



## Research Article

# CULTURAL EXCHANGE POLICY OF THE NGUYEN DYNASTY WITH CHINA (1802-1884)

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## ABSTRACT

*As regards the cultural policy of a state, cultural exchange and contact with foreign countries is important. In Vietnam, in foreign relations with neighboring countries and other countries, cultural diplomacy has always been prioritized. This mission has been advocated by the country's leaders to perform effectively in the past, especially during the independence and autonomy period. The Nguyen Dynasty – the last monarchy of Vietnam – followed that tradition. In this article, we focus on clarifying cultural exchanges and contacts between the Nguyen court and China during the period of 1802-1884 in two aspects: cultural exchange policies with the Qing court and policies with overseas Chinese.*

**Keywords:** foreign relations; cultural exchange; China; Nguyen Dynasty

## 1. Introduction

Nguyen Dynasty - one of the last dynasties in the history of feudalism in Vietnam, attaches great importance to the relationship with China. The reason why as early as 1802, the Nguyen Dynasty wanted to maintain diplomatic relations with the Qing Dynasty in applying for the title of king to affirm the legitimacy and build prestige for its dynasty – which, right after its establishment, the Nguyen Dynasty did not have (Nguyen, 2009). The tribute system was regularly maintained by the Nguyen every year on the occasion of the opening ceremony (congratulations), invitations for consecration (asking for kingship), thanksgiving (thanksgiving), and incense offering (offering incense) of the Qing Dynasty. In the diplomatic policy that is said to be skillful between the Nguyen dynasties and the Qing dynasties, maintaining the tributary system not only helped the Nguyen dynasty ensure the value of the crowning but it was also an opportunity for this dynasty to expand its prosperity and understanding of the Chinese situations through the bibliographies brought back by the emissaries. At the same time, through the envoy's trips to China, the Nguyen Dynasty also emphasized the mission of the ambassadors to spread their own culture. The chief and deputy

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envoys selected by the Nguyen dynasty were all good at languages and literature. It can be seen that cultural exchange is one of the important components of foreign policy between the Nguyen and Qing dynasties in the period 1802 to 1884. The cultural exchange policy of the Nguyen dynasties with the Qing dynasties happened and how it played a role in the diplomatic relations between the two countries are the main contents of this article.

## **2. Discussion**

### **2.1. Summary of diplomatic relations of the Nguyen Dynasty**

The remaining historical documents allow us to assert that in diplomatic relations with countries, the Nguyen Dynasty placed diplomatic relations with the Manchu on the first priority. The profound origin of prioritizing the close relationship with the "Celestial Empire" comes from the natural geographical position between Vietnam and China: the mountain, the river, the long border, and establishing relations with neighboring countries is evident in foreign relations. On the other hand, throughout the country's history of construction and development, Vietnam's "neighbor" is a big neighbor and always embraces and dominates. From the early days of the building of Vietnam, Nguyen dynasty kings from Gia Long, Minh Mạng, and Thieu Tri to Tu Duc were aware that war was unexpected and unfavorable event for a small country. Therefore, the consistent ideology in the foreign policy of the early Nguyen kings with the Qing dynasty was to keep peace with China through peaceful foreign policy.

The Nguyen kings considered the Qing's proclamation very important. That Qing Dynasty proclaimed orthodoxy guarantees that there will be no force in the country to compete for the emperor's career and other countries must respect. In the state relations with the Qing dynasty, as the previous Dai Viet monarchs, the Nguyen dynasty always kept the ceremony of a small country to a big country. The Nguyen Dynasty has a common practice of regularly sending missionaries to deliver a tribute to the Qing Dynasty. In addition, every time the Qing dynasty had a celebration or a funeral ceremony, the Nguyen Dynasty sent an embassy to bring offerings. Based on the book "Kham dinh Dai Nam" compiled by the cabinet of the Nguyen dynasty, it can be seen that, of the five books on diplomatic relations, there are four books (from volume 128 to volume 131) recorded about the relationship between the Nguyen Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty. These four volumes meticulously recorded the strict rules that the Nguyen Dynasty had to carry out during the relationship with the Qing, from the form of messengers, ceremonies, and letters to the procedure of receiving the Qing's embassy, great ceremony of proclamation, great ceremony of sacrifice, the reception ceremony... (The Nguyen Dynasty's cabinet, 1993).

However, looking at diplomatic relations between Vietnam and China in the first half of the nineteenth century, some domestic and foreign researchers remarked: The "submission" of the Nguyen Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty was only a "Formality". Because in reality, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Vietnam existed entirely as an

independent, sovereign country. The court decided all domestic and foreign affairs without any direction or intervention of the "Celestial Empire." Even the reception of the embassy also took place equally. The welcome and see-off of the Qing embassy are the responsibility of the mandarins. Tribute items remained the same as in the Tay Son period, with the tribute value not so great (tributes were medicine, ivory, rhino horns, and silk). From 1803 to 1853, the Nguyen dynasty maintained the four-year rule to send tribute once and after every king died or the new king was crowned, in China or Vietnam. From 1853 to 1867, due to the Taiping Rebellion in China, the typical paths of Vietnamese envoys were cut. In relations with the Qing Dynasty, the Nguyen Dynasty formally used the term "tribute", but in domestic terms, the Nguyen dynasty called it "bang giao" – meaning pure diplomatic relations between this country and other countries. There is no concept of above - below, high - low.

The scholar Tsuboi explains the tribute of the Nguyen dynasty to the Thanh dynasty comes for three reasons: The first is to affirm Vietnam's desire to have a peaceful relationship and ensure national security; The second is a way of securing the value of the kings that the imperial emperor gave to the Vietnamese kings and his successors; Third is to exchange tributes, sometimes giving tributes from China that are more valuable than Vietnam's tribute. Of these three reasons, the second reason is the most decisive. (Tsuboi, 2011, p.157)

Regarding the ordination of the Nguyen dynasty kings, Cèreère explained as follows: "The ordination ceremony, under the eyes of the Chinese people, is what gives king An Nam full authority. Before receiving the ordination of the emperor, king An Nam was only called the chief, "the leader of the kingdom", or rather, "the head of the kingdom." The king only took the title "king," or "emperor" as well, at the same time as receiving the ordination."

However, in the eyes of foreign scholars, the ordination of the early Nguyen kings was not only to affirm the orthodoxy of the dynasty but also of the king who was ordained. In the above document, Cèreère also affirmed, "But just as the kings in Hue gave themselves the emperor's title, we thought that they tried to wriggle in order not to follow the rituals imposed by China, especially in ritual to the throne and solemn coronation ceremony to report to ancestors in Nam Giao or Xa Tac altars..." (Tsuboi, 2011, p.157-158). According to the scholar, the submission of the Nguyen kings in relation to the Qing was only relative, if not formal. They did not claim "king" as the title ordained but proclaimed "emperor," meaning asserting the position of the Vietnamese kings as equal to the Chinese emperors, not the vassal king of a small neighboring country. To further clarify the skillful diplomacy of the Nguyen Dynasty, we need to discuss more deeply about going on an embassy to the Qing Dynasty at that time. As a rule, a mission trip often occurred according to the following process: The Vietnamese emissaries sent a letter to the Chinese king. After that, the emissaries offered tributes to the emperor. In response, the Chinese emperor gave more gifts to the Vietnamese kings and the emissaries. Finally, the emissaries must: 1. Report on

China's political, economic and social situation according to the emissaries' observation during the trip; 2. Report the new institutions of the Chinese court; and 3. Buy Chinese books. Thereby, it can be seen that going on an embassy is not only for political tasks but also to carry out other tasks, especially cultural ones cleverly. The kings of the Nguyen dynasty and the intellectual elite of the Confucian scholars in society were well aware that China was the source of knowledge. So, one of the important duties of the emissaries going to the Qing Dynasty was to bring back Chinese books, especially newly released books, to learn how to run the country and Chinese culture. In the decree for the emissary to the Qing in 1829, king Minh Mang requested to buy ancient poetry, and paintings, especially if it was possible to find the royal annals of the Qing Dynasty. It must be purchased at all costs, even if it was only a copy. Besides, the other responsibility of the emissary to come to China was to spread his country as a cultural country. So when selecting emissaries, the Nguyen dynasty promoted diplomacy skills and cultural knowledge. We could see this through a decree that King Minh Mang promulgated in 1840. According to King Minh Mang, the emissary must be good at literature and language if he is inferior, he will only take contempt from other countries. Because these people not only have to the response by poetry in an equal manner with the Qing mandarins, they also have to compete with emissaries from other countries (like Korea). The consideration of the emissaries' literary talent to come to China was carried out by previous Vietnamese monarchs, and the Nguyen dynasty continued to be appreciated.

On the other hand, in addition to the official diplomatic path, the intellectuals of the Nguyen Dynasty, by their cultural capital, became a cultural bridge between Vietnam and China. They have greatly contributed to promoting cultural exchange, introducing new technologies into our country at that time. Dang Huy Tru's case is a typical example. In 1865, he was sent to China to "explore and consider the situation of Western countries" (listening to Western countries' attitude towards our country). Dang Huy Tru came to Huong Cang and had a chance to enjoy a new art originating from Western countries: photography. In 1867, when he was sent to China again, he immediately bought photographic equipment and tools to bring home. At the beginning of 1869, he opened the first photoshop in Vietnam, Cam Hieu shop in Thanh Ha Street, Hanoi. Also, in his mission, when witnessing the development of waterway science and technology in foreign countries, he influenced Tu Duc king to send people to learn about modern shipbuilding. Later, Phan Boi Chau rated Phan Huy Tru as: "One of the first civilizers in Vietnam".

## **2.2. Overseas Chinese management policy**

The policy of flexible diplomatic relations of the Nguyen dynasty with China was expressed not only by tribute, ordination, or going on an embassy but also by the attitude of dealing with Chinese people in Vietnam.

On the one hand, the Nguyen Dynasty set out rules for managing overseas Chinese. On the other hand, after taking the throne, King Gia Long determined the law of exceptional

management of Chinese organizations: promulgated regulations in which these unions must be organized into particular organizations called "states." In each locality, there were as many different Chinese languages as states. Each state elected a chief state and an assistant. The chief and assistant assisted the administrative agencies in taxing residents and immigration control.

But on the other hand, the Nguyen dynasty also had open policies for the Chinese people. Some "Minh Huong" communes were created throughout Vietnam at the beginning of the nineteenth century. At first, it was the villages of Minh refugees. Later, Minh Huong communes were villages of Chinese or Chinese-born Vietnamese.

According to Nguyen's regulations, if in a province where there are more than 5 Minh Huong people without a Minh Huong village, they can establish their village or live in old states. However, from 1841 onwards, a policy of assimilating Chinese immigrants was determined that "... people in states (Thanh people) born descendants, are not allowed to pluck their hair to sam tail, so old to 18, the chief state have to report to the mandarin, following Minh Huong's book..." (The Nguyen Dynasty's cabinet, 1993, p.311).

Under the Nguyen Dynasty, Minh Huong people participated in examinations to be mandarins, which was forbidden entirely for a Chinese immigrant. Thanks to this policy, many Minh Huong people were successful. They became mandarins in the Nguyen Dynasty, such as Trinh Hoai Duc, the author of "Gia Dinh into the media," was mentioned to the Minister of Works, then the Minister of Rites.

Chinese immigrants and Minh Huong people had the right to freedom of business and trade, of course, under the control of the Nguyen court. For example, the imperial court executed many measures to prevent exporting illegal rice and importing opium. In 1837, the Minh Mang king decreed to ban Minh Huong people, and the Chinese settled from doing business by sea. In 1838, this ban was again reiterated that:

Decreeing the Nam Ky provinces to governors in the localities must comply with the prohibitions, the Thanh people coming to live only trade by river, not by sea. And all the merchant ships cross the sea, they cannot hire Thanh people as boatmen or sailors, and those who disobey orders will arrest them. Strictly let the watchman hold the sea gates wholeheartedly. If there are Thanh people who ask boats to go to the sea to trade and implicitly meet the merchant's boat in the county, immediately catch to punish. (National History of the Nguyen Dynasty, 2007, p.408)

The policy for the Chinese people of the Nguyen Dynasty showed that, on the one hand, the state gave them some administrative autonomy within the states and villages of Minh Huong. Still, on the other hand, the government also creates barriers to limit the growth of the Chinese economy, especially in Cochinchina.

### 3. Conclusion

The flexible diplomatic policy with China in the period (1802-1884) was reflected in many aspects, especially the attitude towards overseas Chinese in Vietnam. It can be seen that the ingenuity and flexibility of the Nguyen Dynasty helped Vietnamese culture absorb the quintessence of Chinese culture. On the other hand, it helped spread Vietnamese culture's values to enrich the national culture.

Recognizing the objective necessity and importance of harmony relationship with neighbors, following the tradition of previous dynasties in the spirit of peace and cooperation, the early Nguyen kings had flexible diplomatic policies with China. Choosing Confucianism as an orthodox ideology, China became a model for the early Nguyen kings to learn and refer. The exchanges and contacts on the economic, political, cultural, and social aspects between the two countries were carried out regularly. In particular, during the exchange with the Qing dynasty, the Nguyen dynasty paid great attention to cultural issues. By goodwill of peace, cooperation, learning, and based on bravery, national identity, the Nguyen dynasty selected, absorbed Chinese cultural values and products, and introduced the culture of Vietnamese people to Chinese people. The priority in diplomatic relations with the Qing dynasty created a neighboring relationship that ensured national security and position in the region, promoted understanding and attachment between the two cultures, and contributed to enriching the national culture.

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**CHÍNH SÁCH GIAO LƯU VĂN HÓA CỦA TRIỀU NGUYỄN  
VỚI TRUNG QUỐC (GIAI ĐOẠN 1802-1884)**

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**TÓM TẮT**

*Trong chính sách văn hóa của một nhà nước, vấn đề giao lưu, tiếp xúc văn hóa với nước ngoài là một nội dung quan trọng. Ở Việt Nam, trong quan hệ đối ngoại với các nước láng giềng cũng như các quốc gia khác, vấn đề ngoại giao văn hóa luôn được đề cao. Triều Nguyễn – triều đại quân chủ cuối cùng của Việt Nam – đã nối tiếp truyền thống đó. Bài viết này làm sáng tỏ sự giao lưu, tiếp xúc văn hóa giữa triều đình nhà Nguyễn với Trung Hoa giai đoạn 1802-1884 trên hai phương diện: chính sách giao lưu văn hóa với triều đình nhà Thanh và chính sách với Hoa kiều.*

***Từ khóa:*** quan hệ ngoại giao; giao lưu văn hóa; Trung Quốc; Triều Nguyễn