchase anything in Jiangnan, his envoys must proceed to Beijing via Hubei and Hunan, as previously done.”* (Devéria, 1880: 71)

Interestingly, the envoys not only brought tribute items to China and purchased goods to take back to Vietnam, but they also brought Vietnamese goods to sell in China.

In the same book, Devéria published the content of an edict issued by the Qing dynasty in 1665, which allowed envoys from tributary states to bring goods to sell in Beijing:

*“Envoys from tributary countries, except for those from Ryukyu (琉球國) and Koryo (高麗國), after being granted gifts by the emperor, are permitted to set up markets for three to five days. Envoys from Ryukyu and Koryo may trade on any day. The Ministry of Rites will assign officials from the Ministry of Finance to purchase goods (sold by the envoys from these countries) for the court. Upon receiving a reply from the Ministry of Finance, an announcement will be made, and officials will be appointed to oversee fairness in the transactions. Ships from tributary countries arriving outside the specified times to deliver tribute will be considered engaging in illegal trade. Governors and district officials must expel them.”* (Devéria, 1880: 70)

#### *List of tributes and goods traded by Vietnamese envoy missions*

Historical sources related to the commercial activities of Vietnamese envoy missions in China clearly distinguish between tributes, goods brought for sale, and gifts (from the Qing court to the Vietnamese court) versus goods purchased and brought back to Vietnam.

### *Tributes*

According to the 欽定大清會典事例 (Repertory of the Administrative Regulations in Da Qing,) in 1803, the Qing court issued a list of tributes that the Nguyễn dynasty had to periodically present to the Chinese court:

*“As per the Ministry of Rites’ suggestion, the regular tributes to be sent every two years by Annam (Vietnam), as determined by the Emperor, include: 600 taels of agarwood (沉香), 1,200 taels of aromatic wood for perfuming clothes (薰衣香), 4 elephant tusks (象牙), 4 rhinoceros horns (犀角), 600 pieces of white silk (白絹), 200 pieces of cotton cloth (棉花), 90 catties of cardamom seeds (砂仁), and 90 catties of dried areca nuts (檳榔). Additionally, for special celebrations (Coronations, Longevity celebrations etc., of the Qing emperor or the royal family), the tributes include: 4 elephant tusks, 4 rhinoceros horns, 300 pieces of white silk, and 100 pieces of cotton cloth.”* (Devéria, 1880: 52)

Apart from the listed items, the Chinese sometimes requested additional tributes such as: crafted gold and silver items (金銀器皿), various aromatic resins (降真香, 速香), agarwood (木香), black thread incense (黑線香), paper fans (紙扇), and local silks (土綢, 土絹, 土紬) purple aromatic incense (紫降香). (Devéria, 1880: 88-89)

### *Goods for sale*

As mentioned earlier, besides tributes, envoy missions also brought goods to China for trade. A Qing decree from 1665 clearly states:

*“Envoys bringing tributes are allowed to carry goods (for sale), but they must cover transportation costs. If suitable, they may trade in Beijing, but if they prefer to trade elsewhere, viceroys and local officials must assign personnel to supervise the transactions and preempt any difficulties”.* (Devéria, 1880: 70)

In *Histoire des Relations de la Chine avec l’Annam-Vietnam du XVI<sup>e</sup> au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Devéria, referencing *An Nam thổ vật* (安南土物: native products of Annam,) lists goods typically brought by Vietnamese envoys to sell in China, including: natural gold (生金), silver (銀), copper (銅), cinnabar (丹砂), pearl (珠), tortoiseshell (玳瑁), coral (珊瑚), agarwood (沉香), balsam oil (蘇合油), jadeite (翡翠), white pheasant (白雉), white deer (白鹿), rhinoceros (犀), elephant (象), rhinoceros horn (兕), mountain goat (羚羊), orangutan (猩猩), baboon (狒狒), Mongolian ape (蒙猿), python (蟒蛇), mangoes (菴羅果), jackfruit (波羅密), dried areca nuts (檳榔), pepper (胡椒), sappanwood (蘇木), ebony (烏木), salt (鹽), and lacquer (漆). (Devéria, 1880: 87-88)

### *Goods purchased*

The route from Vietnam to Beijing passed through many provinces and cities in China, each with its own specialties favored by the envoys. These included high-quality

Jiangnan silk, Jiangxi porcelain, Weizhou wine, Beijing herbal medicine, Hubei tea, and forest products from Yunnan.

On their way, envoys often stopped in Jiangxi to commission porcelain items customized to the requirements of the Vietnamese court and officials (Commissioned patterned porcelains). On their return, they collected these items to bring back to Vietnam. In addition to these commissioned patterned porcelains, decorated with motifs and reign title of the king (年號) to the Vietnamese kings, envoys also commissioned porcelain for personal use, often inscribed with the year they were sent to China, such as: 甲子年製 (Made in the Jiazi year, 1804), 庚辰年製 (Made in the Gengchen year, 1820), 丙戌年製 (Made in the Bingxu year, 1826), 丁巳年造 (Made in the Dingsi year, 1857)...<sup>1</sup>

Aside from pre-ordered items like commissioned patterned porcelains and mirror paintings, most other goods were purchased on the return journey. Silk, silk threads, tea, and herbal medicine were easily transported from central China, while larger and heavier items were mainly purchased in border provinces like Guangxi and Yunnan...

Devéria also detailed in his book the typical goods purchased in Guangxi and Yunnan, including: Taihua tea (太華茶), dried golden thread fish (金線魚), peacock (孔雀), horse (馬), special fabrics like: patterned cloth (紋布), five-color brocade (五色錦), Tianchang paper (千張紙), and various types of bamboo products: bean bamboo (豆竹), cloud bamboo (雲竹), rattan bamboo (撲竹), silk drooping bamboo (垂絲竹), chicken leg bamboo (雞腿竹), musk (麝香), marble (屏石), copper ore (石青), iron (鐵), white copper (白銅); diamond (金網鑽), amethyst (紫石), lapis lazuli (琉璃), gypsum (石膏), amber (琥珀), jade (玉), red stone powder (銀硃), black salt (黑鹽), and camphor stone (龍腦石). (Devéria, 1880: 89-91)

In addition to the goods purchased according to the Vietnamese court's orders, envoys also brought back gifts from the Qing emperor for the Vietnamese king and court officials.

On their return journey, envoys were escorted by local Chinese officials and soldiers, who also helped carry the envoys' luggage and goods as they passed through their jurisdictions. These escorts were responsible for reporting back to the Qing court about the envoy's journey from Beijing until they crossed the border into Vietnam. From there, local Vietnamese officials in border provinces like Lạng Sơn, Thủy Vĩ, and Bình Nguyên... escorted the envoys and transported their goods to Hanoi. There, the goods and gifts were sorted, with the Qing court's gifts and the envoys' personal belongings transported to Huế capital with the envoy. Bulkier, less important goods were temporarily managed by Bắc Thành officials and later shipped to Huế by water, as recorded in the 212-213 pages of

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<sup>1</sup> I have compiled a list of 52 chronological inscriptions (year mark) found on export porcelain that correspond to the years when Vietnamese diplomatic missions traveled to China.

the Minh Mạng reign's official records previously cited. (Cục lưu trữ nhà nước, 1998, vol. I: 420)

## Conclusion

Thus, aside from envoy missions sent to China for diplomatic purposes between the two countries, the Nguyễn dynasty, and before that, the Lê-Trịnh regime, also dispatched envoy missions to China to purchase goods for the consumption needs of the kings, royal families, and the court.

In addition to missions specifically tasked with purchasing goods, which Nguyễn dynasty records often referred to as “official missions,” diplomatic envoy missions also engaged in commercial activities. These included bringing raw materials, agricultural and forest products, minerals, and specialties from Vietnam to trade in China (participating in markets designated by the Chinese authorities) and purchasing goods, raw materials, and luxury items from China as requested by the Vietnamese court.

These commercial activities highlight the multifaceted roles of Vietnamese envoy missions in China. They were not merely diplomats but also traders, conducting transactions as required by the court and making purchases based on their needs and preferences.

Moreover, the regulations set by the Chinese court for the commercial activities of Vietnamese envoys, such as the designated locations and times for transactions, the permissible goods for trade, and the local Chinese authorities' oversight of the Vietnamese envoys' commercial activities, reflect the hierarchical nature of China's diplomatic relationships with its “tributary states.” This hierarchy placed Vietnam in a lesser position compared to other tributary states like Koryo and Ryukyu. This also indicates a higher degree of autonomy in Vietnam's diplomatic relations with China, positioning it as a “tributary country” rather than a “vassal country,” a distinction I have analyzed in a previously published study.

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