

Vietnam-China Trade Relations in the Feudal Period: From the Early 10th to the Late 19th Century

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Abstract

During the thousands of years that Vietnam and China existed side by side, trade relations between them, despite fluctuations at different times, continued without interruption. History reveals that trade relations between the two countries were always strongly affected by political relations. This article aims to understand trade relations from the 10th century until 1885, when Vietnam emerged as an independent country after having been an administrative district of the Chinese feudal dynasty. The Treaty of Tianjin, which was signed between France and China in 1885, gave France control over Annam, as Vietnam was then known, and marked the permanent termination of the vassal relationship between Vietnam and China. This paper suggested that Vietnam trade relations with China during the 10th century until 1885 followed the principle of being firm but flexible in order to maintain conciliatory relations with China, as China was considered Vietnam's main partner in both political and economic relations. The state of Vietnam-China economic relations fluctuated during different feudal dynasties. Certain dynasties maintained a closed-door policy; however, trade between two countries still took place by traders especially in border areas. This indicated that trade relations at border crossings or trading sites on land and at sea was stronger and more active than formal trade relations.

Keywords: Vietnam, China, relations, trade, feudal

บทคัดย่อ

ในช่วงระยะเวลาห้าพันปีที่เวียดนามและจีนมีชายแดนติดกัน ความสัมพันธ์ด้านการค้าระหว่างสองประเทศก็ดำรงอยู่มาโดยตลอด มากน้อยตามแต่ช่วงเวลา

ประวัติศาสตร์ความสัมพันธ์นี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่า ความสัมพันธ์ทางการค้าได้รับผลกระทบเป็นอย่างมากจากความสัมพันธ์ทางการเมือง บทความนี้ต้องการอธิบายความสัมพันธ์ทางการค้าระหว่างเวียดนามและจีนตั้งแต่ศตวรรษที่ 10 ถึง ค.ศ. 1885 คือตั้งแต่ช่วงที่เวียดนามได้รับเอกราชเป็นอิสระจากที่เคยเป็นเพียงส่วนหนึ่งของหน่วยงานบริหารของระบอบศักดินาจีน จนถึงช่วงที่มีการลงนามในสนธิสัญญาเทียนสินระหว่างฝรั่งเศสและจีนใน ค.ศ. 1885 ทำให้ฝรั่งเศสมีอำนาจเหนืออาณานิคมหรือเวียดนามในปัจจุบัน ซึ่งนับเป็นการสิ้นสุดความสัมพันธ์แบบรัฐบรรณาการระหว่างเวียดนามและจีนอย่างสิ้นเชิง บทความนี้เสนอว่าความสัมพันธ์ทางการค้าระหว่างเวียดนามและจีนระหว่างศตวรรษที่ 10 ถึง ค.ศ. 1885 อยู่ภายใต้หลักการแห่งความมั่นคงแต่ยืดหยุ่น เพื่อรักษาความสัมพันธ์แบบประนีประนอมกับจีน เนื่องจากเวียดนามถือว่าจีนเป็นหุ้นส่วนที่สำคัญในความสัมพันธ์ด้านการเมืองและเศรษฐกิจ ความสัมพันธ์ทางเศรษฐกิจระหว่างเวียดนามและจีนมีการเปลี่ยนแปลงขึ้นลงตามแต่ละราชวงศ์ บางราชวงศ์มีนโยบายปิดความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างสองประเทศ แต่อย่างไรก็ตาม พบว่าการค้าระหว่างสองประเทศยังคงมีอยู่โดยพ่อค้าโดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในพื้นที่ชายแดน ซึ่งแสดงให้เห็นว่าความสัมพันธ์ทางการค้าตามด่านชายแดนและจุดการค้าทั้งทางภาคพื้นดินและทางทะเลมีความเข้มแข็งและคึกคักกว่าความสัมพันธ์ทางการค้าแบบเป็นทางการ

คำสำคัญ: เวียดนาม จีน ความสัมพันธ์ การค้า ระบอบศักดินา

Introduction

The first economic exchanges between Vietnam and China took place at the border areas of the two countries. Geographical proximity as well as the close friendship between the people living in these areas provided the basis for the two sides to exchange commodities as well as business and technological experience. From the 3rd century BCE, wet rice cultivation techniques and methods of making bronze drums were passed from the south to the north. At the same time, methods of applying fertilizer and scooping water as well as the manufacture and use of metal tools moved from the north to the south (Tran Huy Lieu, 1966). These exchanges demonstrate the culture of Vietnam-China trade history. Trade activities on the state level appeared gradually.

For more than 1,000 years - from 111 BCE to 939 CE - Vietnam was under the domination of China, so that official trade relations between the two were not in existence. It was not until the 10th century, when Vietnam became independent from China,¹ that trade relations between the two countries were officially opened.

Diplomatic trade relations

Tribute offerings by Vietnam to China were one of the two important diplomatic communications, along with requesting investiture (for a discussion of this practice, see Nguyen Thi My Hanh, 2009: 65-73). Offerings of tribute became an indispensable way for the two countries to conduct economic exchanges. For Vietnamese feudal dynasties, tribute offerings were a way to show respect to the more powerful county and the desire to establish and maintain a friendly relationship. Thus, the Vietnamese usually listed specific figures for the number of tribute items offered to the Chinese emperors on every occasion. These figures demonstrate the value and economic meaning of tributary activities at that time.

It is important to note that when a Chinese emperor received tribute items from Vietnam, he also offered gifts to the Vietnamese delegation. Chinese gifts usually were various kinds of cloth, including brocaded silks, which were among the specialties of China.² The number

¹ After the insurrection led by Ngo Quyen in 938, a period of 1,000 years under the rule of feudal China ended, and Vietnam became an independent nation. Before that, for over 1000 years under the domination of China, Vietnam was one county/district of China.

² Examples include the following: (1) in 1260, during a tributary trip to Yuan Dynasty, the king of the Yuan Dynasty offered the Vietnamese delegation three pieces of west brocade, six pieces of *kim thuc cam* (a kind of brocade) (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1972: 194); (2) in 1790, on the Longevity Ceremony of King Qianlong, the Vietnamese delegation visited China. In response to Vietnam's offer, King Qianlong offered many specialties (such as the items mentioned above), King Qianlong then gave Group I various kinds of cloth, including the following: five pieces of *doan ngoai*, five pieces of *doan trong*, four pieces of brocade, four pieces of *doan bong*, four pieces of *doan vay*, one pair of large *ha bao*, two pair of small *ha bao* and many other cloths (Long, 2005: 58); (3) under the Nguyen Dynasty, in 1804, in response to the tribute of Vietnam, the king of the Qing Dynasty gave eight pieces of *doan mang*, eight pieces of *doan mo*, eight pieces of brocade, 27 pieces of silk, 27 pieces of *truu mua xuan*; (4) in 1870, on a trip to Beijing to survey the situation and reactions of China to the invasion of the West (led by the chief envoy Tran Bich San and deputy envoy Pham Hy Luong), the Vietnamese delegation visited the Qing Dynasty and gave offerings to the Chinese emperor.

of gifts from the Chinese emperor was rather small compared with the total number of items that Vietnam offered. But the fact that the Chinese dynasties always reciprocated with specific gifts for the Vietnamese ambassadors demonstrates that the commodity exchange between the two countries was due to the natural need for economic development between them.

However, the tribute items were not limited to the items that the Vietnamese king sent to the Chinese emperor; there was also another important component: the items that the ambassadors brought with them. The purpose of carrying along these items was to exchange and trade with China to gain benefits. The number of items “carried” along was considerable, as reflected in the observations of Truong Han, a historiographer under the Ming Dynasty.

“The gifts offered by the Ming Dynasty were great, but they accounted for only a very small proportion of the tribute. Costs were not even equal to one ten-thousandth of *ho thi*, [that is, a small number compared to the amount of goods that the tributary delegation brought along to trade with China].” (Ly Kim Min, 1988: 19-20)

Vietnam, like other vassal countries, went to China during the feudal periods by the most favorable trading method, which had the advantage of not being taxed. The Chinese government assigned mandarins to conduct trade with the envoys from Southeast Asian countries. From the Ming Dynasty, the local items brought by the vassal countries were taken care of, checked and transferred by the

In response, when the delegation returned to Vietnam, the Chinese emperor sent some gifts to King Nguyen, including the following: eight folds of embroidered brocade and eight folds of rough brocade, eight bars of gold corresponding to 12 ingots, five cymbals of silk. The ambassadors were offered three bars of gold, eight folds of *doan* (a kind of cloth), five folds of silk, five folds of *luc* (a kind of cloth) and two folds of silk. And escritaires and an elephant keeper were offered along with five folds of *doan* (a kind of cloth), five folds of *luc* (a kind of cloth) and three folds of *la* (a kind of cloth). In addition to the gifts from the Qing Dynasty emperor, the Tribute Ministry also had gifts for the Nguyen king and the ambassadors. Specifically, he presented the king with 40 tablets of ginseng, four bottles of wine; he presented the ambassadors with 10 tablets, four bottles of wine; and he presented the retainers each five tablets and one bottle of wine (Internal Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty, 1963: 146-147).

officials in the *Thi bac ty* (districts).³ Especially in this period, from the tribute trips, certain economic sectors in China were introduced into Vietnam. Dang Huy Tru, ambassador of Vietnam under the Nguyen Dynasty, is a typical example: after two mission trips to China in 1865 and in 1867 to “assess [i.e. spy on] the situation,” he not only purchased 239 large mountain guns and established many trading posts in Hanoi to export goods to China and other countries, but also studied photography and introduced it as a business into Vietnam. The photo shop, Cam Hieu Duong, which opened on March 3, 1869 in Hanoi, became the first in the history of Vietnam. Moreover, Dang Huy Tru introduced printing into Vietnam and opened the first book printing shop, Tri Trung Duong (Pham Tuan Khanh, 1990: 69). Thus, the tribute method contributed to promoting the exchange and influence of various kinds of trade between Vietnam and China at that time.

In contrast, China did not stop at the large profits from trading activities with the Vietnamese ambassadors, for Chinese envoys themselves often carried goods to Vietnam, set high prices and ordered Vietnam’s court to buy them. When returning to China, they brought back a great quantity of Vietnamese goods. For example, in 1434, Ming envoys Guo Qi and Turn Zhu visited Vietnam for the funeral of Le Thai To, the first king of the Le Dynasty. They brought along many products from China, then forced members of the Le Dynasty to buy them at high prices. In addition to this type of trade, in December, 1435, Zhu once again went to Dai Viet (the old name of Vietnam) on the occasion of Minh Anh Tong’s ascent to the throne. On this trip, Chu Bat brought many Chinese goods to Vietnam, set high prices and ordered the Le Dynasty to purchase them. When returning home, the delegation brought with them tribute and luggage along with nearly a thousand people (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1993: 334, 358). Thus, through the forced purchase method, the Chinese government gained increased economic benefits from unequal commercial activities.

³ Vuong Ky, a Ming author, wrote, “When the ambassadors came to offer tribute, our court established *thi bac ty* to manage it.... When they come, allow them to trade with local people in the trading stations called *ho thi*, set up by the state” (Ly Kim Min, 2006: 96).

In addition to the two-way commercial activities of the diplomatic missions, there were also trips purely for commercial purposes of the missions of the two countries. In particular, under the Nguyen Dynasty, these were thoroughly and comprehensively recorded.⁴ Moreover, when the king and people in the imperial palace needed Chinese products outside the time for tributary occasions or ceremonies, the Vietnamese feudal dynasty appointed ambassadors to go to China to meet their needs. There were also many occasions when the Chinese emperors themselves appointed their ambassadors or sent a letter to Vietnam to buy rare Vietnamese products desired by the palace. For example, under the Sung Dynasty, when Sung Hien Tong had just taken the throne and was to conduct the Heaven-worshipping ceremony, he requested the purchase of ten elephants from Vietnam to use in the ceremony. Subsequently, Vietnamese ambassador delegations offered elephants again after a period of suspending the offering of elephants. However, compared with the concurrent commercial activities of the diplomatic envoys, the trips purely for commercial purposes of the two countries' ambassadors were few in number.

Based on the analysis above, we can see that tribute offerings provided the basis of a vigorous trade between Vietnam and China. For Vietnam, the tribute trade was maintained as an important diplomatic method that brought certain economic benefits. For China, it not only brought enormous economic benefits, but also improved the country's political prestige and helped it catch up with the real needs and progress of the regional economic environment.

Trade relations over land

As was mentioned above, trade relations over land between Vietnam and China initially consisted of activities along the border. However,

⁴ Compared with 1858, when the French invaded, under the influence and pressure of Western science and technology, apart from the appointment of the envoys to purchase goods from China, beginning in 1860 the Nguyen Dynasty also sent representatives to France to buy steam ships, then sent Nguyen Thanh to bring agricultural products, fine art and handmade items at the craftsmanship fairs in Paris. Obviously, the vision of the Nguyen Dynasty at that time was broader than before even though it was still confined within the framework of the Eastern world.

until the early nineteenth century, the world had no concept of borders as it does today, but only the broad concept of “border areas” which facilitated the natural exchange and contact between the minorities living there. Consequently, “the purchase, sale and exchange of daily necessities as well as trading activities of traders in the markets in the border area, were continuous” (Ta Ngoc Lien, 1995: 91).

Under the Ly-Tran Dynasties, due to the fear that China, under the guise of trade, would spy on Vietnam, the kings allowed the Chinese to trade only at certain places and under the control of the state. China, similarly, allowed Vietnamese traders to trade in only certain areas in Guangzhou and Qinzhou. In 1009, Le Long Dinh initiated trading activities with the Sung Dynasty in Guangzhou. In 1012, Ly Cong Uan shipped products to Guangzhou for sale, but the Sung King Shin allowed ships to stop only in Guangzhou and at the Nhu Hong camp of Qinzhou, following the old rules of the Tien Le Dynasty.

Generally, on the land border at that time, the trading activities between Vietnam and China first took place in border trading stations known as *bac dich truong*. In Guangzhou, there were two large *bac dich truong*. One was Heng Son farm, where horses, forestry products, local pharmaceuticals and salt were sold, and the other was Vinh Binh farm, the most important station for trading goods with Vietnam at that time and the largest in Qinzhou. According to Chinese historian Chu Khu Phi,

“The *bac dich truong* in the suburban area at Jiang Dong is the place where Jiaozhi fishermen bring fish and oysters to exchange for rice and cloth. Traders of that country (Vietnam) coming to trade from Vinh An District must notify Qinzhou. Goods sold are silver, copper, several kinds of aloes wood, pearl and ivory. The small traders of our country (China) sell pens, articles, rice and cloth. Daily exchanges with Jiaozhi people are few.” (Tran Quoc Vuong & Ha Van Tan, 1963: 225)

Ethnic minority people also engaged in trade and exchange activities in the border areas of the two countries. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn*

thur, a record of Vietnam history, mentions a group of Man people (a branch of Tai people in Ta Giang and Huu Giang, China) who were caught after crossing the copper post to Kim Hoa dock, Vi Long district to trade in 1012 (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1972: 194).

During the Le So Dynasty, based on many records, we can imagine the trading scene on land. A description of the Tu Long copper mine follows.

“Tu Long commune is a mountainous area.... In the market, people sell rice, [which] is measured in bamboo tubes, each tube of rice is worth eight to nine coins.... Salt is often sold in town... from Tu Long, each kilo is worth two *quan* [a kind of currency in the past], 100 kilos are worth 20 *quan*. In China, the public salt is expensive and bitter, so northern people bring the Chinese traditional medicine from Binh Di pass to exchange it for salt, then secretly bring it back their region to sell for profit.... Lighting oil is also sold by Chinese traders, at day and night, so the tax collected in the markets is substantial.... Horses are sold in Khai Hoa, China, the fine ones are worth seven to eight *dat* [a kind of money in the past], the weak or thin ones are worth two to three *dat*....” (Le Qui Don, 1977: 350)

In fact, the Le Dynasty issued numerous policies to strictly control foreign trade, especially the activities of private traders, and to deal with illegal trading activities. Typical was an incident headed by Quang Ngoc in Long Chau in 1473, in which some Chinese traders illegally cooperated with dishonest Vietnamese traders in Lang Son to cast counterfeit money and conduct illegal trade. All were punished (Ta Ngoc Lien, 1995: 91-92).

In the 17th and 18th centuries, which are considered the peak period of Vietnamese feudal foreign trade, there were many changes in trade relations between Vietnam and China. During this period, there was a massive wave of migration from China to Vietnam. The number of Chinese migrants increased quickly and they played an increasingly important role in promoting trade. Chinese merchants often brought to

Vietnam such commodities as porcelain, tea, herbs, silk, brocade, saltpeter and sulfur to sell and exchange. The goods they purchased were mainly silk, cinnamon and copper. Although this is considered the “most liberal” period, trading activities also had to comply with the rules prescribed by the state. For example, in 1720, the Le-Trinh Dynasties issued regulations regarding the collection of tax on copper and cinnamon; in 1723, the Trinh Cuong lord issued additional regulations on the price of copper. Moreover, the state also regulated the specific locations where Chinese traders could trade.⁵

Especially at this time, in the south, with the preferential policies of the Nguyen lord, Chinese traders played an important role in promoting trade between Vietnam and China, as well as between Vietnam and many other countries around the world. In many cases, the Nguyen lord and the mandarins bought Chinese goods indirectly through Chinese traders. For example, in 1742, the mandarins asked Chinese emigrants to buy 21 rare Chinese products, including Shanghai red velvet, wax and pearls. And in 1797, the mandarins asked Chinese emigrants to buy two types of Chinese traditional medicine. At this time, in the south of Vietnam, Chinese traders, because of their business competence and the preferential policies of the Nguyen lord took control of all important trade relations.

During the Nguyen Dynasty, trade in the border areas took place became quite active. The border crossings of Dong Dang (Lang Son) and Mong Cai (Quang Ninh) became the key locations for the import and export of goods. In particular, Dong Dang, which is adjacent to Nam Hai pass, was the most important border crossing for foreign relations between Vietnam and China, as well as the site of the largest trade transactions. Near that border crossing were some smaller ones, such as Quang Lang, Son Trung and Khuat Xa. From Nam Quan pass, about a few dozen kilometers inland was Ky Lua Market with flat terrain and spacious streets, near the Ky Cung River flowing back to China.

⁵ For example, in 1764, Trinh Doanh's grandson ruled that Chinese traders could trade only in Van Don and Van Ninh, two communes of An Hai; Can Hai, Hoi Thong in Nghe An; and Trieu Khau in Thanh Hoa. In the south of Vietnam, the Chinese traders traded mainly in the cities, especially in Hoi An.

This was also the place where traders from the two countries met to exchange goods.⁶

Under the Nguyen Dynasty, in Lang Son, especially in Dong Dang and Ky Lua, it was common for Chinese traders to bring goods to the markets, stay for a few months, and then return to China. To be able to control these traders, the Ministry of Finance in 1838 established specific provisions on residence taxes in addition to taxes on goods, as described below.

“There have been more and more Qing (Chinese) people coming to Lang Son for business, at least a few hundred people. If they stay here from May to June or July, they must pay three *quan*; if they stay until August or September or the end of the year, they must pay five *quan*. The province must have residence management books and must collect taxes. For a three-month period, books listing the amount of money collected, the name, age, hometown of the guests and months issued must be submitted to the ministry to report to the king. At the end of the year, the amount of tax collected will be recorded in a report submitted to the king.” (Internal Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty, 1993: 309-310)

Clearly, the amount of tax was not very high and was primarily a way for local governments to control the traders.

Another border crossing was Mong Cai, which, in addition to the trade exchange on land, had the great advantage of being located near the commercial port of Van Ninh at the mouth of the Thac Mang River flowing into the South China Sea. There, Chinese merchant ships and those of other countries often gathered or shipped goods to other places. Consequently, it became a very important crossing that must be taken into account when discussing trade relations between the two countries at that time.

⁶ In the early 19th century, historian Phan Huy Chu commented, “In Ky Lua Street in the west of Nhi Thanh cavern, the trading activities were crowded” (Phan Huy Chu, 1981: 12). *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* (Geographic Book of Dai Nam) added: “Ky Lua Street with seven smaller streets is a famous street in the northern province of Lang Son” (Internal Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty, 1971: 372).

For the trade exchange to take place smoothly, the Nguyen Dynasty in the first half of the 19th century, especially under the Minh Menh Dynasty, issued specific regulations concerning taxes on goods.

“As in the previous dynasty, the Chinese goods exported to Vietnam were primarily areca, tobacco, article, canvas, pottery bowls, cloth, artificial coloring, sugar, oil, silk and traditional medicines, while the Vietnamese goods most exported to China were brown tuber, faux, cardamom, Giao Chi silk, bamboo, wood, cinnamon, pepper and areca. However, in order to ensure that there was enough food in the country during agricultural crises, the Nguyen Dynasty banned the selling of rice to foreigners. Rice could be sold only for consumption, and each person on a merchant ship was allowed to buy 100 kilos of rice and required to pay the price that the government set in 1806, which was three *quan*.” (Nguyen Minh Hang, 2001: 46)

This policy also applied to Chinese merchants at the time.

King Tu Duc especially at the beginning of the 19th century, faced with opium smuggling and opium smoking even though these activities were banned by the state (in 1817, 1820, 1824, 1832, 1840, 1852, 1853, 1856) until February, 1865, nullified the ban but applied a very high import tax on imported opium, including one on Chinese traders. When arriving, Chinese traders were required to declare the exact amount of opium they were selling and pay the appropriate tax (Tsuboi, 1992: 158). In fact, the Chinese traders were the main offenders selling products banned by the Vietnamese government in Vietnamese markets at that time. These products included not only drugs, but also weapons, precious metals, precious woods and rice. Some dishonest Chinese traders even used non-standard scales in weighing goods, and many of them cast counterfeit coins, causing disruption in the Vietnamese market (Truong Thi Yen, 1981: 60-61). Hence, we can see that in addition to positive impacts, the trade between Vietnam and China also had negative impacts on the economy of Vietnam.

The Treaty of Tianjin⁷, dated June 9, 1885, ended China's economic influence over Vietnam, and was followed by the Commercial Treaty on the border between France and China, which was signed on September 20, 1885 and laid the basis for a new page in trade relations between Vietnam and China.

Maritime trade relations

When discussing maritime trade relations between Vietnam and China, the commercial port of Van Don must be mentioned. After Van Don Farm was opened in February, 1149 by King Ly Anh Tong (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1972: 281), merchant ships from the countries in the area came to exchange goods and offer to open diplomatic relations to Vietnam. During the Tran Dynasty, Van Don farm was changed into Van Don town. Subsequently, this port became the most important center for foreign trade of Vietnam until the 17th century.

Van Don, an archipelago in the eastern part of the country, was a strategic location for sea carriage from China to Vietnam. During the Vietnamese invasion, Chinese navy and food transport troops went through that archipelago. Therefore, the defense of Van Don and tight control of its foreign trade were of high concern to the Ly, Tran and Le Dynasties. In 1349, the Tran Dynasty set up a control post, road post and customs post (sea control) in Van Don, as well as a navy. Smugglers were punished, and the *Quốc triều hình luật* (*The formal penal code of Vietnam dynasties*) of the Le Dynasty outlined very strict regulations on foreign trade. People living along the border and coast, including mandarins, farm keepers and islanders who bought foreign goods or welcomed foreign merchant ships without the permission of the local government, would be severely punished and heavily fined (Tran Nham, 1991: 210-211). Moreover, the Chinese ban on sea trade affected the maritime economic conditions of both sides. However, the profits were always attractive, tempting coastal Chinese residents to cross the sea to

⁷ This treaty was the culmination of a compromise between the Qing Dynasty and the French under which the Qing formally renounced their role as overlords of Vietnam in exchange for commercial and political interests with the French.

the island harbors of the Gulf of Tonkin, Vietnam to covertly purchase and sell goods, including pearls, which were the most popular item. On the other hand, many Chinese sources indicate that Vietnamese boats were also present in Ao Chau (Chau Tri) to search for pearls (Ta Ngoc Lien, 1995: 88-89). Even under the strict control of both countries, the ports of the Northeast Sea and the East Sea of Vietnam were well known through the transfer and export of ceramics. In addition to serving as a port through which Chinese ceramics were transferred to regional markets, Van Don was also known as the gateway through which Vietnamese blue-glazed ceramics in the Le So Dynasty reached international markets. Thus we can see that merchants from both sides continued to trade without government control.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Chinese merchant ships often came from the ports of Guangzhou, Shaoguan, Chaozhou, and Fujia during the monsoon, crossing over the sea to Vietnam. In North Vietnam, these merchant ships often landed at Van Don port (Quang Ninh) and then went to Pho Hien (Hung Yen), Vi Hoang (Nam Dinh) or Thang Long (Ke Cho). In South Vietnam, the Chinese merchants often traded in Hoi An (Quang Nam) or Thanh Ha (Thuan Hoa) (Do Bang, 1996: 39).

On those trips, the Chinese goods that were transported to Vietnam usually included ceramics, silver bars, article, tea, herbs, silk, brocade, salt, pepper, sulfur, lead, and weapons. When returning to China, the traders often brought with them silk, cinnamon, pepper, sugar, wood, spices, birds' nests, rhino horns and ivory. These sales had to comply with the rules prescribed by each country.

During this period, Chinese merchant ships not only maintained the two-way trade between China and Southeast Asian countries, but also served as a link connecting ports in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. Therefore, the exchange of goods between Vietnam and other countries in the region was promoted through Chinese traders. It is estimated that in the period from 1651 to 1724, the number of trips made by large merchant ships (those with a tonnage of 150-200 tons) from China transporting goods from Vietnam's ports to Nagasaki, Japan was

251, including 52 trips from northern ports and 199 trips from the southern port of Vietnam (Association of Vietnamese Historians, People's Administration Committee of Hai Hung Province, 1995: 64).

For the Nguyen Dynasty, especially after the invasion of the French in 1858, the state trade with Chinese merchant ships was somewhat more difficult than before. Normally, trade activities between Vietnam and China took place mainly in the north, where French colonial control was somewhat looser than in the south.

In response to the threat of unpredictable situations and the disruption of markets caused by dishonest Chinese traders, King Tu Duc set up a tax collection agency as well as an import tariff for merchant ships from China to tighten control on these trade activities. Specifically, in 1866, the Nguyen Dynasty established the Nhu Vien tax department at the mouth of the Tra Ly River, Nam Dinh province. That same year, King Tu Duc increased the import tariff on Chinese merchant ships coming to trade in northern Vietnam,⁸ possibly to limit the disruption caused by Chinese traders (Internal Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty, 1963: 81). In addition, the Nguyen Dynasty issued a number of other specific provisions for imported goods; for example, items related to the military, such as zinc, iron, copper and saltpeter, had to be sold directly to the court, and could not be sold to individuals. As for drugs, King Tu Duc, after taking the throne in 1865, implemented very strict laws on land trade as well as on imports. Before then he was powerless against the illegal opium trade, opium smoking as well as diplomatic and financial pressures; he had to import drugs and collect a high tax on them.

But the most remarkable thing of all was that in 1876, King Tu Duc removed the ban on trade by sea. Previously, during the 28 years he had ruled, the Nguyen Dynasty had banned Vietnamese merchant ships from going abroad to trade. Penalties included confiscation of illegality ships and cargo, and a punishment of 100 to 300 whiplashes. This important event in 1876 is discussed in *Đai Nam thực lục (True Records of Dai Nam)*.

⁸ However, 69 boats supporting the fight against the invaders were exempted from tax.

“Previously, Vietnamese people engaged only in domestic sales; net revenues were limited, so that merchants’ vessels from China and Western seaports got more profits. Vietnamese people were bound by laws and were not able to trade and their assets were deficient. Now, I reject the policy of preventing sea trade and open the way to bring benefits to the Vietnamese people. When Vietnamese vessels return from foreign countries to certain provincial seaports, five percent of the total goods are kept. Transporting prohibited products (such as weapons, bullets, guns and Vietnamese women)⁹ and tax evasion as well as market disruption shall be sentenced according to the decree in the 9th Minh Menh year (1828).⁹” (Internal Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty, 1963: 282)

From the above discussion, it can be seen that at this time Nguyen Dynasty realized the need to create advantageous conditions for people to trade on the sea and put an end to the unilateral trade conditions (mainly implemented by Chinese traders) that had long existed in Vietnam. These changes not only benefitted the Vietnamese people and increased revenue for the state from tax collection; they also limited excessive actions and manipulation by Chinese traders in Vietnamese markets.

To summarize, in this period sea trade activities encountered more difficulties than before and were often concentrated in certain areas, such the north. However, with the looser foreign trade policy and non-intervention by the Nguyen Dynasty, especially the opening of trade in 1876, sea trade flourished and played a more important role than overland trade.

Summary and conclusions

This article examined Vietnam-China economic relations from the early tenth until the late nineteenth century. Although these relations

⁹ Vietnamese women were considered a commodity at this time.

arose early in the centuries before the Common Era, they officially started in the tenth century, when Vietnam emerged from over 1000 years of Chinese domination and became a feudal nation that was independent in all aspects in its relations with the Chinese feudal empire.

During the nearly ten centuries after Ngo Quyen's victory in the Bach Dang River (938), Vietnamese feudal dynasties always followed the principle of being firm but flexible with China in order to maintain conciliatory relations between two countries. In both political and economic relations, China has always been considered Vietnam's main partner. Therefore, guidelines and policies for trade exchange with China were also somewhat looser than those with other countries. However, along with the changes in the diplomatic relations in the political field, the state of Vietnam-China economic relations fluctuated considerably during different feudal dynasties. Certain dynasties, notably the Le Dynasty in Vietnam and the Ming Dynasty in China, maintained a closed-door policy; however, trade between two countries, especially exchanges in border areas still took place beyond the central court's prohibition.

In conclusion, external trade relations at border crossings or trading sites on land and at sea were somewhat stronger and more active than formal relations and became the main trading activities in Vietnam-China economic relations although they encountered more disadvantages than did formal relations. This conclusion is based on consideration of the relationship between several aspects of Vietnam-China commercial relations in this period. It is obvious that Chinese traders held the dominant and advantageous position in these relations. Moreover, Vietnam's self-imposed limitation of foreign trade in the feudal periods was a hindrance that was later overcome through a change in its policy. Nevertheless, the remarkable achievements of Vietnam-China trade in this period were a necessary foundation for continuation and development of relations between the two countries in the period that followed.

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