

The ‘Last’ Friendship Exchanges between Siam and Vietnam, 1879–1882: Siam between Vietnam and France—and Beyond

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Abstract

Studies of Siam’s diplomatic relations from the mid-nineteenth century have been focussed on its troubled relations with Western colonial powers, often within a bilateral framework. While highlighting issues such as territorial losses and treaty revisions, scholarly interest tends to have overlooked Siam’s relations with its neighbouring countries. Based on archival records at the National Archives of Thailand, this article aims to fill this gap by examining diplomatic exchanges between the Siamese and Vietnamese courts that took place between 1879 and 1882. In April 1879, a royal mission from the Vietnamese court bearing gifts and a royal letter from Tự Đức to Chulalongkorn arrived in Bangkok. It was allegedly the first formal mission from the Vietnamese court in almost half a century after the two countries had come into conflict in the 1830s. By examining how Siam and Vietnam sought to maintain and manipulate ‘traditional’ interstate relations in the face of treaty arrangements that France enforced upon Vietnam, this article reveals complex issues involved in the process of negotiations, such as the questions of maintaining the equality between the two monarchies and of the ‘translation’ of the concepts of sovereignty between Thai and Sino-Vietnamese languages, and suggests the necessity to pay more attention to historical and broader regional contexts in Asia.

KEYWORDS: Siam, Vietnam, France, China, interstate relations

INTRODUCTION

ON 23 APRIL 1879, a royal mission from Vietnam bearing gifts and a royal letter from Tự Đức to Chulalongkorn of Siam¹ arrived in Bangkok on board a steamboat named *Li Tat Ki*, a 33.5m by 6m warship equipped with guns and

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¹In this article, I refrain from using the terms ‘emperor’ and ‘king’ to designate Tự Đức and Chulalongkorn unless the words are direct translations of the terms used in original documents. Although the English words ‘emperor’ and ‘king’ do not necessarily suggest that one is superior to the other, the equivalent terms in Chinese or Sino-Vietnamese characters, invariably imply that the emperor is superior. In the Sino-centric world order, the Chinese ‘emperor’ (*huang di*) is superior to all the ‘kings’ (*wang*), who rule tributary states. This is one of the points at issue in this paper.

cannons.² The embassy, which consisted of 131 members in total including seven envoys, one interpreter, five students, over 50 able-bodied seamen, and other attendants, was apparently the first Vietnamese royal mission to Siam since friendly relations between the two countries had discontinued fifty years before.³

Chulalongkorn welcomed the embassy by granting the envoys a royal audience, and received the letter and gifts from the Vietnamese court. While issuing two royal letters addressed to Tỵ Đức in return, one in appreciation of resuming the friendly relationship with the Vietnamese court and the other in celebration of the upcoming 70th birthday of the Empress Dowager, Chulalongkorn also ordered his official to contact the French consul in Bangkok in order to inquire whether sending a return mission to the Vietnamese court would not be against the conditions of the Treaty of 1874 (commonly known as the Philastre Treaty), which obliged Vietnam not to change existing relations with foreign powers. After consulting with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, the French authorities in Cochinchina advised the Siamese court not to send a return mission. However, after two years of negotiations, Chulalongkorn decided to send a royal letter and gifts to the Vietnamese court by entrusting French officials with their delivery.

How could such exchanges of royal letters and gifts occur? What was the purpose and political significance of these exchanges – were they a mere continuation of obsolete tradition or a matter of formality? What issues were involved in the process of negotiations between Siam, Vietnam, and France? Based on historical records at the National Archives of Thailand which have not been used before, and thus, admittedly, are primarily from the Siamese perspective, this article will reconstruct and examine the process of negotiations between Siam, Vietnam, and France concerning the exchanges of royal letters and missions between 1879 and 1882. Although the French authorities emphasised their success in making Siam comply with their desire to curtail autonomous diplomatic relations of the Vietnamese court, the actual negotiation records suggest that the issues were much more complex and that Siam had its own concerns and ideas about its relations with Vietnam and France. This is an interesting case of ‘diplomacy’ by Southeast Asian states which faced European colonialism,

²Chaophraya Phanuwong Mahakosathibodi (hereafter abbreviated as Chaophraya Phanuwong) to Chulalongkorn, Ro.thi 191, the 4th day of the waxing moon of the 6th month (24 April 1879) in the National Archives of Thailand, Fifth Reign Documents, Nangsue krap bangkhom thun (abbreviated as NA.R.V. NK.) lem 1; and thi 247 “Banchi chue khunnang lae khon chai”, in the National Archives of Thailand, Fifth Reign Documents, Krom Ratchalekhathikan, Ekkasan yep lem, Saraban samut phiset (abbreviated as NA.R.V. RL-SP.) lem 4. The date of arrival varies between 21 and 23 April 1879 depending on the source. *Li Tat Ki* is a phonetic transcription of the name of the Vietnamese ship written in Thai. This might be one of the five steamboats presented by France. See *Đқи Nam Thục Lục Chính Biên* (大南寔錄正編) (hereafter abbreviated as *DNTL*) IV (the Period of Tỵ Đức), 1980, vol.56, 3a.

³Ro.thi 191, the 4th day of the waxing moon of the 6th month (24 April 1879) (NA.R.V. NK.1); and thi 247 (NA.R.V. RL-SP.4). There were several other navy officers.

a changing Sino-centric world order, as well as their own regional order. This is a much-neglected theme of historical inquiry in the existing scholarship on South-east Asia which tends to highlight the threat of Western colonial powers and the subsequent anti-colonial nationalism, often within a bilateral framework.⁴

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Before going into more detail, it is useful to briefly review the broader historical and geopolitical contexts in which this particular event took place, starting with the historical relationship between Siam and Vietnam prior to this embassy. The relationship between the two countries in the nineteenth century, in general, was characterised as an intense rivalry between two strong regional powers that pursued expansionist policies to gain control over smaller states, such as Cambodia, which lay between them. However, unlike Siam's relations with Burma,⁵ relations between Siam and Vietnam were intermittently friendly and hostile, if always distrustful, and at least sometimes involved extensive exchange of royal letters and embassies.

A Thai archival record suggests that, among approximately 190 letters exchanged between Siam and neighbouring countries from the 1770s to the 1840s, the most frequent were conducted with Vietnam, with which Siam exchanged 72 letters, including 52 royal letters.⁶ Reflecting their close relationship

⁴Regarding this particular case of exchanges between Vietnam and Siam, there are several studies based on French diplomatic archival documents. Marr (1971: 41) mentioned in a footnote that "Tự Đức between 1874 and 1882 also made perfunctory attempts at meaningful relations with Italy, England, Siam, and Spain. However, a combination of court disinterest and French maneuvers to limit Huế's foreign contacts torpedoed each effort." Tsuboi (1991: 237) also considered the 1879 mission from the Vietnamese court as part of Tự Đức's diplomatic efforts to broaden Vietnamese foreign contacts from the mid-1870s to the early 1880s. He observed that even though Tự Đức made efforts to restore diplomatic relations with Siam from 1877 to 1880, sent diplomatic missions to China in 1876 and 1880, and concluded a treaty with Spain in 1880, his attempts only irritated the French without bearing fruits. Pensri (Suvanij) Duke (1962: 114–116), on the other hand, briefly described the negotiations between France and Siam, and mentioned, as a conclusive comment, a letter from Le Myre de Vilers to Admiral Jauriguiberry dated 7 March 1882. The letter stated that after two years of negotiation over the matter of sending an embassy, the Siamese government hurriedly decided to comply with the desire of the French authorities, and as a result, the vague desire for independence of the Court of Huế was severely suppressed. Snit and Breazeale (1988: 60–61) also examined the negotiation between Siam and Vietnam within the contexts of Siamese policies toward the Phuan State. These works have been greatly helpful for my research, and my citation of them here is not meant to discredit them. For the relations between Siam and France concerning this period, see also Tuck (1995).

⁵Siam regarded Burma as the arch-enemy after the destruction of Ayutthaya by the Burmese in 1767, and never exchanged royal letters and embassies afterwards.

⁶The National Library of Thailand (abbreviated as NL.), *chotmai het* (administrative records, abbreviated as CMH.), *ratchakan thi sam* (the third reign, abbreviated as R.III.), *cho so* (*chunlasakkarat*, the Siamese lesser era, abbreviated as C.S.) 1200, No.88. The same record listed 42 letters exchanged with China. See also Koizumi (2008b).

forged by the support of the Siamese court to Nguyễn Ánh during his struggle against the Tây Sơn before his enthronement as Gia Long (r. 1802–1820), these exchanges mostly occurred during the reign of Gia Long between 1804 and 1820.⁷

Moreover, it is interesting that these written communications were through translation between Thai and Sino-Vietnamese (*akson yuan*), and that there were Vietnamese interpreters/translators apart from the Chinese ones at the Siamese court. They translated the Sino-Vietnamese royal letters from the Vietnamese court into Thai, and, at least sometimes, prepared a Sino-Vietnamese version of the royal letters from the Siamese court to the Vietnamese court.⁸ Further, while the Thai translation of Sino-Vietnamese royal letters sent from the Vietnamese court at times used hierarchical terminologies of varying degrees such as *khamnap ma* and *krap bangkhom thun*⁹ to express the act of the Vietnamese court sending envoys and gifts to the Siamese court, in the Sino-Vietnamese version of these royal letters, they appeared to have maintained the equal status between the respective sovereigns by designating each other as (Buddha) kings ((phật) vương (佛)王).¹⁰

⁷While most of the exchanges took place on ceremonial occasions such as the enthronement of a new king and funerals at the court, these letters often contained detailed information about the political situations both at the respective court and in neighbouring states that lay between the two, or concerning maritime trade including activities of Chinese piracy or shipwrecks of Siamese junks on their way to/from Canton.

⁸See the following archival documents: NL.CMH.R.I. C.S.1158 No. 3; NL.CMH.R.I. C.S.1166 No.5, NL.CMH.R.I. C.S.1171 No.1; and NL.CMH.R.II. C.S.1175 No. 23. There also is evidence that the Siamese court sometimes sent the Vietnamese court royal letters written not only in Thai, but in “Chinese” (*akson chin*) and “Vietnamese” (*akson yuan*, literally meaning ‘Vietnamese script’ but presumably Sino-Vietnamese characters), and these letters were sealed with *tra loto*, presumably the same camel seal granted by the Chinese emperor as a symbol of a legitimate king of a tributary state endorsed by the Chinese emperor. See Koizumi (2008b). For the etymology of the term *yuan*, see Flood (1990: vol.2, 45–46) and Thomas (1974).

⁹*Khamnap* means “to salute with respect” and *krap* means “to postulate”. On the other hand, I would think that the term *khrueng ratchabannakan*, which is generally understood as meaning “tribute [to a superior]”, did not necessarily have a hierarchical connotation, given that this term was also used for instances of gifts from a sovereign of a European state, such as Napoléon III. See, for instance, NL.CMH.R.IV. C.S.1228 No.201.

¹⁰An interesting case is a royal letter (in Thai) from Rama I to Gia Long in 1806 (NL.CMH.R.I. C. S.1168 No.2). Here, more honorific terms were added to Rama I than Gia Long, by calling Rama I *Somdet phrachao krung mahanakhon siayutthaya phuyai* and Gia Long *Phrachao krung vietnam*. The term *phuyai*, meaning ‘the great person’, was used to designate the Chinese emperor in the royal letters (in Thai) that were exchanged between the Chinese and Siamese courts. On the other hand, in *Ngoại Quốc Thư Trát* (外國書札), a collection of (copies of) royal letters exchanged between the Siamese and Vietnamese courts in the fifteenth and sixteenth years of Gia Long’s reign, we find a copy of a royal letter from the Siamese court dated in the year of Bính Dần (丙寅); this should fall in 1806 (pp. No.7–No.10). From the content, it seems that this is a copy of the Sino-Vietnamese version of the above-mentioned royal letter from Rama I to Gia Long in 1806. However, in this Sino-Vietnamese version, both monarchs were designated equally as *wương* (‘king’), i.e. the Siamese king as Xiêm La quốc vương (暹羅國佛王) and Gia Long as Việt Nam quốc phật vương (越南國佛王), the status that would place them both as inferior to the

Such extensive exchange of royal letters and embassies between Siam and Vietnam in the beginning of the nineteenth century were discontinued when the two countries came into conflict in the 1820s. Triggered by the conflict among the Cambodian royal families after the enthronement of Ang Chan, as well as the revolt of Chao Anu of Vientiane, their relations became tense and culminated in war over the control of Cambodia and the upper Mekong valley from 1834–1847 (Chandler 1973; Eiland 1989; Snit and Breazeale 1988). Even though the warfare concerning Cambodia ended with the enthronement of Ang Duong, which was endorsed by both the courts of Vietnam and Siam in the late 1840s, the exchange of royal embassies and letters, the symbol of friendship between the two sovereigns, never resumed.

This does not mean, however, that there was no contact between the two countries. In fact, sporadic contacts between local officials were recorded on both the Siamese and Vietnamese sides.¹¹ The earliest contact happened in the early 1850s.¹² A group of Vietnamese officials and commoners dispatched by the governor of Saigon, who had received an order from Tỵ Đức to inquire about the political situation in Siam, arrived in Samut Prakan, a town at the mouth of Chaophraya River, in 1853. They claimed that the purpose of their visit was to recover Vietnamese families taken by the Siamese troops during the war over Cambodia in the 1840s. Chaophraya Bodindecha, the Siamese commander-in-chief during the war campaign, had promised at the end of the war that Siam would return the Vietnamese families in exchange for the firearms that the Vietnamese troops had taken to Vietnam. However, Siam declined the proposal on the grounds that the group could not be recognised as a formal mission sent through a proper channel.

Nevertheless, this was followed at the end of the 1850s by another mission from Vietnam with a similar request, which was again declined.¹³ The Siamese court, still harbouring a strong sense of rivalry against Vietnam, was determined to refuse any overture of friendship from Vietnam if it found the Vietnamese attitude haughty, even though the potential benefit that Siam would gain from the

Emperor of China in the Sino-centric world-order. See also Woodside (1971: 238–240, 258–260). There remains a question of who translated this particular letter from Thai to Sino-Vietnamese, and/or vice versa. Considering that a royal letter from the Vietnamese court was translated into Thai by an official titled Phra Ratchamontri in the same year of 1806 in front of a group of Siamese officials, including Phraya Kosathibodi, Phra Choduekrachasetthi, and *lam yuan* (a Vietnamese interpreter), it is possible that the same Phra Ratchamontri also translated the letter discussed above. See CMH. R.I. C.S.1168 No.4. In 1809, a royal letter from the Vietnamese court was translated into Thai by an official with the same title, Phra Ratchamontri, who was, this time, noted as *yuan* (Vietnamese). See CMH.R.I. C.S.1171 No.1.

¹¹I am grateful to Associate Professor Bruce Lockhart for bringing this point to me. The evidence on the Siamese side indicates that contact seems to have been initiated by the Vietnamese side. For the records on the Vietnamese side, see, for instance, *DNTL* IV, vol.16, 7b; *DNTL* IV, vol. 19, 14b; and *DNTL* IV, vol. 23, 3a.

¹²NL.CMH.R.IV. C.S.1215 No.40.

¹³NL.CMH.R.IV. C.S.1219 No.11 and No.128.

expansion of trade with Vietnam appeared attractive. However, this was not the only reason for the refusal this time. Siam also referred to their treaty relations with the West as the ‘standard’ for their relationship with Vietnam. Citing that Siam had already concluded treaties twice with the British (1826 and 1855) and the United States (1833 and 1856), and once with France (1856), Siam denied the existence and effectiveness of the promise (*sanya*) made by Chao-phraya Bodindecha by arguing that a valid treaty (*sanya*) should be in a written form signed by the sovereign of the respective states and that Bodindecha was a mere military commander without any authority granted by Rama III (r. 1824–1851) to negotiate a treaty.

Indeed, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, both Siam and Vietnam faced increasing pressure from the western colonial powers, in particular the British and French. However, their attitudes towards the West appear to be quite different. In April 1855, Siam concluded a treaty of friendship and commerce with Great Britain, the so-called Bowring Treaty.¹⁴ A similar treaty was also concluded with France and the United States, respectively, in the following year. However, Vietnam did not follow the same path with either the British or the French (Tarling 1965). The refusal of Vietnam to negotiate a treaty with France, along with dissatisfaction at Vietnamese persecution of Catholics, led French forces to attack Tourane in 1847 and 1857; and the execution of a Spanish bishop in Tonkin in September 1857 gave further justification for a French-Spanish joint campaign to attack Tourane again in 1858 and then capture Saigon in February 1859.¹⁵ Following the conclusion of the Second Opium War in 1860, France occupied three southern provinces in 1861 and concluded a treaty in 1862 to formalise the cession and gain additional privileges such as freedom of navigation along the Mekong, freedom of religion, and a large indemnity. Furthermore, in 1863, the French made Cambodia its protectorate, and occupied an additional three provinces in the south of Vietnam in 1864. This was officially endorsed by the Philastre Treaty of March 1874. While recognising the ‘sovereignty’ of the king of Annam (Vietnam) and the full ‘independence’ of the country against all foreign powers, including China (Article 2), the 1874 treaty also prescribed that Vietnamese foreign policies should comply with French policies and that the present diplomatic relations of Vietnam should not be changed (Article 3).¹⁶

¹⁴By the conclusion of this treaty with the British, Siam regarded itself as being granted the same level of prestige as Qing China (Koizumi 2008a: 75–78).

¹⁵The following account of French advancement and the Vietnamese reactions to it is based on the following works: Lockhart (1993: 10–15), Brocheux and Hémery (2009: 15–42), Munholland (1979), and Nguyễn (1992: Chapter 1).

¹⁶For provisions of the Philastre Treaty, see Taboulet (1956: 742–747). It should be noted that these two provisions in Article 3 could be contradictory to each other and that the conception of ‘independence’ and ‘sovereignty’ in the French text and that of ‘自主之權’ in the Chinese (Sino-Vietnamese) text of Article 2 were not exactly same. I owe this point to Associate Professor Bruce Lockhart. Even though these discrepancies in the 1874 treaty would primarily concern

It was this provision in Article 3 of the Philastre Treaty that became an issue several years later in the exchanges between Vietnam and Siam examined here. In addition, Article 2 also became problematic concerning the Vietnamese relationship with China, as Vietnam started to seek closer relations with Beijing to counter the pressure from the French colonial power. In September 1876, Vietnam sent a tributary mission to Beijing. The French first interpreted this as an act of 'pure courtesy' and did not explicitly express any objection. But when a Chinese rebel, Li Yangcai, invaded Tonkin and China quickly sent military assistance on request from Hué and successfully repressed Li Yangcai's rebellion, the French started to argue for further military pressure on Tonkin in the beginning of 1879 (Mochizuki 2009: 434–441; Munholland 1979: 85–87). In response to the further French pressures as such, Vietnam made overtures to Siam in 1879 and to Spain, with which Vietnam concluded a treaty in 1880, and another tribute mission to China in 1880.

Siam, on the other hand, also faced French colonial pressure. In July 1863, Cambodia, a kingdom under Siam/Vietnam dual overlordship, signed a treaty with France to become a French protectorate. Siam's counter-attempt to maintain its control over Cambodia with a new Siam-Cambodia treaty in December 1863 failed upon the ratification of the France-Cambodia Treaty in 1864 and the conclusion of another France-Siam Treaty in 1867 that prescribed the recognition of the French protection over Cambodia in exchange for the Siamese control over Battambang and Siam Reap, at the expense of renouncing any tribute, present or other mark of vassalage from Cambodia (Pensri (Suvanij) Duke 1962: 20–61; Tuck 1995: 17–25; Wilson 1970: 545–555). It should be noted that while Siam confronted the French in Cambodia, Siam's claim over the upper Mekong valley and the Phuan State against Vietnam and France was not pronounced until the mid-1880s. From the end of the 1860s, hordes of Chinese bandits, commonly known as the Ho, began to raid the mountainous areas between the Black River and the Mekong. By the mid-1870s, they were coming down to plunder lowland areas in Nakhon Phanom and Nongkhai and even showed signs of attacking Bangkok. Siam raised an army to counter-attack; it reached the Phuan State in 1876 and relocated several thousand people to lowland areas in order to cut the supply of provisions to the Ho.¹⁷

the relationship between Vietnam and France and the Vietnamese, rather than the Siamese, views on its diplomatic relations with other countries, they formed a condition in which the Vietnamese court actively pursued its own diplomacy with other countries including Siam, while the French reactions to those Vietnamese overtures were not consistent or successful. See also Cordier (1902: 291–307). Moreover, the 'translation,' or the manipulation of translation, of various Western concepts, such as 'sovereignty,' 'independence,' 'autonomy,' and 'rights,' were one of the critical issues in the era of colonialism and treaties across Asia. See, for instance, Liu (2004) and Okamoto (2004; 2007).

¹⁷For the history of the Phuan state and its people, which was incorporated into French Laos as Tran Ninh and Xieng Khouang, as well as the Siamese military campaigns against the Ho, see Snit and Breazeale (1988: 1–8, 47–62). According to Snit and Breazeale (1988: 47–48), the Ho

However, when heavy death tolls among the war captives on the way to resettlement drew criticism from the foreign community in Bangkok for cruel treatment of the prisoners, Bangkok decided to return them home. But this did not mean bringing the Phuan State under Siamese control. No Siamese rank, title, or regalia were ever given to the Phuan rulers after their return to their homeland. Siam made no attempt to exercise power over Phuan leaders; so long as the Lao towns under Siamese control were undisturbed, Siam remained uninvolved in the affairs of the Phuan State until the outbreak of new Ho raids in the mid-1880s (Snit and Breazeale 1988: 53–59).

The French placed less pressure on Siam than it did on Vietnam, at least until the mid-1880s. One reason was the British predominance in the political and economic spheres of Siam after the conclusion of the Bowring Treaty (1855). Siam also accommodated British interests because it sought to receive support for its centralisation policies and for its stance against French intervention. As a result, in the beginning of the 1880s, when the French decided to take a more interventionist policy in Bangkok to establish firmer control over deteriorating Cambodian internal affairs, Harmand, the new French consul in Bangkok, found that Bangkok was dominated by the British and that the French influence was very limited (Tuck 1995: 35–48). Even though it may appear too optimistic in hindsight, this observation resonates with the following views expressed by Chulalongkorn. In a correspondence to Gréhan, the Siamese representative in Paris on 30 August 1880, he wrote that he was “not afraid much in[*sic*] the movement of the French in that part of the world [Tonkin] as they ha[ve] already held in their hands the ties which we shall call a protectorate one.”¹⁸ Chulalongkorn also considered that the French Republic (established in 1871) would not like to “play a game of extending their territory more than in the t[ime?] of [the] French empire [i.e., the Second Empire under which the French colonisation of Indochina had begun].”¹⁹ He thought that Siam had an equal right in the treaty with France, therefore France would not dare to make an advancement.²⁰

After the Front Palace Crisis (1874–1875), which was solved by the intervention of the Governor of the Straits Settlements, the conclusion of the Chiang Mai Treaty with the British in 1874, and the suppression of the Chinese riots in Phuket and Ranong as well as that of the Ho raiders in the mid-1870s, the most pressing political concerns at the end of the 1870s were: the case of Phra

was the term generally used by those along the Mekong “in reference to almost anyone of Yunnanese origin”, and the term was also used for the bandits, mainly of Chinese origin, by the Lao and Thai. Those included the Chinese who fled from southwestern China after the suppression of the Taiping rebellion. Contemporary English documents refer to them as the Haw. For Siamese and French interventions into the Lao states in the mid-1880s, see also Breazeale (1975), in particular Chapter 8.

¹⁸Chulalongkorn to Grehan, 30 August 1880, (NA.R.V. NK.9).

¹⁹Chulalongkorn to Grehan, 30 August 1880, (NA.R.V. NK.9).

²⁰Chulalongkorn to Grehan, 30 August 1880, (NA.R.V. NK.9).

Pricha,²¹ further negotiations for the revision of the Chiang Mai Treaty with the British, and negotiations for the first major treaty revision with the twelve Western powers, including the British and French (Manich Jumsai 1977). These negotiations with the twelve Western powers revolved around the influx of cheap Chinese liquor that was posing a serious problem to the fiscal and judicial autonomy of Siam as the liquor was sold by Chinese who claimed to be subjects of European treaty powers (Samnao thi 1766, NA.R.V. NK.6).

Another important issue that the Siamese elite were facing was China's request for tribute. Siam, like Vietnam, was a tributary state of China. However, due to an attack by Taiping rebels on Siam's tributary mission of 1852 upon their return from Beijing to Canton, Siam stopped sending tributary missions after its return to Bangkok in 1854. Despite repeated requests for tribute since that time, Siam tried to avoid sending a mission by resorting to a dilatory policy and proposing a change in its route to Beijing via Tianjin instead of the long and troublesome overland route via Canton. Siam could never clearly declare the abolishment of tribute to China because it feared that a direct refusal would produce a negative impact, including dissatisfaction among the Chinese community in Siam. Between the late 1870s and early 1880s China's requests for the tribute became more frequent and intense: Siam received such requests for tribute at least five times: in 1876, January 1880, August 1881, August 1882, and 1884. Some of these requests were accompanied by a hint of possible military intervention.²²

In April 1876, replying to a request for tribute made earlier in the year through a Canton official, who claimed to be in charge of affairs related to both Siam and Vietnam, Phrakhlang²³ raised the issue of sending a mission via Tianjin on the grounds that the Chinese court had already opened the port to other foreign envoys entering Beijing, and expressed his regrets that it would be a dishonour for Siamese envoys being obliged to take the long, dangerous land route from Canton to Beijing. However, the request was not accepted. When the letter from the same Canton official to inform Siam of the decision to reject the Tianjin route reached Bangkok in April 1877, Chulalongkorn consulted with thirteen of his ministers and the Council of State members about

²¹Phra Pricha was a son-in-law of the British consul-general, Thomas George Knox, who threatened the Siamese government with the possibility of gunboats to save Phra Pricha from a death penalty handed down by Chulalongkorn.

²²NA. *Ekkasan yep lem krasuang kantangprathet* (hereafter abbreviated as KT (L)) 1: 96–99; 102–107. Regarding the Sino-Siamese negotiation processes concerning the resumption of tribute from the 1860s to mid-1880s, see Koizumi (2009: 48–58).

²³Phrakhlang', literally meaning the 'Royal Treasury', was an abbreviation of 'Chaophraya Phanuwong Maha Kosathibodi thi Phrakhlang'. Although the formal establishment of the modern Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Siam was in 1892, 'Chaophraya Phanuwong Maha Kosathibodi thi Phrakhlang' was designated as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Krom Tha as the Foreign Department in English publications and records from the early 1870s. See, for example, *Bangkok Calendar 1871*:53.

the question of sending tribute to China. Reflecting the seriousness and complexity of the issues involved, their views were divided: four supported the continuation of sending tribute while another four proposed its discontinuation, the remaining five proposed to maintain a wait-and-see strategy. They were aware that Siam's position as a tributary state of China would be linked to the question of their position vis-a-vis Western treaty powers, and were concerned that if China decided to resort to force to impose its demand for tribute from Siam, Siam might have to depend on the intervention of foreign powers, a similar predicament to which Cambodia found itself in.

In 1877, Britain, knowing that Burma was also a tributary state of China, was also closely watching the course that Siam "would pursue if the Chinese insisted on a renewal of tributary relations with Siam."²⁴ Several English newspapers carried articles which pointed out a possible war between China and Siam to settle the question of Siam's sending tribute.²⁵

Seeing that China was actually intervening in the affairs of its tributary states, such as Vietnam, by force, and due to the existence of a large number of Chinese within Siam itself, Siam's recognition of China as a threat continued in the early 1880s and even beyond.²⁶ Perhaps the sense of threat among the Siamese elite was amplified by China's intervention into Macao, which started at the end of March 1880. Reacting to the news that China was "claiming from the Portuguese government a tribute due to them for Macao" and had "threatened them with force of arms if not paid", Prince Pritsadang wrote from London on 30 April 1880 to Prince Dewavongse, then the personal secretary of Chulalongkorn,

²⁴In late June 1877, Knox, the British consul-general in Bangkok, informed the India Office about the recent negotiations between Siam and China, and that information was forwarded to the Foreign Office in September. Draft, India Office, Mr. Knox, No.18, 26 June 1877 (FO 69/66); Draft, J. Pauncefote, 23 August 1877 (FO 69/67); Letter, Louis Mallet to the Under Secretary of State, Foreign Office, 7 September 1877 (FO 69/67).

²⁵Several English newspaper articles, starting from the one that appeared in the *Times* on 30 October 1877, pointed out "a possible war between these two countries" as "China now demands a settlement". Dismissing it as groundless, the Siamese consul in London (D.K. Mason) forwarded this news in his letter dated 9 December 1877, which reached Bangkok on 19 December 1877. See letter, Phra Sayamthurapha (D.K. Mason) to Chaophraya Phanuwong, NA. The Fifth Reign Documents. *Ekkasan yep lem krasuang kantangprathet* (Hereafter abbreviated as R.V. KT(L)) lem 23. In the meantime, some newspaper articles also pointed out that it would be "very improbable that China would declare war against Siam" (e.g. the *Straits Times*, 24 November 1877), but the news of a possible Sino-Siamese war was still circulating in the beginning of January 1878. On 7 January 1878, the *Pall Mall Gazette* published an article titled "Siam and China," in which, quoting the *Times of India*, it reported that the Chinese government sent "letters threatening war" if Siam did not send tribute according to the old practice and that Siam was "said to be preparing rapidly for war."

²⁶In January 1880, Siam received another request for tribute, this time from the Ministry of Rites (*Libu*) in Beijing, which it again politely declined. Writing to a Canton official who claimed to be in charge of Siamese and Vietnamese affairs named Ngo Siang on 20 April 1880, Phraya Choduek-ratchasetthi (hereafter abbreviated as Phraya Choduek), the official in charge of both domestic and foreign Chinese affairs, repeated Siam's wish to wait for an opportunity to be allowed to visit Beijing via Tianjin. See Koizumi (2009: 55).

that he regarded the “danger of a Chinese claim of the sovereignty over Siam” was “at its height”²⁷ and that as he saw it, after Macao, the Chinese would come to Siam with a similar threat.²⁸

Following the unsuccessful request for tribute in 1880, Ngo Seng Siang, a Canton official, this time claiming to be in charge of tributary missions from Siam, Vietnam, and Ryukyu, made another request, which was brought to Bangkok by a Chinese official named Ngo Hun Yong, a son of Ngo Seng Siang, and arrived in late August 1881.²⁹ Ngo Seng Siang’s letter, addressed to Phrakhlang, requested Siam to resume tribute through the traditional route via Canton.³⁰ After considering the fact that it was a letter from an official of lower rank that requested tribute and fearing that a clear rejection of the request for tribute might cause China to request a treaty instead (which could make a large number of Chinese in Siam foreign subjects), Phrakhlang’s reply to Ngo Seng Siang only conveyed the deep condolences of Chulalongkorn on the demise of the Empress Dowager and the regrets for China’s repeated rejection of the Tianjin route (Koizumi 2009: 55–56).

According to W. G. Palgrave, the British consul in Bangkok, the visit of the Chinese official became known to outsiders despite Siam’s efforts to keep it secret.³¹ Palgrave explained that Siam “informed the Chinese government that Siam having concluded treaties with European powers now considered itself on a European level” and proposed relations on an equal footing with the Emperor of China (FO 69/78). He also expressed a strong apprehension that such a response from Siam could result in “the gradual awakening of the Chinese mind both in China itself and here”, and that “should the Chinese government demand to exercise over its subjects in Siam the same protectorate [*sic*] and rights as claimed by European powers for their subjects, the results would be equivalent to a revolution” (FO 69/78). Indeed, how Siam could assert

²⁷Pritsadang to Devawongse, 30 April 1880 (NA.Ekkasan suan bukkhon (hereafter abbreviated as SB.16.11/30).

²⁸Pritsadang to Devawongse, 30 April 1880 (NA.SB.16.11/30). This news of China’s claim over Macao was first reported by the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 29 March 1880, and, according to the same newspaper, it immediately caused a sensation in Lisbon (1 April 1880). Soon after it was reported that “the King of Siam” had already promised “to give active support to Portugal” in cooperation with Russia “in the event of the Macao quarrel bringing on hostilities” (the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 April 1880). Later in the month, China started blockading Macao (the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 27 April 1880).

²⁹On 28 August 1881, an imperial proclamation to announce the demise of the Empress Dowager Tzu-An, accompanied by letters from the Governor-General of Liangguang and Ngo Seng Siang, was brought to Bangkok.

³⁰These letters were translated into Thai by senior officials of Krom Tha Sai, i.e. Phraya Choduek and Phra Sawatwamdit, and presented to Phrakhlang, who then informed Chulalongkorn about their contents.

³¹In his report to Lord Glanville dated 7 October 1881, Palgrave gave a detailed description of the visit of the Chinese official and the Siamese reaction to “the request of the renewal of the triennial embassy with tribute and letter of allegiance” and the demand “for the bearer a personal audience with” Chulalongkorn himself (FO 69/78).

equal footing with China was one of the most difficult challenges that Siam faced at that time.

ROYAL EMBASSY FROM THE VIETNAMESE COURT, 1879

The Arrival of the Vietnamese Embassy

As stated above, after a fifty-year interruption, a royal mission from the Vietnamese court, bearing gifts and a letter from Tỵ Đức to Chulalongkorn of Siam, arrived in Bangkok on 23 April 1879. The chief envoy was Nguyễn Trọng Biện and the second envoy was Đinh Văn Giản.³² Upon their arrival, according to the customary practice of receiving guests from other countries, they were led to a place to stay which had been prepared by the Siamese court particularly for their accommodation. They were provided with food and other necessities such as rice, betel, tobacco, torches, soap, and silk bed linen.³³

The next day, the mission paid a courtesy visit to Chaophraya Phanuwong Mahakosathibodi (hereafter abbreviated as Chaophraya Phanuwong), the Krom Tha (functioning as Minister of Foreign Affairs), and delivered a letter from ‘*Ong Le Bo*’ (Ông Lễ Bộ, the Minister of Rites, who handled Vietnamese foreign relations)³⁴ addressed to Chaophraya Chakri, the Siamese Minister of Mahatthai in charge of northern province affairs. After paying visits to several other important officials and members of the royal family – such as Somdet Chaophraya Borom Maha Sisuriyawong (the ex-regent of Chulalongkorn, hereafter abbreviated as Sisuriyawong), Prince Chakkraphatphong, Prince Phanurangsi, and Prince Mahamala – during the next few days, the Vietnamese embassy was given an official audience with Chulalongkorn on 30 April 1879.³⁵

According to Ong Le Bo’s letter to Chaophraya Chakri, dated 5 March 1879, and translated into Thai by Siamese officials, the immediate purpose of the mission was to retrieve six Vietnamese commoners and nine cannons that had been mistakenly captured by Siamese soldiers during their campaigns against

³²The names of the first and second envoys are written as Wian Tong Pian and Tueng Wian Yang. These phonetic transcriptions of the names in Thai appeared in the Thai version of the royal letter translated from the original written in Sino-Vietnamese script, which the Siamese officials usually regarded as ‘Vietnamese’ (*akson yuan*) (‘Phraratchasan hongte phrachao krung vietnam,’ Ro. thi 193, NA. R.V. NK.1). In the original letter, the first envoy was referred to as ‘鴻臚寺卿辦理工部參辦商船事務阮仲忞,’ and the second envoy as ‘吏部郎中丁文簡’ (NA.R.V. NK.1).

³³The expenses incurred in the reception of this embassy, totalling 8217 baht, were recorded with the detailed breakdown by item (Ro. thi 999, NA.R.V. NK.4).

³⁴*Ong Le Bo* is a phonetic transcription in Thai of the title of a Vietnamese official in charge of foreign affairs (Ông Lễ Bộ), the head of the Ministry of Rites (equivalent to the Chinese Libu), with an honorific title in Thai to express respect *ong*. See also Bradley (1971: 799–800).

³⁵Chaophraya Phanuwong to Chulalongkorn, Ro. thi 191, the 4th day of the waxing moon of the 6th month (24 April 1879), (NA.R.V. NK.1); and ‘Prakat ratchathut yuan’ (30 April 1879), in Sathian Lailak (1935: Vol.10, 23–26).

the Ho in the mid-1870s.³⁶ Confirming, in the beginning of his letter, that Vietnam and Siam had been on friendly terms for a long time until their relations had been interrupted by “some state affairs”, Ong Le Bo explained the situation that led the Vietnamese court to send a royal embassy as follows. In 1876, when the Siamese waged military campaigns against the Ho invaders in the Phuan State, they captured Vietnamese officials who had been stationed there and several Vietnamese commoners by mistaking them for the Ho. They were taken back to Bangkok together with other Ho captives. Later, it was found that two of the captives were Vietnamese officials named Cao Bình Trâm and Lê Đăng Trung. The Siamese took good care of the Vietnamese and decided to send the officials back to Vietnam, leaving the remaining six Vietnamese commoners and nine cannons in Bangkok.³⁷ TỰ ĐỨC, having heard about these experiences from the two officials after they returned, felt grateful to Chulalongkorn for having taken good care of his people. He then decided to send ambassadors to restore friendly relations with Siam and retrieve the remaining Vietnamese commoners and cannons.

The Royal Letter and the Royal Audience

Although the embassy arrived in Bangkok aboard a warship, a symbol of power in the era of colonialism and gunboat diplomacy, other symbolic items and practices, such as royal letters and gifts, were seemingly within the frame of traditional exchanges, which appear to have been adapted and modified from the practices under the Chinese tributary system.

For instance, the royal letter from TỰ ĐỨC to Chulalongkorn brought by the envoys was written in Sino-Vietnamese script. With the seal of the ‘Emperor of Dai Nam’³⁸ stamped at the beginning and end of the letter, and with a style of writing in which honorific terms such as ‘Emperor’ were placed at the beginning of the line in the ‘elevated’ form, the royal letter assumed a traditional format that had been adapted from Chinese official documents.³⁹ In a similar vein, the letter was accompanied by a set of local products as royal gifts consisting of cinnamon of good quality, gold and silver coins, and silk of various sorts, with a list of these products, also written in Sino-Vietnamese, attached.⁴⁰

³⁶Letter from Ong Le Bo to Chaophraya Chakri, dated the 13th day of the second month, the 32nd year of the TỰ ĐỨC’s Reign, with a date according to the Thai calendar as Saturday, the 13th day of the waxing moon of the 4th month, the Lesser Era (chunlasakkarat, abbreviated as C.S.) 1240 (5 March 1879) (Ro. thi 192, NA.R.V. NK.1; and Samnao 244, NA.R.V. RL-PS.4). However, the 13th day of the waxing moon of the 4th month of C.S. 1240 was not Saturday, but Wednesday. Given the 13th day of the waxing moon of the 4th month of C.S.1239 was Saturday, some confusion occurred in converting from the Vietnamese date.

³⁷See also *DNTL* IV, vol.60, 42b for the Vietnamese account of the dispatch of the embassy.

³⁸大南皇帝之璽 *Đại Nam hoàng đế chi ti*.

³⁹Attachment to Ro. thi 192, (NA.R.V. NK.1). Siamese officials considered that it was written in ‘*akson yuan*’ (Vietnamese script).

⁴⁰Attachment to Ro. thi 192, (NA.R.V. NK.1).

Interestingly, moreover, Tự Đức's letter⁴¹ designated Chulalongkorn as the 'Buddha King of Siam,'⁴² and Tự Đức himself as the 'Emperor of Dai Nam country,'⁴³ placing both of them at the beginning of the line at the same level of elevation. The Siamese officials, then, translated the letter from Tự Đức into Thai as *phraratchasan*⁴⁴ (a royal letter), in which the term 'Emperor of Dai Nam' was translated as '*hongte phrachao krung vietnam*'.⁴⁵ while the Thai monarch was expressed as '*somdet phrachao krung mahanakhon siayutthaya*'. Here the Thai translation of the name and title of Tự Đức, which consisted of the phonetic transcription of the term 'emperor' (*hongte*, close to the Hokkien pronunciation of the Chinese term *huang di*),⁴⁶ thus making the term meaningless in Thai, and *phrachao*, an honorific prefix for the king's name, followed by the name of the kingdom (*krung vietnam*), corresponds word for word with the designation of Chulalongkorn, which also consisted of the honorific title and prefix *somdet*, meaning 'excellent', 'high', and 'great', and *phrachao*, followed by the name of the kingdom '*krung mahanakhon siayutthaya*', the same term used

⁴¹It was stated as 'a letter of respect' (肅書, túc thư).

⁴²暹羅國佛王 Xiêm La quốc phật vương. The term 'phật vương' was often used in Vietnamese royal letters to refer to the Siamese kings. As has been mentioned above, examples from the early nineteenth century are found in *Ngoại Quốc Thư Trát* (外國書札). See also Woodside (1971, 258–260).

⁴³大南國皇帝 Đại Nam quốc hoàng đế. For the meaning of 'Đại Nam' chosen by Minh Mạng as the name of the dynasty, see Choi (2004: 131–133). Interestingly, this is a slightly different expression from the term 大南國大皇帝 Đại Nam quốc đại hoàng đế, which appeared as the appellation for Tự Đức in the Philastre Treaty of 1874 (*DNTL* IV, vol.50, 7–14).

⁴⁴Admitting it is stylistically odd, this paper provides Thai terms only in Romanised form, whereas some Sino-Vietnamese terms are given in both Vietnamese as well as Sino-Vietnamese scripts. This is because in order to discuss translation and transliteration in relation to the question of superior-inferior status of sovereignty, which were closely related to the Chinese tributary order, one needs to give the nuance in meaning embodied in Chinese or Sino-Vietnamese characters – a nuance which the Thai alphabet would not necessarily give.

⁴⁵Usage of the term *krung vietnam* was not new or uncommon in Thai historical documents from the early nineteenth century. See, for instance, the Thai translation of Vietnamese royal letters (e.g. NL.CMH. R.II.C.S.1158 No.3; NL.CMH. R.I.C.S.1166 No.5; NL.CMH. R.III.C.S.1200 No.88).

⁴⁶It is not stated in the document who translated this royal letter into Thai. Considering that the translation into Thai of the list of accompanying presents was assigned to an official, Luang Phiphitphanphichan, and that this name was also found in the group of officials who examined the Sino-Vietnamese text of Tự Đức's royal letter, it is most probable that Luang Phiphitphanphichan also translated the royal letter into Thai. Luang Phiphitphanphichan was a son of a Chinese named Lim Thiang. His dialect background is not clear; it could have been Hakka, Teochew or Hokkien. An archival record dated March 1880 suggests that Luang Phiphitphanphichan was an official under the Krom Tha Sai but out of work and destitute. See Luang Phiphitphanphichan to Chulalongkorn, the 13th day of the waning moon of the 3rd month, C.S.1241 (8 February 1880) (Ro.thi 1898, NA.R.V. NK.6). However, he was later promoted to Phra Sawatwamdit, and then to Phraya Choduekratchasetthi. We find, on the other hand, in the *Sarabanchi* (1883), the first postal directory for Bangkok, two Vietnamese interpreters presumably also under the Krom Tha Sai (Krom Praisani lae Thoralek 1998: 73). For the pronunciation of the term in Chinese dialects, see also Goddard (1883: 50, 156), MaClay and Baldwin (1870: 278), and Macgowan (1883: 144), as well as some online resources such as Taiwan Minnan Dictionary by the Ministry of Education, R.O.C. (http://twblg.dict.edu.tw/holodict_new/index.html) and an online Teochew Dictionary (<http://www.mogher.com/dic>).

for their kingdom when they translated royal letters from the Chinese court. The act of Tữ Đức sending the royal mission and letter was expressed in Thai as 'wishing to promote royal friendship' (*kho charoen thang phraratchamaitri*), the same expression used in royal letters (Thai language version) from Chulalongkorn addressed to the sovereigns of the Western states and Japan.

Maintaining equal status between the two monarchies was a crucial issue that Siam needed to negotiate properly, as it was directly related to the rank and authority of each monarch in comparison with each other, by combining existing protocols with the European standard that they had just started to use as well. For instance, when Chulalongkorn decided to grant the Vietnamese embassy a royal audience on 30 April 1879 the question arose as to which protocol should be followed for Chulalongkorn to receive the royal letter of Tữ Đức from the Vietnamese embassy. On 24 April 1879, a week before the date of the royal audience, Chulalongkorn pointed out to Krom Tha (Chaophraya Phanuwong) the necessity of reaching an agreement with the Vietnamese embassy regarding the ceremonial procedures for the royal audience and asked him to examine the precedents. Chulalongkorn raised two points. The first was how many times and on what occasions he should grant the Vietnamese embassy a royal audience. The second was how the Siamese court should send a royal letter and gifts in reply to the Vietnamese court.⁴⁷

In addition to consulting extant copies of royal letters and records of the gifts exchanged with the Vietnamese court in the past, Chulalongkorn also advised Krom Tha (Chaophraya Phanuwong) to seek out any records concerning the procedures for delivering a return royal letter and gifts to the Vietnamese court, and to consult with Somdet Chaophraya Sisuriyawong for his knowledge. Chulalongkorn also urged Phanuwong that, if it was found that the Vietnamese embassy should bring the letter and gifts from Chulalongkorn back with them, he should quickly prepare the gifts and letters so that they could send the Vietnamese embassy home without keeping them too long in Bangkok.⁴⁸

In his reply to Chulalongkorn, dated 29 April 1879, Chaophraya Phanuwong reported the precedents regarding the royal audience for foreign embassies at the Siamese court.⁴⁹ What particularly mattered here was the way to receive

⁴⁷According to Chulalongkorn, it was a customary practice for the Vietnamese embassy to have a royal audience when they presented a royal letter from the Vietnamese court, and again before they left. But Chulalongkorn was not sure how many times in between these two occasions that the embassy should be granted a royal audience. The second point concerned whether the Vietnamese embassy should bring the royal letter and presents from Chulalongkorn back to Hué, or if the Siamese court should send them to the Vietnamese court by dispatching their own embassy after the Vietnamese embassy returned. Chulalongkorn to Krom Tha, the 4th day of the waxing moon of the 6th month, C.S.1241 (24 April 1879) (Thi 249, NA.R.V. RL-PS.4).

⁴⁸Chulalongkorn to Krom Tha, the 4th day of the waxing moon of the 6th month, C.S.1241 (24 April 1879) (Thi 249, NA.R.V. RL-PS.4).

⁴⁹Chaophraya Phanuwong to Chulalongkorn, the 9th day of the waxing moon of the 6th month, C.S.1241 (29 April 1879) (Ro. thi 225, NA.R.V. NK.1).

the royal letter from the Vietnamese court in order to secure the equal status between the two monarchies. Since Siam had already changed its practice for such occasions and the foreign embassies dispatched from Western countries thus could now hand royal letters directly to Chulalongkorn, they wondered if this new practice could be applicable to the Vietnamese envoys in the present circumstances.

An inquiry to the Vietnamese embassy found that when Tỵ Đức received royal letters from foreign embassies, he would sometimes receive the letter directly from the hand of the envoy, but not always. On some occasions, the embassy delivered the letter to the Vietnamese official in charge, who then would forward it to Tỵ Đức. This ambiguous response from the Vietnamese envoy made Chaophraya Phanuwong suspect that if a return mission was sent from Siam to Vietnam, the Vietnamese court might not allow the Siamese mission to hand the royal letter directly to Tỵ Đức. Fearing that the equality between the two sovereigns would not be guaranteed, Chaophraya Phanuwong recommended that Chulalongkorn not receive the Vietnamese royal letter directly from the hands of the embassy. Instead, he proposed to have the Vietnamese embassy place the royal letter in a box on a *phan* (a gilded tray supported on a pedestal) and lift this tray up to set it on a table. Then, a scribe would take the letter out of the box and read it aloud in Chulalongkorn's presence.⁵⁰

When the Vietnamese envoys were informed of the decision of the Siamese court on 30 April 1879, they pointed out that the customary practice of using a tray to present the royal letter to Chulalongkorn was not applied to other foreign embassies any more. They also told the Siamese officials that according to the royal instructions of the Vietnamese court, they would report this arrangement to the Vietnamese court so that the latter would receive the return embassy from Siam in the same manner with equal (dis)honours.⁵¹

Explaining his understanding that the Vietnamese still maintained the customary way of receiving foreign envoys, in contrast to the Siamese who had already introduced the Western practice in which foreign envoys were allowed to hand the royal letter directly to Chulalongkorn, Chaophraya Phanuwong then asked the Vietnamese embassy for a written endorsement that the Vietnamese court would allow the Siamese return embassy to directly hand the royal letter to Tỵ Đức. Moreover, Somdet Chaophraya Sisuriyawong expressed his view that Siam should pay due consideration to the Vietnamese as they were a close neighbour of Siam. According to Sisuriyawong, considering that Siam had already changed its practice of receiving foreign embassies by abolishing

⁵⁰Chaophraya Phanuwong to Chulalongkorn, the 9th day of the waxing moon of the 6th month, C.S.1249 (29 April 1879) (Ro.thi 225, NA.R.V. NK.1).

⁵¹Phanuwong to Chulalongkorn, the 10th day of the waxing moon of the 6th month, C.S.1241 (30 April 1879) (Ro.thi 236, NA.R.V. NK.1). The following explanations on the written endorsement from the Vietnamese embassy as well as the views of Sisuriyawong are also based on this document.

the use of boat processions to welcome incoming envoys at Samut Prakan and allowing those envoys to hand royal letters directly to Chulalongkorn, disappointing the Vietnamese embassy would not be appropriate. He thought, in any case, it would be desirable to maintain equality.

With the letter, which explained all of the above, Chaophraya Phanuwong also attached a letter of guarantee written by the Vietnamese envoys. The letter assured that the Vietnamese court would offer the Siamese return envoy the same courteous treatment that the Vietnamese would receive in Siam this time.⁵² In the end, the Vietnamese embassy handed the royal letter to Chulalongkorn during the royal audience.⁵³

After the royal audience, both parties continued negotiations concerning the details for the return embassy from the Siamese court to Vietnam. The Vietnamese first and second ambassadors recommended a visit sometime between the eighth and tenth month (of the Siamese lunar calendar in 1880), most favourably starting from Bangkok in the first half of the eighth month. They also described the way to reach Hué by steamship, calling first at the port of Da Nang, where ships from other countries were received by the Vietnamese officials of high rank who were responsible for maintaining order at sea, before proceeding to the capital.⁵⁴

In addition, the ambassadors requested a royal letter from Siam and a letter from Phrakhlang for the envoys to take back to Vietnam. The ambassadors claimed that this had been a customary practice for Vietnamese embassies that had visited Siam in the past, and that the recent Vietnamese embassies that visited France and Spain had also brought letters from the sovereigns back on their return home.⁵⁵ They also informed Chaophraya Phanuwong that they wished to return to Vietnam in time for the ceremony to celebrate the 70th birthday of the Empress Dowager, which was scheduled during the period of the waxing moon in the eighth month. They requested, as their personal wish, a congratulatory letter for the Empress Dowager from the court of Siam.⁵⁶

In the end, Chulalongkorn sent two royal letters dated 29 May 1879 to Tỵ Đứ́c: one expressing gratitude for the royal embassy in resuming their friendly

⁵²Phanuwig to Chulalongkorn, the 10th day of the waxing moon of the 6th month, C.S.1241 (30 April 1879) (Ro.thi 236, NA.R.V. NK.1); Kham plae chak akson yuan (Ro.thi 237, NA.R.V. NK.1).

⁵³Phraratchasan, Chulalongkorn to Tỵ Đứ́c, the 9th day of the waxing moon of the 7th month, C.S. 1241 (29 May 1879), (NA.R.V. RL-PS.11).

⁵⁴Hong Lo Tue Khan and Tueng Wian Yang to Chaophraya Phrakhlang, the 10th day of the waning moon of the 6th month, C.S.1241 (15 May 1879), (Ro.thi 420, NA.R.V. NK.2). The day (Saturday) and the date (the 10th day of the waning moon of the 6th month) do not match each other, indicating that either the date or the day is erroneous.

⁵⁵Hong Lo Tue Khan and Tueng Wian Yang to Chaophraya Phrakhlang, the 10th day of the waning moon of the 6th month, C.S.1241 (15 May 1879) (Ro.thi 420, NA.R.V. NK.2).

⁵⁶Chaophraya Phanuwong to Chulalongkorn, the 2nd day of the waxing moon of the 7th month, C.S.1241 (22 May 1879) (Ro.thi 420, NA.R.V. NK.2).

relations, and another celebrating the 70th birthday of the Empress Dowager.⁵⁷ In order to prepare the royal letters, Chulalongkorn ordered Phra Phairatchaphakphakdi (a son of Chaophraya Phanuwong), with Luang Phiphitphanphichan, Luang Yuanphanthiat who was presumably a Vietnamese, Sin Seyito, and a clerk named Chiakseng, to check the text of the royal letter from TỰ ĐỨC and inform Chulalongkorn of the expressions used. The officials reported to Chulalongkorn that TỰ ĐỨC addressed his letter to Chulalongkorn as a royal letter (*phraratchasan*), in which it was stated that ‘*dainamkuak wangde tukthoe*’ salutes with respect (*mi khamnab ma yang*) ‘*siamla koeuk phak biang klueong tiang than chieu*.’⁵⁸ They also explained that if ‘translated into Chinese’ (*plae pen phasa chin*), it would mean that ‘*dai nam kok hongte*’ salutes with respect ‘*siamlo kok hut ong tia chia sae chia*,’ and if translated into Thai, it would be that ‘*somdet phrachao krung vietnam*’ (the king of Vietnam) salutes with respect ‘*phrachao krung phra mahanakhon siayutthaya an mi ratsami sawang yu nai sawettachat*’ (the king of Ayutthaya the great city, who is crowned with the glory of royal power under the white umbrella).’

Based on their own interpretation, these officials claimed that the word *hut* in Chinese would be translated as *phra*, while the term *ong* in Chinese would be translated as *chao* in Thai.⁵⁹ Explaining in addition that the term *hongte* (*huang di* in Mandarin Chinese, meaning ‘emperor’) in Chinese would be translated as *somdet* in Thai, the honorific title to indicate a superior rank, the officials also hesitantly admitted that the Vietnamese court elevated itself a little higher (than its Siamese counterpart by using *hongte* for TỰ ĐỨC himself while calling the Siamese king *ong*).

Having had probably been aware that the ‘emperor’ (*huang di*) should be considered higher than the ‘king’ (*wang*) in the context of the Chinese tributary order, Phra Phairatchaphakphakdi thus reported to Chulalongkorn that in the royal letter from Siam to Vietnam, he ordered his officials to translate the passage in Thai ‘the king of great Ayutthaya kingdom salutes with respect the Vietnamese (Buddha) king’ (*somdet phrachao krung phra mahanakhon siayutthaya khamnab ma yang phrachao krung vietnam*) as that ‘*siamlo kok hongte*

⁵⁷Phraratchasan,’ Thursday, the 9th day of the waxing moon of the 7th month, C.S.1241 (29 May 1879), (Samnao, thi 470 and 471, NA.R.V. NK.2).

⁵⁸These terms, *dainamkuak wangde tukthoe* and *siamla koeuk phak biang klueong tiang than chieu*, are phonetic transcriptions in Thai of the Vietnamese readings of the following characters that appeared in the Vietnamese royal letter as: 大南國皇帝肅書 and 暹羅國佛王帳前青炤. Phra Phairatchaphakphakdi to Chulalongkorn, the 3rd day of the waxing moon of the 7th month, C.S.1241 (23 May 1871) (Ro.thi 451, NA.R.V. NK.2).

⁵⁹*Hut* and *ong* are phonetic transliterations in Thai of the readings for the Chinese characters, 佛 (*fo*) and 王 (*wang*), respectively. On the other hand, the term *phra* in Thai would generally be used as both a title given to a Buddhist monk or a prefix denoting royalty, while *chao* would mean a ‘lord’ or a ‘master’ or a ‘king’.

(the emperor of Siam) salutes with respect *tai nam kok hut ong* (the Buddha king of Dai Nam country).⁶⁰

However, seen from the extant copy of the letters, the resulting royal letters from Chulalongkorn to TỰ ĐỨC⁶¹ did not follow the above explanation. We find instead in the letters (written in 'Vietnamese') that TỰ ĐỨC was still designated as the 'Emperor of Dai Nam country,' while Chulalongkorn's name appeared as a phonetic transcription of his designation in Thai, '*somdet phra chao krung phra mahanakhon siayutthaya*,' written with Sino-Vietnamese script.⁶² Thus by avoiding to designate Chulalongkorn either as a king or as an emperor, and choosing instead a transcription into Sino-Vietnamese that would have been unintelligible to the Hué court, the Siamese officials in charge deliberately evaded the question of who would be higher than whom between the two monarchs within the contexts of the existing Chinese world order, and, at the same time, managed to pay respect to TỰ ĐỨC by maintaining his status as 'emperor.'

Accompanied by a Vietnamese Buddhist monk at the Anamnikayaram Temple in Bangkok named Hi Hue, who had agreed to the request of the Vietnamese court to stay in Vietnam for a few years as a Thai language teacher and translator,⁶³ the Vietnamese embassy, bearing these letters and gifts from Chulalongkorn to TỰ ĐỨC as well as a letter from Phanuwong to Ong Le Bo, returned to Hué on 23 June 1879. Ong Le Bo, in his reply to Chaophraya Phanuwong dated 9 August 1879, informed him of the safe return of both the Vietnamese embassy and the commoners and cannons from Siam. He also expressed a special appreciation of the fact that the Vietnamese mission had been received

⁶⁰Phra Phairatchaphakphakdi to Chulalongkorn, the 3rd day of the waxing moon of the 7th month, C.S.1241 (23 May 1871) (Ro.thi 451, NA.R.V. NK.2).

⁶¹Each was titled as 皇國書 hoàng quốc thư, a 'royal letter of empire' or an 'imperial royal letter'.

⁶²Kham plae (Ro.thi 470 and 471, NA.R.V. NK.2). TỰ ĐỨC was designated as 大南國皇帝 (Đại Nam quốc hoàng đế), while Chulalongkorn was expressed as 識迭詫嘲中詫摩訶哪坤熾啞憂且加 (Sấm diệt sá trào trung sá ma kha ná khôn xí á kiệt thả gia).

⁶³Chaophraya Phanuwong to Chulalongkorn, the 2nd day of the waxing moon of the 7th month, C. S.1241 (22 May 1879) (Ro. thi 419, NA.R.V. NK.2). Considering that there was no one in Vietnam who knew Thai language at that time, TỰ ĐỨC sent several students with the embassy to study Thai language in Siam, so that they could serve as interpreters after learning the language and returning to Vietnam. Alternatively, TỰ ĐỨC had also proposed to bring the students and the person who would be a Thai teacher back to Vietnam with the embassy if the embassy could find someone willing. While in Bangkok, the Vietnamese embassy searched for a possible teacher and found Hi Hue. Hi Hue, born to a father who was an able-bodied man liable for tax in kind in eagle wood in Chanthaburi, was a 42 year-old Vietnamese monk who knew the Thai language very well. The Anamnikayaram Temple is one of the two Vietnamese temples which had been established by those who had taken refuge in Siam with Nguyễn Ánh during the reign of Rama I (Damrong 1931, (6) – (7)). It should also be noted that at the end of the nineteenth century, the numbers of Vietnamese Buddhist temples and monks in Siam exceeded that of the Chinese (Krom Smlapakon 1985, 31–34), and that Vietnamese monks were an important part of the ceremonial life of the Siamese court: Phraya Choduek, for instance, invited Vietnamese monks to the *kongtek* ceremony at the royal palace to commemorate the death anniversary of Queen Sunandha Kumariratana and her daughter (Phraya Choduek to Chulalongkorn, received on the 2nd day of the waxing moon in the 7th month, C.S.1243, 29 May 1881, Ro. thi 196, NA.R.V. NK.12).

at the Siamese court in the same manner that foreign missions from other countries with formal friendship relations were received. Moreover, the royal confirmation from the Vietnamese court that the same kind of reception, better than the old customary one, could be expected for the Siamese embassy, was also delivered to Chaophraya Phanuwong.⁶⁴

Along with this letter from Ong Le Bo, a royal letter from Tỵ Đức to Chulalongkorn and the Second King, also dated 9 August 1879, confirmed the safe return of the Vietnamese envoy on 23 June 1879 and expressed deep appreciation for the return of the Vietnamese captives and cannons, as well as for the royal letters and gifts for his mother's 70th birthday. In addition, Tỵ Đức extended a cordial invitation to the Siamese court to send a return mission to the Vietnamese court, asking them to let him know when they would be ready to dispatch such a mission.⁶⁵

SIAM AND VIETNAM IN REGIONAL CONTEXTS

Chinese Factors

The exchange of letters and embassies between Vietnam and Siam had wider implications beyond their bilateral relations, such as their existing tributary relations with China, and their relations with the Western colonial power, France.

On 30 April 1879, the day when Chulalongkorn granted the Vietnamese envoys a royal audience, Chaophraya Phanuwong issued a proclamation to announce the arrival of the Vietnamese embassy, in which he described the background and purpose of this mission in great detail (Sathian Lailak 1935: vol.10, 23–26). Dating their friendly relations to the beginning of the nineteenth century, the proclamation confirmed the long historical relationship between the two countries until its interruption during the reign of Rama III. The proclamation then elaborated on how the two countries had resumed contact, repeating the contents of Ong Le Bo's letter to Chaophraya Chakri dated 5 March 1879 in a factual tone without hierarchical terms,⁶⁶ and announced the arrival of the Vietnamese mission.

⁶⁴Ong Le Bo to Chaophraya Phrakhleng (Thai translation), the 22nd day of the 6th month, the 32nd year of the Tỵ Đức's Reign, the 7th day of the waning moon of the 9th month, C.S.1241 (9 August 1879) (Samnao, Ro.thi 1313 (kho), NA.R.V. NK.5). The safe return of the mission with the report of their experiences in Siam, including what they had been informed on regarding political situations such as Siam's relations with European powers, were reported to Tỵ Đức (*DNTL* IV, vol.61, 38–40).

⁶⁵'Ratchasan hongte' (Thai translation), the 22nd day of the 6th month, the 32nd Year of the Tỵ Đức's Reign, the 7th day of the waning moon of the 9th month, C.S.1241 (9 August 1879) (Samnao, Ro.thi 1321, NA.R.V. NK.5).

⁶⁶It explained the capture of Vietnamese officials and commoners by Siam during the military campaigns against the Ho rebellions in the mid-1870s, followed by the return of the two Vietnamese officials to their homeland, and then the proposal of sending a mission from the Vietnamese court to Siam to express gratitude and receive the Vietnamese commoners and the cannons captured by the Siamese.

Interestingly, it seems that the reason why the Siamese court accepted the royal mission from the Vietnamese court and issued this proclamation was related to the question of the Siam's relations with China at that time. As mentioned above, the Vietnamese mission arrived in Bangkok soon after the Siamese proposal to enter Beijing from Tianjin was refused by the Governor-General of Liangguang in 1877.⁶⁷ In a broader context, this was the time when China started to increase its involvement in the affairs of its tributary states such as Ryukyu, Vietnam, and Korea, and intensified its request for resumption of tribute from Siam. It was also the time when the question of resuming tribute to China was an issue of great concern not only for Siam but also for Western powers. In addition to the British, who were closely following Sino-Siamese relations, in April 1878 Siam was informed that German and other European representatives in Beijing were deliberating a possible intervention into the 'affairs' of Siamese tributary relations with China if Siam requested it.⁶⁸ Siam was thus well aware of the political significance that this question entailed.

It was against such a background that, on 25 April 1879, Chulalongkorn instructed Krom Tha (Chaophraya Phanuwong) to issue a proclamation and publicly announce the arrival of the Vietnamese envoys:

"I think the arrival of the royal embassy from Vietnam appears something very strange and novel to us. There are many who have never seen such a mission from Vietnam before and have had no knowledge about the matter. The Westerners here often mention Siam's tribute-sending to China. I am afraid that if this Vietnamese mission comes to the knowledge of those Westerners, they will talk about the matter, be it true or false. I thus think we should inform the arrival of the Vietnamese embassy to all and make the matter open so that all of us can understand our friendly relations with the Vietnamese court. To receive the Vietnamese mission in a friendly manner will be beneficial for us to prevent jealous and protective feelings of the French and annoying remarks from various parties. Moreover, we can even cite this mission as an example for indicating that in our past association with China, we believe that we have been on terms of friendship with China in the same manner as we have been with Vietnam. This would also be beneficial for us."⁶⁹

Considering the fact that the Siamese court used the same terms – *khrueng ratchabannakan* (accompanying gifts) and *phraratchasan* (royal letters) – in

⁶⁷NA.KT (L) 1: 96–99; 102–107. See also Koizumi (2009: 54–56).

⁶⁸Bhasakarawongse to Chulalongkorn, the 7th day of the waxing moon of the 5th month, C.S.1239 (9 April 1878) (NA.R.V. RL-PS.2).

⁶⁹Chulalongkorn to Krom Tha, the 5th day of the waxing moon of the 6th month, C.S.1241 (25 April 1879) (NA.R.V. RL-PS.4).

their exchanges with both China and Vietnam,⁷⁰ and that the Chinese official who came to request tribute from Siam claimed to be responsible for Vietnam affairs, Chulalongkorn probably thought that the reception of Vietnamese ambassadors on an equal basis would be the grounds to assert that Siam's relationship with China would never be a tributary one.

Moreover, Siam was also concerned about the situation in border areas between Siam and Vietnam, as well as between Vietnam and China. One area of concern were the activities of the rebel Li Yangcai in the Vietnam-China border area. The Vietnamese mission, while claiming rumours and information in various newspapers were groundless, mentioned China's involvement, that Li was a Chinese rebel who led a band of three to four thousand soldiers to attack Vietnamese towns bordering China, and that upon the request of the Vietnamese court, the Governor-General of Liangguang had sent an army. The army fought a few battles against Li's soldiers killing a few hundred and capturing a few hundred more.⁷¹

Relations with France

As was also indicated in Chulalongkorn's instruction to Krom Tha, another foreign power that Siam had to take into consideration was France. Even though Siam did not think France was a direct threat at the time, a good relationship with French colonial authorities was indispensable for Siam to deal with various issues such as the sale of cheap imported liquor that had been causing serious trouble with local spirit tax farmers, and the construction of telegraph lines between Bangkok and Saigon.

Upon receiving the Vietnamese embassy, Siam informed the French consul in Bangkok about the arrival of the Vietnamese mission and inquired if their visit would be in conflict with the treaty arrangement between France and Vietnam. The French consulate replied that the mission did not impinge on France's treaty with Vietnam, and that the French authorities in both Cochin-China and Bangkok had already been well-informed of the letters exchanged between the Vietnamese and Siamese courts concerning the dispatch of the Vietnamese mission in advance.⁷²

Several weeks later in mid-June 1879, the *Antelope*, a French gunboat dispatched from Saigon, arrived in Bangkok. The French consul in Bangkok

⁷⁰These terms were also used for the gifts and royal letters from and to the Western powers which concluded a treaty with Siam.

⁷¹Phra Phairatchaphakphakdi to Chulalongkorn, the 12th day of the waxing moon of the 6th month in C.S.1241 (2 May 1879) (Ro thi 263, NA.R.V. NK.1). As for the first point, which concerned the situation in the Phuan State, the Vietnamese envoy suggested that if Siam sent a letter to a brother of Prince Khanthi of the Phuan State in Vientiane and told him to stop the disturbing activities, the situation would be settled. The envoy, however, failed to provide any further information to satisfy the Siamese officials. See also Davis (2014).

⁷²Chaophraya Phanuwong to Chulalongkorn, the 9th day of the waxing moon of the 6th month, C.S. 1241 (29 April 1879) (Ro.thi 225, NA.R.V. NK.1).

explained that the purpose of the dispatch was nothing more than a visit to the French consul in Bangkok that made use of a gunboat that sat idle at that time. However, Chaphraya Phanuwong understood the real intention of this dispatch as scouting the activities of the Vietnamese mission.⁷³

Writing a personal letter in English to Admiral Lafont in Saigon on 16 June 1879, Chulalongkorn explained the background for receiving the Vietnamese mission as follows:

“Friendly intercourse between Siam and Annam had ceased for about fifty years. When my troops in Northern Siam in crushing an army of piratical marauders the Chin Haws rescued from them some Cochin Chinese officers their prisoners, and enabled them to return to Hué.”

In acknowledgement of this His Majesty the King of Annam lately sent hither a friendly Embassy; and as I and my Government are glad to be on good terms with our neighbour on the North East frontier, believing such relations will be the best guarantee for the peace of the inhabitants of our distant provinces, and the suppression of the said Chin Haws [i.e., the Haw coming from China], Chinese Rebel General, and the other land-pirates, and as moreover I am desirous to hear the report of a trustworthy witness as to the present state of the city of Hué I have it under consideration to send an Embassy thither I am glad that this occasion give [*sic*] me the opportunity of renewing my personal correspondence with your Excellency and assuring [*sic*] of my high consideration.”⁷⁴

This royal letter, translated into French and sent to Lafont, was followed by another letter from Phanuwong to Lafont dated 18 June 1879, which explained the recent revival of royal friendship (*phraratchamaitri*) with Vietnam and inquired about the French attitude toward Siam's dispatch of a return mission to Vietnam, particularly regarding the treaty between France and Vietnam.⁷⁵

In his reply to Phanuwong dated 26 June 1879, Lafont told Phanuwong that he would have to consult with his government in Paris as to whether a return mission from Siam would be regarded as a change in the existing diplomatic relations of Annam, and a violation of the stipulations prescribed in the Article 3 of

⁷³Chaophraya Phanuwong to Chulalongkorn, the 9th day of the waning moon of the 7th month, C.S. 1241 (13 June 1879) (Ro thi 570, NA.R.V. NK.2). It is not clear that the Vietnamese mission was still in Bangkok when *Antelope* arrived as I have not been able to ascertain the exact date of their departure from Bangkok. *Straits Times Overland Journal* (24 June 1879) reported in the article “Bangkok News” the arrival of the French gunboat *Antelope* in Bangkok on 12 June 1879 “for the benefit of the Commander's health” as he was “quite ill.” The *Straits Times Overland Journal* (30 July 1879) also carried an article titled “Bangkok News” which, based on *the Daily Times* (23 July 1879), stated that “the Annamese gunboat *Le Dart* left here for Hué ten days since. Yesterday the French gunvessel *Antelope* arrived.”

⁷⁴Chulalongkorn to Rear Admiral Lafond (Lafont), 16 June 1879 (Ro.thi 588, NA.R.V. NK.2).

⁷⁵Chaophraya Phanuwong to Admiral Lafont, 18 June 1879 (the 14th day of the waning moon of the 7th month, C.S.1241) (NA.KT(L) 9/29).

the Treaty of 15 March 1874. Lafont also informed Phanuwong that he would be leaving for Paris soon, to be succeeded by M. Le Myre de Vilers.⁷⁶ A similar but shorter reply was also sent to Chulalongkorn.⁷⁷

In early January 1880, Chaophraya Phanuwong received a reply from Le Myre de Vilers dated 23 December 1879. It informed Phanuwong about the judgement of the Ministry of Marine, stating that under such conditions as had been prescribed by the Philastre Treaty between France and Vietnam on 15 March 1874, which prohibited any changes in the diplomatic relations henceforth, the reopening of long-interrupted relations between the courts of Bangkok and Hué would appear “difficult to be reconcile[d] to the relevant clauses of the Treaty of 15 March 1874.” The resultant judgement was that “the Republic Government would not much be able to agree with its encouragement.”⁷⁸ Following this letter, Siam suspended sending a return embassy to Vietnam.

DISPATCHING A RETURN EMBASSY TO THE VIETNAMESE COURT

The discouraging reply from the French authorities was not the end of negotiations, however. On 2 May 1880, a list of royal gifts for the Vietnamese court, worth 3450.5 baht, was prepared and presented to Chulalongkorn (Chulalongkorn 1935: 75). On 5 June 1880, Ong Le Bo of Vietnam received a letter from Chaophraya Phanuwong which discussed Siam’s intention to send a royal embassy to the Vietnamese court in the eighth month (according to the Siamese lunar calendar) of 1880. It seems that Phanuwong also asked Ong Le Bo to inform Siam about the result of the inquiry regarding the possibility of sending a Siamese mission to Vietnam, which Phanuwong had asked Ong Le Bo to make to the French commander in Saigon several months earlier. Phanuwong told Ong Le Bo that, without hearing the response of the French commander, the Siamese court was not sure what to do, and that they would send return gifts and a mission if the French remained silent.⁷⁹

In his reply to Phanuwong, Ong Le Bo explained that he had already informed Tỵ Đức (expressed in the Thai translation as *phrachao hongte*) about this inquiry from Phanuwong. According to Ong Le Bo, Tỵ Đức expressed his willingness to accept the dispatch of an embassy from Siam. While confirming the provisions of their treaty with France that prohibited the making of any changes in the existing diplomatic relations with other countries without prior

⁷⁶Lafont to Chaophraya Phanuwong, 26 June 1876 (Ro.thi 776, NA.R.V. NK.3).

⁷⁷Lafont to Chulalongkorn, 26 June 1876 (Ro.thi 777, NA.R.V. NK.3).

⁷⁸Le Myre de Vilers to Siamese Minister of Foreign Affairs in Bangkok, 23 December 1879 (Samnao, Ro.thi 1772, NA.R.V. NK.6).

⁷⁹Recited in the letter of Ong Le Bo to Chaophraya Phrakhleng, the 30th day of the 4th month, the 33rd Year of the Tỵ Đức’s Reign, the 1st day of the waxing moon of the 8th month, C.S.1242 (7 June 1880) (Samnao, Ro.thi 642, NA.R.V. NK.9).

consent of France, Ong Le Bo also urged Siam to maintain its friendly relations with Vietnam as before. In addition, he informed Siam that he had not yet made any inquiry with the French authorities since he had not heard of any definite date for the dispatch of the Siamese embassy. He promised to let the French authorities know what Siam's intention was and to wait for their response.⁸⁰

However, it took another year for both sides to make further moves. In the beginning of August 1881, Phrakhlang received a letter from Ong Le Bo dated 23 May 1881. This letter was accompanied by royal gifts from Tỵ Đức consisting of five pieces of high quality *opchoei* (a kind of cinnamon) and five tael *tamlueng chin* (tael) of the *kralamphak* aromatic tree. The letter and gifts were delivered by a Buddhist monk named Phra Hi Iu (or Hi Hue), who, after spending more than a year in Vietnam, was to return to Bangkok.⁸¹ While recalling their communication over the two years since the dispatch of Vietnamese envoys to the Siamese court in 1879, and emphasising how Tỵ Đức was pleased by the re-establishment of friendly relations with Siam, Ong Le Bo expressed strong concern that a long interruption in their friendly relations without an exchange of letters and missions would estrange the two countries.

While urging a response from the Siamese side, another topic that Ong Le Bo raised was the exchange of Buddhist monks and students. Reminding Chaophraya Phanuwong that he had entrusted a teacher of the Siamese language (*phasa sayam*), the Buddhist monk Phra Hi Iu (or Hi Hue), with the Vietnamese mission on its return from Bangkok, Ong Le Bo informed Phanuwong that the monk would like to take nine of his students back to Bangkok in order for them to study the Siamese language in country for three years. Ong Le Bo encouraged a prompt response from Siam by granting gold coins tied by a loop of silk string with silk tassels and sixteen volumes of Pali books to a Vietnamese monk at Wat Anammikayaram named Phra Khruborihanphrot.⁸²

One week after receiving this letter from Ong Le Bo, Chulalongkorn prepared a royal letter to Tỵ Đức dated 14 August 1881.⁸³ The royal letter informed the Vietnamese court, with deep regrets, that there would be no chance for the Siamese court to send a royal mission to the Vietnamese court, despite their

⁸⁰Ong Le Bo to Chaophraya Phrakhlang, the 30th day of the 4th month, the 33rd Year of the Tỵ Đức's Reign, the 1st day of the waxing moon of the 8th month, C.S.1242 (7 June 1880) (Samnao, Ro. thi 642, NA.R.V. NK.9).

⁸¹Ong Le Bo to Chaophraya Phrakhlang, the 26th day of the 4th month, the 34th Year of the Tỵ Đức's Reign (23 May 1881) (Samnao, Ro. thi 535, NA.R.V. NK.13). While the date according to the Vietnamese calendar should fall on 23 May 1881, which was the 11th day of the waning moon of the 6th month of C.S. 1243 according to the Siamese calendar, the Thai translation instead converted the date to the 11th day of the waning moon of the 7th month of C.S.1243.

⁸²Ong Le Bo to Chaophraya Phrakhlang, the 26th day of the 4th month, the 34th Year of the Tỵ Đức's Reign (23 May 1881) (Samnao, Ro.thi 535, NA.R.V. NK.13).

⁸³There is a copy of the letter in 'Vietnamese' and a Thai translation of it. 'Phraratchasan Somdet phrachao krung phra mahanakhon siayutthaya,' the 4th day of the waning moon of the 9th month, C.S. 1243 (14 August 1881) (NA.R.V. NK.13).

strong desire to maintain amicable relations and even though they had prepared royal gifts to send.

Chaophraya Phanuwong also wrote a lengthy reply letter dated 14 August 1881 to Ong Le Bo.⁸⁴ Elaborating the situation which obliged them not to send their mission as had been previously notified, the letter explained the original intention of sending an embassy to Vietnam in the eighth month of the Lesser Year of 1242 (around June 1880) and how this plan was interrupted when, in January 1880, Le Myre de Vilers, the Governor of French Cochinchina, informed Siam that the French would regard sending such a mission from Siam to Vietnam as inappropriate, as it conflicted with the provisions of the treaty between France and Vietnam. Given such a negative view of the French authorities, he continued, Chulalongkorn had shelved the plan to send a royal mission to Vietnam. Chaophraya Phanuwong also asked Ong Le Bo to request permission from the French authorities for Siam to send a mission to Vietnam.

It appears that the Vietnamese and Siamese authorities' actions were at cross purposes. According to Ong Le Bo's previous letter, Ong Le Bo waited for Siam to notify Vietnam regarding the definite schedule for sending a mission before making an inquiry to the French authorities concerning the possibility of gaining permission for such a royal exchange. So when Ong Le Bo received a letter from Phanuwong inquiring about France's response, Ong Le Bo told Phanuwong that without receiving from Siam a definite schedule for the royal mission, he had not yet made such an inquiry to the French authorities.

Phanuwong then told Ong Le Bo that given that the Vietnamese court had not yet received permission from the French authorities regarding the possible dispatch of a royal mission from Siam, there would be no possibility for Siam to send a royal mission in return to the Vietnamese court. That being said, however, he added that the Siamese court, which had a strong wish to maintain amicable relations with Vietnam, intended to send a royal letter and gifts to the Vietnamese court through the hands of French authorities in Saigon.

In mid-November 1881, three months after he had written this letter to Ong Le Bo, and a month after the Chinese official who had come to request tribute had left Bangkok, Chaophraya Phanuwong, promising that Siam would bear all the cost of delivery, made an inquiry to the French consulate in Bangkok regarding the possibility of delivering the royal letter and gifts from Chulalongkorn via the French authorities at Saigon.⁸⁵ Having, the next day, gained a commitment from the French Consul in Bangkok that he would be willing to perform the task of delivery to Saigon, Phanuwong also wrote to the Governor, Le Myre de

⁸⁴The following explanation is based on this letter from Chaophraya Phrakhlung to Ong Le Bo, the 4th day of the waning moon of the 9th month, C.S. 1243 (14 August 1881) (NA.R.V. KT(L)53).

⁸⁵Chaophraya Phanuwong to M. Lorgeou, the 8th day of the waning moon of the 12th month, C.S. 1243 (14 November 1881)(NA.R.V. KT(L)53).

Vilers, on 18 November 1881, asking him to forward the royal letter and gifts from Saigon to Tụ Đức.⁸⁶

Explaining why the Siamese had come to ask the French Consul in Bangkok and the Governor General in Saigon for such a favour, Phanuwong described the dilemma that Siam faced. On the one hand, the Siamese government had decided to halt the return mission to the Vietnamese court by duly respecting the view of the French government that such an exchange would not be appropriate in light of the stipulations prescribed by the Philastre Treaty. At the same time, the Siamese government strongly believed that it would not be appropriate for them to follow the French advice, and remain silent and ignore Vietnam, as they had already accepted the royal letter and gifts from the Vietnamese court. All the high-ranking officials in Siam regarded sending a return embassy as obligatory according to their customary practice for maintaining amicable relations. In such a difficult situation, and given that sending a royal letter and gifts directly to the Vietnamese court might arouse unnecessary suspicion among the French authorities, the Siamese government came up with the solution of asking the French authorities to deliver the letter and gifts to the Vietnamese court so that the French would know what was going on between Siam and Vietnam.⁸⁷

However, it took another few months before the French consul in Bangkok delivered Chulalongkorn's letter and gifts to Tụ Đức. In mid-March 1882, a French warship visited Bangkok to deliver a letter from Le Myre de Vilers expressing gratitude to Chulalongkorn for granting him the Order of the White Elephant, and informed Chaophraya Phrakhlàng that the French authorities were about to bring the royal letter and gifts to Tụ Đức.⁸⁸

On 24 March 1882, Ong Le Bo of Vietnam received the return royal letter of Chulalongkorn along with seventeen boxes of royal gifts that consisted of aromatic oils, gold and silver coins, as well as silk fabric of different sorts, all together worth 3450.5 baht.⁸⁹

Interestingly, seen from the extant copy of the draft, Chulalongkorn's royal letter this time designated Tụ Đức not as the 'Emperor of Dai Nam

⁸⁶M. Lorgeous to Chaophraya Phanuwong, the 9th day of the waning moon of the 12th month, C.S. 1243 (15 November 1881) (NA.R.V. KT(L)53); Chaophraya Phanuwong to M. Lorgeou, the 12th day of the waning moon of the 12th month, C.S. 1243 (18 November 1881)(NA.R.V. KT(L)53); and Chaophraya Phrakhlàng to Le Myre de Vilers (18 November 1881)(NA.KT(L) 9/29).

⁸⁷Chaophraya Phanuwong to the French consul, the 8th day of the waning moon of the 12th month, C.S. 1243 (14 November 1881)(NA.R.V. KT(L)53); Chaophraya Phrakhlàng to Le Myre de Vilers (18 November 1881) (NA.KT(L) 9/29).

⁸⁸Chaophraya Phanuwong to Chulalongkorn, the 12th day of the waning moon of the 4th month, C. S. 1243 (16 March 1882) (Ro.thi 1635, NA.R.V. NK.16); Le Myre de Vilers to Chaophraya Phanuwong, 7 March 1882 (Ro.thi 1636, NA.R.V. NK.16); and Le Myre de Vilers to Chaophraya Phanuwong, 7 March 1882 (Ro.thi 1637, NA.R.V. NK.16).

⁸⁹Ong Le Bo to Chaophraya Phrakhlàng, the 9th day of waning moon of the 6th month, C.S. 1244 (11 June 1882) (Ro.thi 290, NA.R.V. NK.17); and 'khrueng ratchabannakan song pai' (NA.KT(L) 9/29).

country',⁹⁰ but as the 'Emperor of Great Vietnam',⁹¹ while Chulalongkorn himself was expressed in Sino-Vietnamese characters, using the same phonetic transcription of the Thai term *somdet phrachao krung phra mahanakhon siayut-thaya*⁹² as had appeared in the previous royal letters. The implication of using the term the 'Emperor of the country of Great Vietnam' instead of the 'Emperor of Dai Nam country' in the face of French intervention deserves closer examination. Nevertheless, the appellation of Tự Đức as the 'Emperor of Great Vietnam', which consisted of the term 'Việt Nam' (Vietnam) – the name of the country bestowed by the Chinese emperor at the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasty in opposition to 'Nam Việt' proposed by Gia Long – and a prefix đại, meaning 'the great,' followed by the term 'the emperor' (hoàng đế), seems to indicate a deliberate manipulation by Siam, or the translator at the Siamese court, to locate Tự Đức and his country within the context of the Chinese world order, possibly as a reminder to the French of the shadow of Chinese influence over Vietnam, and at the same time, to elevate Tự Đức as the emperor, so that Tự Đức, being equal to Chulalongkorn, would not be a king of a tributary state of China.⁹³ At the same time, the letter did not use the term 'emperor' for Chulalongkorn himself, thus avoiding the risk of Siam offending China if this text became known to Chinese authorities. Moreover, considering that the term Đại/Da was often used as a prefix to designate a name of a country or sovereign in modern treaties between Qing China and Western powers, it may be possible that Siam adopted this terminology from modern treaties to give its royal letter a modern appearance.⁹⁴

To my knowledge, there is no record to indicate how Tự Đức received this letter from Siam. Only a copy of a royal letter from Tự Đức, dated 11 May 1882 and translated into Thai, is found in the Thai archives. The letter, in which Tự Đức expresses his gratitude for the letter and gifts from Chulalongkorn and wishes the continuation of amicable relations between the two countries, was also sent through the hands of the French authorities and arrived in Bangkok in early June 1882.⁹⁵

⁹⁰大南國皇帝 Đại Nam quốc hoàng đế.

⁹¹大越南國皇帝 Đại Việt Nam quốc hoàng đế (NA.R.V. NK.13).

⁹²識德訛嘲中訛摩訶哪坤熾啞憂且加 Sám đức sá trào trung sá ma kha ná khôn xí á kiết thả gia (NA.R.V. NK.13).

⁹³Minh Mạng claimed when he changed the name of the country to Đại Nam quốc that the country had once been named as Đại Việt Nam quốc. See Takeda (1975: 494) and *DNTL* II, vol.190, 1a–2b.

⁹⁴It is strange to find that while the term Đại Việt Nam quốc (hoàng đế) was consistently placed at the beginning of the line in an elevated form, the term to designate the Siamese monarch (Sám đức sá trào trung sá ma kha ná khôn xí á kiết thả gia) was not always placed at the beginning of the sentence with the same level of elevation as the Vietnamese counterpart, which remains an open question for future inquiry. It seems that Siam was showing excessive respect to the Vietnamese monarchy.

⁹⁵Chaophraya Phanuwong to Chulalongkorn, the 1st day of the waning moon of the 7th month (2 June 1882) (Ro. thi 289, NA.R.V. NK.17); Ong Le Bo to Chaophraya Phrakhlang, the 9th day of waning moon of the 6th month, C.S.1244 (11 May 1882) (Ro.thi 290, NA.R.V. NK.17). A royal

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In early March 1882, when the Siamese court sent the royal letter and gifts to the Vietnamese court via French diplomatic channels, Le Myre de Vilers, the Governor of French Cochinchina, reported to Admiral Jaureguiberry their success in both obliging Siam to comply with the French diplomatic policies toward Vietnam and suppressing the desire for independence of the Court of Huế.⁹⁶ From the perspective of the French colonial authorities, it is possible to evaluate this outcome as a success. However, seen from the Siamese perspective, the situation appears more complex and ambiguous. On the one hand, if we recall Chulalongkorn's remarks in his letter to Gréhan in August 1880 cited above, in which he recognised the advancement of the French into Tonkin and, at the same time, expressed his confidence that France was no threat to Siam, the decision to send the return gifts and letter to the Vietnamese court through the French colonial authorities might be interpreted as a tactical decision to follow the winning side, rather than giving into the French threat.⁹⁷ On the other hand, the two years of negotiations between Siamese, Vietnamese, and French authorities seen in the Siamese records may also lead one to understand that Siam and Vietnam were persistently seeking to maintain their 'traditional' friendly relations. Siam, having stopped the dispatch of a return mission to the Vietnamese court after the advice of the French authorities, changed its attitude once a reminder from Vietnam was received. It also managed to at least send the return gifts and royal letter to the Vietnamese court by devising a compromise method of dispatching them through the hands of the French colonial authorities, which the French also accepted. Given that failing to respond to a royal mission of letters and gifts properly would express a hostile attitude within the existing protocol for inter-state relations, it was also important for Siam to complete the reciprocal circle of exchange with Vietnam without saying no to either side. On the other hand, the Vietnamese chronicle's record of this event notes that Siam, due to the intervention of the French military commander, sent the return gifts by hiring a French boat *Antilope* to express gratitude (*DNTL* IV, vol.67, 6b-7a). Occasional contacts between Siam and Vietnam were still observed after this, suggesting that their relations were actually not broken off.⁹⁸

One may also wonder to what extent the exchanges of embassies and letters were of actual political significance in the face of colonial power. Though the

letter from *dainamkok hongte* (the Emperor of Dai Nam country), the 9th day of the waning moon of the 6th month, C.S.1244 (11 May 1882) (Ro.thi 466, NA.R.V. NK.18).

⁹⁶As quoted in Pensri (Suvanij) Duke (1962: 114–116).

⁹⁷It should also be noted that as late as January 1888, Chaophaya Phanuwong in his conversation with Mr. Gould, the British Charge d'Affaires, expressed his view that he regarded the question of China to be more serious than that of France. Memorandum of conversation between Mr. Gould and Chao Phya Bhanuwongse, 31 January 1888 (FO 69/122).

⁹⁸See for instance, thi 250, Ong Le Po to Phrakhlhang, the 2nd day of the waxing moon in the 6th month, the 35th Year of the Tỵ Đức's reign (16 July 1882) (NA.R.V. RL-PS.5).

question of political meaning and effectiveness cannot be answered by examination of this single case alone, at least in the eyes of the contemporary Siamese elite, maintaining relations with Vietnam was important to keep Siam's interstate relations open to as many options as possible. One example helpful for illuminating the exchange was Siam's reaction to a request for military support from the French colonial authorities. In June 1883, Jules Harmand, the former French consul in Bangkok who was recently appointed to the position of civil commissioner general of the Republic for Tonkin (Aurousseau 1922), secretly inquired of Chulalongkorn about the possibility of dispatching Siamese troops to Tonkin to help France with its war against China. According to Harmand, if the name of Siam should appear in the ceasefire treaty on the winner's side, Siam could claim itself to be fully independent, no longer a tributary of China. However, Chulalongkorn pointed out to Harmand that if China sent troops to Tonkin to fight against France, Vietnam might take advantage of the conflict between China and France for its own interest, and that Siam would also gain greatly by assisting Vietnam.⁹⁹ After the meeting, when Chulalongkorn consulted with twelve members of the royal family and five high-ranking officials including Phrakhlung about how to deal with Harmand's request, none agreed with the idea of supporting the French action. One major reason why Siam declined to collaborate with France was that Siam considered such an action to be against the customary practice of amicable relations with Vietnam, which had just been restored after half a century of interruption (Koizumi 2011).

Another important issue raised in the direct negotiations between Siam and Vietnam was how to maintain the equal footing of each monarchy within multi-layered regional and inter-regional contexts. The issue was raised concerning the ceremonial protocol for receiving royal missions and letters as well as the language and terminology used in the royal letters. As for ceremonial affairs, both perceived Western practices as the standard to guarantee equality. Regarding the terminology used in royal letters, the question was more complex for Siam because communication in Sino-Vietnamese script potentially lowered the status of Chulalongkorn. The implications of this would not remain between the two countries; they would necessarily extend to Siam's relationship with China and even with European powers. Having already been aware of the issue of hierarchical terminologies in Chinese and the problem of translation between Chinese and Thai through their experiences with the Chinese court and officials (Masuda 1995), Siam, facing China's repeated requests for tribute, intended to use the exchanges with the Vietnamese court as a means to express that existing friendly exchanges, including those with China, had been on terms of equality.

⁹⁹Ro.thi 645, the 13th day of the waxing moon in the 7th month, C.S.1245 (18 June 1883) (NA.R.V. NK.26). See also Koizumi (2011: 70–71).

Towards this goal, Siam seems to have manipulated the translation of royal letters to exploit Thai/Vietnamese/Chinese expressions for king and emperor in a flexible and 'strategic' manner. Understanding the danger that the contents of their communication with the Vietnamese court might be revealed through any channel at any time, even in the distant future, it seems that Siam consciously avoided using the term 'king' (vương) to designate its own monarch so that it would not give China an excuse to claim Siam as a tributary state. Considering that the issue of king vs. emperor mattered in Siam's treaty negotiations with China up until the 1920s, and that other Asian states where Chinese characters were in use, such as Korea and Japan, also faced similar questions (Chang 2007; Morita 2004: 41; Schmid 2002: 72–78), this opens up a broad range of issues concerning translation, including manipulation, appropriation, contestation, and compromise over different world views and conceptions of sovereignty framed in multi-layered regional inter-state relations in mainland Southeast Asia and beyond in the late nineteenth century.

This article has tried to demonstrate how Siam sought to maintain and manipulate 'traditional' inter-state relations in the face of treaty arrangements that France enforced upon Vietnam. The above case suggests that in order to understand modern diplomatic relations of Siam, we need to pay more attention to both historical and broader regional contexts within Asia and go beyond Western/colonial/modernisation assumptions and bilateral perspectives.

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Abbreviations for archival materials cited

- FO 69: The National Archives, Great Britain. Foreign Office, political and other departments, general correspondence before 1906, Siam.
- NA. KT(L): The National Archives of Thailand. *Ekkasan yep lem krasuang kantangprathet.*

- NA. R.V. KT(L): The National Archives of Thailand. The Fifth Reign Documents. *Ekkasan yep lem krasuang kantangprathet*.
- NA. R.V. NK.: The National Archives of Thailand. The Fifth Reign Documents. *Ekkasan ratchakan thi 5, nangsue krap bangkhom thun*.
- NA. R.V. RL-PS.: The National Archives of Thailand. The Fifth Reign Documents. *Ekkasan ratchakan thi 5, Krom Ratchalekhathikan, Ekkasan yep lem Saraban samut phiset*.
- NA. SB.16: The National Archives of Thailand. *Ekkasan suan bukkhon*, 16 (Prince Dewavongse Documents).
- NL. CMH.R.: The National Library of Thailand. The administrative documents. *Chotmai het ratchakan*.

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