

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Foreign Relations in the Last Years of Nguyen Rule, 1738-1776.**

The last thirty years of Nguyen rule under its two rulers, Nguyen Phuc Khoat (1738-1765) and Nguyen Phuc Tuan (1765-1776) saw many changes taking place within the Nguyen territories. Chief among these changes was Nguyen Phuc Khoat's unilateral proclamation as King over southern Vietnam. Another change was the decline of international trade in the Indochina Peninsula, on which the Nguyen had strongly depended on and which had been vital to its survival. This chapter will investigate how these changes had a bearing over the Nguyen's foreign relations, especially when it was facing challenges from an increasingly powerful Siam over Cambodia.

#### **The Nguyen's Change of Status, 1744**

When Nguyen Phuc Tru passed away in 1738, he was succeeded by his eldest son Nguyen Phuc Khoat (r. 1738-1765). The southern Vietnam that he inherited was perhaps at the height of its territorial expansion. Both Nguyen Phuc Chu and Nguyen Phuc Tru's campaigns against the Cambodians and the Siamese had extended Nguyen control beyond the region south of Phu Yen to dominate much of the Lower Mekong. Achievements in territorial expansion and the growing power of the Nguyen prompted Nguyen Phuc Khoat to address the question of disparity of status between the Nguyen and the Trinh.

It was in this light that the most significant event during Nguyen Phuc Khoat's reign took place – his unilateral proclamation as a *Vuong* (king)<sup>1</sup> and the subsequent transformation of his government's structure to suit his new status. This event that took place on 4 June 1744 was the culmination of the aspiration of successive Nguyen rulers since the day Nguyen Phuc Nguyen defied the Le-Trinh Court in 1627. It was also a fulfilment of Nguyen Phuc Chu's wish to attain the same rank as the Trinh family, when he attempted to seek admission to the Chinese tributary system in 1702.<sup>2</sup>

The *Tien Bien* provides a brief description of Nguyen Phuc Khoat's unilateral proclamation as *Vuong* (king). Apparently, the initiatives came from Nguyen Phuc Khoat's officials, especially Nguyen Dang Thanh,<sup>3</sup> who implored Nguyen Phuc Khoat to proclaim himself as *Vuong*. After refusing to do so three times, Nguyen Phuc Khoat finally relented and accepted the proposition.<sup>4</sup>

Following this 1744 proclamation, Nguyen Phuc Khoat, who now styled himself as *Vo Vuong* [King Vo], began a series of programmes aimed at elevating the state apparatus to be in line with his new status. First on the list was the transformation of his court from a provincial governorship to that of a royal household. This involved two stages. The first was the adoption of new royal

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<sup>1</sup> The Vietnamese term of *Vuong* refers to the status of King or Prince. The paramount ruler however, was known as *Vua* or Emperor.

<sup>2</sup> See earlier discussion on Nguyen Phuc Chu's attempt to gain admission to the tributary system in Chapter Five. See also *Tien Bien*, Vol. 7: 20 & *PBTL*, Vol. 5: 27-29.

<sup>3</sup> Nguyen Dang Thanh was a scion of a mandarin family that originated from Nghe An. Among his ancestors was Trinh Cam Thi, who was once secretary of the Ministry of War under the Le. The family moved to Thuan Hoa after the Mac usurpation in 1529. The family's name was changed to Nguyen after Dang Thanh's brother, Dang Di, entered the service of Nguyen Phuc Chu. Nguyen Dang Thanh was known to be talented and entered Nguyen Phuc Chu's service. He held the rank of a *Van Chih* and commissioner of prisons, before being made a tutor for Nguyen Phuc Khoat as before being appointed the *Cai Pha* of Quang Nam. Dang Thanh passed away in 1755. See *Dai Nam Liet Truyen Tien Bien* (hereafter *Liet Truyen Tien Bien*), Vol. 5: 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 5-6.

titles for his immediate and extended families. Titles of queen, royal concubines, princes and princesses were introduced, along with the honorific title of Ton That (Respected Member of the Royal Family) and Ton Nu (for females).<sup>5</sup> This was followed by the re-designation of the official residence and court as palaces (Cong Dien).<sup>6</sup> Prior to 1738, the residence of all Nguyen rulers were referred to as Chinh Dinh or Chinh Pho, which meant main encampment and official residence respectively. Extensive building plans aimed at either renovating existing buildings or the construction of new palaces were being carried out. Pierre Poivre, the French merchant who had visited Hoi An and Phu Xuan in 1749 to 1750, recalled seeing three palaces in Hue.<sup>7</sup> The process of renovating the palaces went on until 1756.<sup>8</sup> Nguyen Phuc Khoat even issued a decree, granting amnesty to prisoners.<sup>9</sup>

Nguyen Phuc Khoat also introduced a change of costumes for his court by changing his own apparel and those of the members of the Court with attire reserved for royalty.<sup>10</sup> The new royal court adopted Ming Chinese costumes, discarding the existing costumes that resembled the costume of northern Vietnam. This change in costume was in a way, a manifestation of the Nguyen's sense of independence from the practices of the Le Court. The change was significant enough to prompt the Trinh, when it managed to defeat the Nguyen in 1776, to

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<sup>5</sup> Even though the compilers of *Tien Bien* use these titles all the time, i.e. for those before Phuc Khoat, they were posthumously given and does not reflect the actual contemporary use of titles in the Nguyen Court. The use of royal titles only began with Nguyen Phuc Khoat in 1744. See *PBTL*, Vol. 1: 36.

<sup>6</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 7 & *PBTL*, Vol. 1: 36.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Poivre, "Descriptions de la Cochinchine", p. 98.

<sup>8</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 7.

<sup>10</sup> See also L. Cadiere, "Le Changement de Costume sous Vo Vuong, Ou Une Crise Religieuse a Hue au XVIII Siecle", *BAVH*, 1915, No. 4, pp. 417-424.

issue a decree to reverse the costume of the people back to those modelled after the northerners.<sup>11</sup> These changes were noticed by Father Jean Koffler, a Jesuit who was living in southern Vietnam at that time. According to Koffler, in order to make the changes effective, Nguyen Phuc Khoat had actually promulgated a new law that helped to enforce the change in costume throughout the Nguyen domain.<sup>12</sup> Koffler also said that, “the change of costume by Nguyen Phuc Khoat was meant to reintroduce the old customs of China before the Manchu invasion”.<sup>13</sup>

This was followed by the changes of the administrative apparatus from what was essentially a provincial governorship to the elaborate six boards (ministries) modelled after the Le Court.<sup>14</sup> For this, Nguyen Phuc Khoat first elevated the status of the Secretariat (Van Thuc) to that of Han Lam Vien (Han Lin Academy). The six Boards were set up by transforming the office of Ky Luc (Judges) to Lai Bo (Board of Personnel), the Nha Ve (Governor of the Magistrate) to Le Bo (Board of Rites), Do Tri (provincial magistrates) to Hinh Bo (Board of Justice), the Cai Ba (Magistrate-Administrator) and Assistant Treasury to be Ho Bo (Board of Revenue). Two separate boards of Cong (Board of Works) and Binh (Board of War) were newly creation.<sup>15</sup> The changes were significant as it symbolised the Nguyen having attained the status of royalty, to be served upon by a correspondingly elaborate bureaucracy.

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<sup>11</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 6-12. See also *PBTL*, Vol. 1: 43.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Koffler, “Descriptions de la Cochinchine”, *Revue Indochinoise*, 1911, p. 597.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>14</sup> Dang Phuong Nghi, *Les Institutions Publiques du Viet-Nam au XVIIIe Siecle*, p. 29; see also John K. Whitmore, “The Development of the Le Government in Fifteenth Century Vietnam”, Ph. D. Thesis, Cornell University, 1968, Chapter 4 -6.

<sup>15</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 11.



While the six boards closely resembled the system practiced by both the Ming and Qing governments in China, there was no separate agency being set up to deal with foreigners as in the case of the Li Fan Yuan (Office of Barbarian Affairs) in China.<sup>16</sup> If it was the practice in China to place the administration of tributary relations under the charge of the Board of Rites, there is no evidence suggesting a similar set up in Nguyen Phuc Khoat's administration. Generally, Nguyen sources are silent on this matter. It is likely that the administration of the uplanders were entrusted to the respective regional commanders or governors. It also suggests that despite this upgrading exercise in the Nguyen administrative apparatus in 1744, many of the decisions regarding the uplanders and foreign relations remained in the hands of the respective Nguyen rulers who delegated the tasks to the provincial governors.

In many ways, the process of elevating the status of the administrative apparatus was carried out merely to suit the changing status of Nguyen Phuc Khoat. It was a change that was not sustained by actual meaningful reform in the recruitment of suitable candidates to take on the demanding task of managing the now much expanded administration with various departments. Lack of suitable personnel to lead these various boards proved a burden rather than a boon to the Nguyen administration. During the first phase of this transformation for instance, Nguyen Phuc Khoat had to place the two Boards of Rites and Personnel under the charge of Nguyen Dang Thanh,<sup>17</sup> the man who was instrumental in urging

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<sup>16</sup> See Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985, p. 86.

<sup>17</sup> See *Liet Truyen Tien Bien*, Vol. 5: 4.

Nguyen Phuc Khoat to elevate his status to that of a Vuong, while the two Boards of Revenue and of War were entrusted to Le Quang Thai.<sup>18</sup>

Symbolically, the proclamation of 1744 was a triumph for the Nguyen family. The move finally helped the Nguyen to attain the rank of Vuong that had thus far, been illusive to them. The rank also made them equal to their rival, the Trinh. However, in the long run, the change was a disaster in the making. The upgrading of the family and the bureaucracy saw a more elaborate administrative structure being put in the place of the much more rudimentary old structure. But at the same time, the newly installed structure was still being staffed by the same people who were only qualified to run the old provincial administrative system. With the introduction of these administrative changes, lesser men were given new ranks and high positions that they were not able to handle. Le Quy Don highlighted this problem when he made comments on the system of taking suitable candidates for the Nguyen service where the requirement was reduced to rudimentary levels. According to him, the Nguyen service only placed emphasis on the Chinese language.<sup>19</sup> This was obviously insufficient in so far as the need to fill the positions in an upgraded administrative apparatus introduced by Nguyen Phuc Khoat.

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<sup>18</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 12. Le Quang Thai was a native of Phu Vinh in Thua Thien district, Thuan Hoa. He came from a family of mandarins. He was first an official at Binh Thuan before Nguyen Phuc Tru appointed him as the magistrate (Cai Ba) of Quang Nam, a post he held for 13 years. He was appointed to be the secretary for the Ministry of War and Ministry of Revenue in 1744 and died the following year. See *Liet Truyen Tien Bien*, Vol. 5: 33.

<sup>19</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 5: 1-2.

## Later Relations with the Chinese, 1744-1765

Nguyen Phuc Khoat's change of status in 1744 was not supported wholly by his own circle of officials. There were cases where members of the administration were less enthusiastic about the change. Nguyen Quang Tien, who was given the task of leading the Han Lam Academy and whom Le Quy Don considered one of the few talented people in the Nguyen Southern Vietnam, was not pleased with Nguyen Phuc Khoat's decision.<sup>20</sup> Nguyen Quang Tien showed his displeasure with the change through an episode where he refused to use the new title adopted by Nguyen Phuc Khoat when writing to China.

In 1756, Quang Tien, the person responsible in drafting Nguyen Phuc Khoat's foreign correspondence, refused to follow Nguyen Phuc Khoat's order in using the title of the King of Annam (An Nam Quoc Vuong) when writing to the authorities in China.<sup>21</sup> The letter was related to the repatriation of a Chinese, Li Wenguang (Ly Van Quang), who rebelled against the Nguyen and was arrested in Tran Bien in 1747. Nguyen Quang Tien reminded Nguyen Phuc Khoat that since the Le Emperor was still enthroned in Thang Long, it was inappropriate for Nguyen Phuc Khoat to use the title. However, Nguyen Quang Tien's case was unique, and no other similar cases were mentioned. Prior to this, no Nguyen ruler had ever used the title in official correspondence though Nguyen Phuc Chu had styled himself as Dai Viet Quoc Nguyen Chua (Lord of Dai Viet).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Nguyen Quang Tien was a native of Thua Tien, in Quang Dien (Thuan Hoa). Known as a talented man, Quang Tien entered the Nguyen service during Nguyen Phuc Chu's reign. He was responsible for drafting the letter to seek admission to the Chinese tribute system in 1702. See *Liet Truyen Tien Bien*, Vol. 5: 31-32 & *PBTL*, Vol. 5: 11.

<sup>21</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 5: 11 & *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 29.

<sup>22</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 8: 7. The title was inscribed on a seal cast in 1709. Nguyen Phuc Chu also had the same title inscribed on a stele in the Thien Mu temple in 1714.

When Nguyen Phuc Khoat (r. 1738-1765) unilaterally declared himself as Vuong, he did not repeat Nguyen Phuc Chu's attempt to obtain recognition from China in 1702. Though there is no explanation offered regarding this decision, it is likely that he had probably felt that the Chinese authority would once again refuse to grant such recognition.

Between 1744 and the end of Nguyen rule in 1776, the Nguyen's relations with China was confined to the repatriation of criminals and those shipwrecked. In 1747, some Chinese from Fujian including one Li Wenguang, were causing trouble at Gia Dinh, in the Mekong Delta.<sup>23</sup> According to the *Tien Bien*, Li was a trader whom the *Tien Bien* says had turned to banditry. He styled himself as the King of Dong Phu in Gia Dinh, and led a force of about 300 men to attack the garrison at Tran Bien.<sup>24</sup> The French East India Company envoy to the Nguyen in 1749-1750, Pierre Poivre, who was critical of the Chinese presence in southern Vietnam, considered Li Wenguang's venture as a threat that could throw the Nguyen kingdom into political turmoil and instability.<sup>25</sup> Poivre's view was an overestimation as Li Wenguang was defeated and was repatriated to China with 57 other Chinese prisoners. Along with the prisoners, Nguyen Phuc Khoat also sent gifts, which included, eaglewood (5 catties), shark fins (30 catties), sea cucumber (30 catties), black pepper (30 catties), bamboo (20 sticks) and flowery rattan (20 sticks).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See *Qing Shi Gao Jiao Zhu*, Vol. 534: *Lie Zhuan*, Vol. 314, p. 12096.

<sup>24</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 13-14; see also *Gia Dinh Thanh Thong Chi*, Vol. 2: 8-9.

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Poivre, "Description de la Cochinchine (1749-1759)", *Revue d'Extreme-Orient*, T. III, 1887, p. 107.

<sup>26</sup> *PBTL*, Vol 5: 30.

Chinese sources of that period however, provided a slightly different version. According to the *Qing Shi*, “In 1754, Li Wenguang who was a native of Guangdong was in league with the local chieftain, Nguyen, in creating trouble at Dong Nai and other places. Li was arrested by the local military forces and was kept in prison.”<sup>27</sup> In 1757, Li was sent back to Fujian with 16 others.<sup>28</sup> The date is different from the date provided by the *Tien Bien*, that is 1747. The *Qing Shi* cited Guangdong as the place of origin for Li Wenguang, whereas the *Tien Bien* mentioned Fujian.<sup>29</sup> Despite the differences in the details of the records, it was clear that the Nguyen were doing their best to accommodate Chinese authorities.

In his dealings with China, Nguyen Phuc Khoat adopted a similar practice as Nguyen Phuc Chu in using a lower rank when referring to his position, as normally done by the Le emperors when submitting to the Chinese in the tributary arrangement. In fact, Nguyen Phuc Khoat even adopted a much lower rank of Ty Mu, or rather, provincial commissioner of Thuan Hoa-Quang Nam and all places in Annam to demonstrate his subservient to the Chinese ruler.<sup>30</sup>

On the part of the Chinese however, the Nguyen gestures meant little. In fact, in many instances, the Chinese seemed confused with the actual situation in Vietnam, especially with the two Vietnamese entities of the Trinh and the Nguyen. Even though the Chinese did not officially recognise the Nguyen as a

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<sup>27</sup> *Qing Shi Gao Jiao Zhu*, Vol. 534: *Lie Zhuan*, Vol. 314, p. 12096.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> See *Qing Shi Gao Jiao Zhu*, Vol. 534: *Lie Zhuan*, Vol. 314, p. 12096. See also *Qing Chao Wen Xian Tong Kao*, Vol. 296, as cited in Yang Baoyun, *Contribution a l'Histoire de la Principaute des Nguyen*, p. 160. See also *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 13-14.

<sup>30</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 5: 30.

separate sovereign kingdom, they nevertheless had a name for Nguyen Southern Vietnam, namely, Guangnan Guo (Kingdom of Quang Nam).

The Chinese Court's confusion over the actual status of the Nguyen rule in southern Vietnam is also reflected in another incident that was reported in the *Bang Giao Luc* (Record of Foreign Relations). In 1718, the governor of the two Guangs confiscated two boats from Thuan Hoa, carrying twenty six persons. During the process of repatriation, the Governor sent the crews to the Le Court instead. The letter was also addressed to the Le Emperor.<sup>31</sup> This transaction suggests that the Chinese probably did not know that the Nguyen were no longer represented at the Le Court, and that Thuan Hoa was by then, a separate entity. It also shows that the Chinese recognised the Le instead of the Nguyen.

The Nguyen's relations with the Chinese during the reign of the last three rulers were rather similar to that experienced by the preceding Nguyen. Relations at the official level were negligible. From the Nguyen sources for instance, any level of contact with China would warrant a mention. Even trivial matters such as the 1754 repatriation of a ship crew from Qing Zhou in China also received a mention in the *Tien Bien*. That year, the Chinese authority at Qing Zhou sent back a group of people from Quang Ngai who were gathering more produce at the Hoang Sa Archipelago (the Paracel Islands), but had drifted into Chinese territory. Those who were repatriated were from the village of An Vinh in the Binh Som

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<sup>31</sup> *Bang Giao Luc*, Vol. 1, as cited in Yang Baoyun, *Contribution a l'Histoire de la Principaute des Nguyen* p. 161.

district.<sup>32</sup> The exploration of the Paracels was their designated labour tribute to the Nguyen.

On the Chinese side, the initiatives of the individual Nguyen rulers did not much change their attitude toward Nguyen Southern Vietnam. It is obvious that the vague Chinese perception of Nguyen rule over southern Vietnam remained unaltered in this case as they would only recognise the Le Court at Thang Long. The Nguyen gained few tangible results from their transactions with the Qing Government. In fact, most of their initiatives were not reciprocated by the Qing Court. This however, did not discourage the Nguyen family to let up in their attempts to win favour with the Chinese government as they continued to look to the Chinese court for recognition and legitimisation of Nguyen rule in southern Vietnam.

From the discussion above, it is apparent that despite the claims in the Nguyen sources regarding their dealings with the Chinese Court, their real contacts were with local authorities in southern China their objective of attaining the status of a tributary state unfulfilled.

### **Managing Asian Trade**

International trade remained the most tangible activity that took place between the Nguyen with foreigners. When Nguyen Phuc Tru took over as the new ruler in 1725, he continued to promote trade like Nguyen Phuc Chu. However, Nguyen Phuc Tru had to cope with a gradual decline in the trading patterns that was taking place in Southeast Asia after the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

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<sup>32</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 24.

In 1715, the Tokugawa Shogunate introduced a new regulation known as the ‘Shotoku Sinrei’ (New Regulations of Shotoku) that restricted the number of foreign junks coming to trade in Japan to a much smaller number. Only 30 Chinese junks, which were the mainstay of the Japan-Southeast Asian trade, were allowed to trade in Hirado after 1715. This was a far cry from the 131 junks that arrived in Japan in 1688.<sup>33</sup> The tonnage of cargo permitted also declined to a mere 6,000 kan (catties), which fell far short of the height of 18,994 kan in 1688.<sup>34</sup> The impact of this restriction upon the trade in Quang Nam was positive. Instead of suffering from a lack of shipping activities, Nguyen Southern Vietnam was full of life. Barred from entering Japan in large numbers, the Chinese junks had to seek an alternative venue to trade. This, they found in the ports of Nguyen Southern Vietnam. However, in his book, Thanh The Vy suggests that foreign merchants, including the Chinese in the 1700s valued the Vietnamese market less than others such as Guangdong because of its weaker markets. Thus, even though Chinese junks continued to call at Nguyen ports, they were mainly interested in obtaining some commodities rather than selling their wares.<sup>35</sup>

Two years after Nguyen Phuc Tru took over the government the Chinese Emperor Kangxi decided to rescind his decade old decree and allowed private trade to Southeast Asia in 1727. The ban was initially imposed out of alarm that Chinese rice and junks were being sold abroad.<sup>36</sup> After the ban was lifted, Chinese

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<sup>33</sup> Iwao Seiichi, *Kinsei Nitshi-Boeki ni Kansuru Suryoteki Kenkyu, Shigaku-zatshi*, Vol. 62, No. 11, p. 19, as cited in Chen Chingho, *Historical Notes on Hoi-An (Faifo)*, p. 26.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Thanh The Vy, *Ngoai Thuong Viet Nam Hoi the ky XVII, XVIII va dau XIX*, Hanoi: Su Hoc, 1961, pp. 200-202 as cited in Li Tana, *Nguyen Cochinchina*, p. 157.

<sup>36</sup> Anthony Reid, “The Unthreatening Alternative: Chinese Shipping in Southeast Asia, 1567-1842”, *RIMA*, Vol. 27, No. 1-2, 1993, p. 23.



trading junks returned to Southeast Asia in great numbers and reached a height of 110 junks in 1740. In relation to this boom, Nguyen Southern Vietnam's share of the junk trade was the highest in the region. Hoi An was reported to have received between fifty to seventy junks a year.<sup>37</sup> This was a great leap from the years when the ban was in force. Previously, only nine ships came to Nguyen Southern Vietnam during a period of 14 years from 1711 to 1724.<sup>38</sup> Father Jean Koffler, the only Jesuit who was allowed to stay on in Nguyen Phuc Khoat's court between 1750 and 1752, mentioned how each year, more than 80 Chinese junks from different provinces in China, came to the ports of Nguyen Southern Vietnam, and this had ensured a period of flourishing trade.<sup>39</sup>

The large number of Chinese junks coming to Nguyen Southern Vietnam had a strong impact on Hoi An's status as a trading port, especially with the large volume of goods made available to traders there. The active shipping schedule also allowed the Nguyen administration to obtain a huge revenue from the duties paid.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Chen Chingho, *Historical Notes on Hoi-An (Faifo)*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Centre for Vietnamese Studies, 1974, p. 26 & Li Tana, *Nguyen Cochinchina*, p. 68.

<sup>38</sup> Anthony Reid, "Unthreatening Alternative", p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Jean Koffler, "Description Historique de la Cochinchine", *Revue Indochinoise*, 1911, p. 585.

<sup>40</sup> See various rates in *PBTL*, Vol. 4: 35.

**Table 10 : Custom Charges at the Port of Hoi An**

<b>Port of Origins</b>	<b>Entry Duty (Paid in Quan)</b>	<b>Exit Duty (Paid in Quan)</b>
Shanghai (Zhejiang)	3,000	300
Guangdong	3,000	300
Fujian	2,000	200
Hainan	500	50
Tay Duong (Europe)	8,000	800
Macao	4,000	400
Japan/Siam	2,000	200
Luzon	2,000	200

Source: *Phu Bien Tap Luc*, Vol. 4: 35.

**Table 11: Custom Charges at Southern Vietnamese Ports other than Hoi An**

<b>Port of Entry (Non-Hoi An)</b>	<b>Entry Duty (Paid in Quan)</b>	<b>Exit Duty (Paid in Quan)</b>
Old Port (Thuan Hoa)	500	50
Ha Tien	300	30
Son Do	300	30

Source: *Phu Bien Tap Luc*, Vol. 4: 35.

Like his predecessors before him, Nguyen Phuc Khoat welcomed the Chinese traders to southern Vietnam. He saw them as an integral part of his trading activities. Due to this accommodating policy, the Chinese were able to dominate trading activities in southern Vietnam. According to Pierre Poivre, who held a prejudicial view of the Chinese, the latter's dominance of the trade in southern Vietnam earned them the hatred of the Vietnamese. Apart from what he described as their natural bent for business, Pierre Poivre attributed the Chinese'

dominance of the southern Vietnam trade to the “ignorance of the Cochinchinese, who are primitive and unable to reap the benefits which exist in their country”.<sup>41</sup> Poivre however also noted that despite the hatred which is felt for them, their numbers are growing considerably.<sup>42</sup> Between 1744 and 1750, there were about 10,000 Chinese merchants living in Hoi An.<sup>43</sup>

Apart from that, personal business activities and monopolies held by Nguyen Phuc Khoat and his predecessors had also contributed to the Chinese dominating Nguyen trade. With Nguyen Phuc Khoat himself fully engaged in business, few Vietnamese dared or were able to compete with him. This was due to Nguyen Phuc Khoat’s virtual monopoly over majority of the trade that had resulted in the emergence of what Poivre described as his subjects’ “primitive” ability to engage in trade. It was the Chinese who carried out the trade monopoly on behalf of Nguyen Phuc Khoat. His desire to earn more for his coffers had been noticed by both Poivre and his own subjects. It was from the latter that Le Quy Don was provided with a description of Nguyen Phuc Khoat’s practice in enriching himself. Le Quy Don was highly critical of Nguyen Phuc Khoat’s behaviour in placing too much emphasis on earning money to the extent of allowing the selling official positions and titles.<sup>44</sup> Hence Nguyen Phuc Khoat was most accommodating to western merchants as they were the ones paying the highest rates in harbour duties. It is important to note that all the Nguyen rulers,

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<sup>41</sup> Poivre, “Description de la Cochinchine”, p. 107.

<sup>42</sup> Chen Chingho, “On the Rules and Regulations of the Duong-Thuong Hoi Quan at Faifo (Hoi-An), Central Vietnam, *Southeast Asian Archives*, Vol. 2, July 1969, p. 159.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 1: 39.

beginning from Nguyen Phuc Nguyen (1613-1635), were engaged in private trade.

Given an almost a free hand in conducting trade in southern Vietnam, the Chinese were able to bring in the type of goods that were in demand by the southern Vietnamese. When the Chinese junks arrived in southern Vietnam in January or February, they brought with them tutenag,<sup>45</sup> brass, red copper, tin, paper, tea, damasks, lead and white and blue porcelain.<sup>46</sup> These goods were a little different from those traded by the Chinese in earlier period. Cheng Chingho's list on earlier trading activities at Hoi An also included books, silk and clothing.<sup>47</sup> The absence of these goods from China in the later lists was probably due to the changing tastes of the southern Vietnamese and the level of profits that could be obtained from trading in these goods. In relation to this, Poivre noticed the ability of the Chinese to discern such changing taste of the southern Vietnamese, and hence, they were able to bring in goods to meet their demands.<sup>48</sup> However, compared to the goods brought in by the Chinese during the days of Nguyen Phuc Nguyen (1613-1640) and those available during Nguyen Phuc Khoat's reign, Pierre Poivre, who was a novice priest in 1730s, noticed that the later goods (1749-50) were of poorer quality than those he had seen during his earlier visit to southern Vietnam as a novice priest.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> This metal had such a profound effect on the fate of the Nguyen rule that Li Tana even devoted a section to its study. See Li Tana, *Nguyen Cochinchina*, pp. 180-182.

<sup>46</sup> Poivre, "Description de la Cochinchine", pp. 107-108.

<sup>47</sup> Chen Chingho, *Historical Notes on Hoi An (Faifo)*, p. 9

<sup>48</sup> Poivre, "Description de la Cochinchine", p. 107.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107-108.

When the Chinese traders left Nguyen Southern Vietnam for other ports of Southeast Asia or Japan in September, they normally carried with them, gold, raw silk, eaglewood, raw ivory, white and brown sugar, pepper, areca and some timber for furniture. Out of these, gold and eaglewood were most readily sought after by the Chinese traders during Nguyen Phuc Khoat's time.

The process of extracting and minting gold into ingots in Quang Nam was carried out by specially appointed officers. These officers would lead teams of diggers and prospectors that at times, were made up of 40 villages, most of them found near the prefecture of Thanh Hoa in Quang Nam.<sup>50</sup>

Eaglewood was normally collected by the uplanders before selling them to Vietnamese traders. According to Le Quy Don, Chinese traders from Guangdong were especially keen in obtaining the various types of eaglewood.<sup>51</sup>

In their effort to find the goods that would bring them large profits, the Chinese had brought to Nguyen Southern Vietnam, a new metal called *tutenag* as an experimental trade item. The metal, called *bach tuyen*, literally means 'white lead', faced low demand in China. It became popular in southern Vietnam during the time of Nguyen Phuc Khoat. Nguyen Phuc Khoat used *tutenag* as substitute for the more costly copper coins. He also found that by engaging in the *tutenag* trade, he could gain huge profits from the sale of minted money. According to Pierre Poivre, Nguyen Phuc Khoat would purchase the *tutenag* from the Chinese

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<sup>50</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 4: 27.

<sup>51</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 6: 2; see also Pierre Poivre, "Description de la Cochinchine", p. 114.

at 14 quan per picul.<sup>52</sup> Out of a picul, Nguyen Phuc Khoat could get between 48 to 50 quan worth of coins. This represented a huge profit from the deal.<sup>53</sup>

At the time he was using the tutenag to make money, Nguyen Phuc Khoat was facing a serious monetary problem.<sup>54</sup> Earlier in 1725, Nguyen Phuc Tru had ordered the minting of extra copper coins to offset the loss of copper coins melted down for making bronze implements by his subjects.<sup>55</sup> The effort to mint copper coins however, was extremely costly. At the same time, the people continued with their habits of melting down the copper to make home utensils.<sup>56</sup> In order to overcome this shortage of money, Nguyen Phuc Khoat turned to tutenag.

According to the *Tien Bien*, it was a Chinese with the name of Huang who had suggested the idea of using tutenag for minting money to Nguyen Phuc Khoat.<sup>57</sup> Nguyen Phuc Khoat agreed to the idea and started new minting centres that minted coins based on the designs of the coins used during the Song Dynasty in China. He also decreed strict prohibition for private enterprises in minting money. The new money was called, Thein Minh Thong Bao (Common Currency of Thien Minh). They were poor in quality, and low in value.

The long term effect of the introduction of tutenag to the economy was devastating to Nguyen rule in southern Vietnam. Attracted by the low cost involved in minting this new money and the profit that could be derived from it, many of Nguyen Phuc Khoat's subjects took the opportunity to mint it and pass it

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<sup>52</sup> A Picul is equal to 100 catties, or 60 kilograms.

<sup>53</sup> Pierre Poivre, "Description de la Cochinchine", pp. 108-109.

<sup>54</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 13.

<sup>55</sup> Poivre mentioned that the southern Vietnamese favoured bronze-made home appliances. See Pierre Poivre, "Description de la Cochinchine", p. 115.

<sup>56</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 4: 23.

<sup>57</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 13 & *PBTL*, Vol. 4: 23.

off as money in the market. As a result of this, the market was basically flooded with *tutenag* currency. Because of that, the value of the *Nguyen quan* depreciated.<sup>58</sup> With the first three years of its introduction from 1745 to 1748, a total of 72,396,000 *quan* was introduced into the market.<sup>59</sup> With the introduction of this new money, copper coins were no longer legal tender. When the *Trinh* army entered the *Nguyen* capital in 1775, they found more than 300,000 strings of copper cash being stored in the treasury. These were the money collected from the market during the transformation from copper coins to *tutenag* coins.<sup>60</sup> An over supply of the new *tutenag* money resulted in a devaluation of the money and started a severe inflation in southern Vietnam. With the introduction of the poor quality and low value *tutenag* money, foreign traders were reluctant to accept them for business transactions. Instead, they preferred barter trade.<sup>61</sup>

Just as there were changes in their dealings with the changing patterns of Asian trade, the *Nguyen* also had to face some new challenges in trade with the West. By the time *Nguyen Phuc Khoat* took over, *Nguyen* Southern Vietnam's main European trading partners, the Portuguese had long retreated to the enclave of Macao. Having lost their prized port of Malacca in 1641. From Macao, they conducted a small trading network between Macao and Goa, using Hoi An as a stopping point for the exchange of goods. Even though trading activities between the Portuguese and *Nguyen* Southern Vietnam continued, it was carried out on a much smaller scale. To some extent, the continuation of Portuguese trading

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<sup>58</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 4: 23-24; see also Pierre Poivre, "Description de la Cochinchine", p. 109.

<sup>59</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 15-16.

<sup>60</sup> See *PBTL*, Vol. 4: 23.

<sup>61</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 4: 24.

activities in southern Vietnam was also a result of the continued presence of Jesuits in the Nguyen court. These Jesuits, many of whom were Portuguese, were able to influence the Nguyen Lords to offer favourable trading condition for the Portuguese. This however, changed during the 1740s and 1750s when new European powers began to arrive in Nguyen Southern Vietnam for trade. The French in particular, were keen to make an impact.

Being the latest of the major European state to enter into the trade foray in Southeast Asia through its Royal East India Company of France, French efforts in the establishment of trade relations with the Nguyen only started in 1740s.<sup>62</sup> Earlier, in 1721, the French were contemplating occupying the island of Pulo Condore at the mouth of the Mekong River, to be used as a trading post. The idea however, was abandoned as the French did not want to experience the same fate as the English venture on the same islands when the English factory was razed to the ground by a group of Makasarese working with the Vietnamese in 1705.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, it is important to remember that French missionaries of the Missions Etrangeres de Paris (Foreign Missionary Society of Paris) had been living in Nguyen Southern Vietnam since 1658.

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<sup>62</sup> Nguyen Thanh Nha, *Tableau Economiques du Viet Nam*, p. 215.

<sup>63</sup> See Nguyen Thanh Nha, *Tableau Economiques du Viet Nam*, p. 215. The French East India Company Frigate, Dande stopped at the islands in March 1721, and renamed the islands Orleans Islands, but nothing further came out of it. See L. Gaide, "Notes Historique sur Poulo-Condore", *BAVH*, No. 2, 1925, p. 92. A complete account of that French venture is found in the letter of Renault, who was the Manager of Port-Louis dated 25 July 1723, as incorporated in Henri Cordier (ed.), "Memoires Divers Sur La Cochinchine (1686-1748): Isle de Poulo Condore", *Revue de l'Extreme-Orient*, Vol. 2, 1883, pp. 306-324.



In 1749, Pierre Poivre,<sup>64</sup> a former novice priest in the French Foreign Mission, and later, a successful silk merchant from Lyon was sent by the French East India Company to Nguyen Southern Vietnam. Poivre was made the representative of the French King, Louis XV in France's effort to establish trade relations with the Nguyen. Poivre stayed in Nguyen Southern Vietnam briefly from 1749-1750, but sufficient to write a very influential report on the favourable conditions in the kingdom. He also left us with two separate accounts on the country.<sup>65</sup>

At the same time of his arrival in Nguyen Southern Vietnam, Pierre Poivre's mission was well received by Nguyen Phuc Khoat. The Nguyen rulers' good treatment of European traders and missionaries was probably due to two factors, namely, the influence of his father and secondly, the prospect of personal financial gain. Like his father, Nguyen Phuc Khoat had close contacts with the European missionaries who had served either as physicians or mathematicians at the court. His affection toward certain missionaries such as Father Siebert and Father Jean Koffler was evident after he became the ruler of southern Vietnam.

The French mission managed to obtain permission to trade in Nguyen Southern Vietnam. Other than that, Poivre was trying to negotiate for a site where the French could establish a factory. However, before anything concrete could be established, Nguyen Phuc Khoat had a sudden change of heart. He ordered the

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<sup>64</sup> For a biography of Pierre Poivre and his ventures, see Louis Malleret, *Pierre Poivre*, Paris: PEFEO, 1974.

<sup>65</sup> Pierre Poivre, "Description de la Cochinchine (1749-1750)", *Revue d'Extreme-Orient*, T. III, 1887, pp. 81-121 & "Journal d'Un Voyage a la Cochinchie (du 29 Aout 1749 au 11 Fev. 1750)", *Revue d'Extreme-Orient*, Vol. III, 1887, pp. 364-510.

French as well as all Europeans out of the kingdom. The sudden change in Nguyen Phuc Khoat's attitude had to do with the opposition to Pierre Poivre from a section of the mandarins in Nguyen Phuc Khoat's Court. The mandarins were uneasy with the presence of the French and their desires to set up a factory to trade, and particularly with the way Nguyen Phuc Khoat was treating the missionaries.

The nature of the opposition toward French business ventures in southern Vietnam however, was influenced by personal reasoning rather than by a general policy. Because of that, the effect was rather harsh on the European community in general. Robert Kirsop, the Englishman who was also living in Hoi An and Phu Xuan in 1750, recounted the events that had brought about the misadventure of Pierre Poivre's mission. He described Poivre's arrival at Hoi An, where he was well received. Pierre Poivre also delivered the King of France's letter to Nguyen Phuc Khoat as well as gifts, including two horses and looking glasses.. In return, Nguyen Phuc Khoat allowed the French to set up their business operations in his domains. He even endorsed the silver dollars (Spanish) brought by the French, and allowed their exchange with local currency. Even though the deal was very much to the disadvantage of the French who had to exchange the local tutenag money at very high price.<sup>66</sup>

According to Robert Kirsop, the French made a mistake by dealing directly with the King, and neglecting Ung Kay An, the most important mandarin in Court.<sup>67</sup> Based on Kirsop's information of this mandarin's power and

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<sup>66</sup> Robert Kirsop, "Some Account of Cochin China", *Oriental Repertory*, Vol. I, 1808, p. 243-244.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p. 242.

position, it was possible that the mandarin referred to as Ung Kay An, was actually Truong Phuc Loan.<sup>68</sup> Even though Pierre Poivre did pay a visit to Loan, he did not bring him gifts.<sup>69</sup> It was at this mandarin's instigation that the Europeans, including the missionaries were all banished.<sup>70</sup>

The strong opposition also took the form of secret intrigues from Pierre Poivre's interpreter, Michel Ruong, a Vietnamese Christian convert who had spent nine months at the French base in Pondichery.<sup>71</sup> Despite being a convert, Ruong sided with the anti-westerners in court. Angry with the opposition and Ruong's betrayal, Poivre packed his goods and set sail for India. He also took Ruong with him. Pierre Poivre's abrupt departure and the abduction of Michael Ruong, naturally upset Nguyen Phuc Khoat who reacted harshly by issuing a decree to expel all western foreigners, including missionaries. The Jesuits confirmed the co-relations between Poivre's behaviour and the expulsion of the missionaries.<sup>72</sup>

Nguyen Phuc Khoat's change of policy in his treatment toward Europeans was naturally due to the fact that he was angry with the abrupt departure of Poivre, who, despite of the Vietnamese ruler's favour, failed to reciprocate. The Poivre episode was seized by a group of anti-western mandarins who were only

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Pierre Poivre, "Journal d'Un Voyage a la Cochinchie (du 29 Aout 1749 au 11 Fev. 1750)", p. 379.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Kirsop, "Some Account of Cochin China", p. 242.

<sup>71</sup> According to Kirsop, there were three interpreters available to the French at Hoi An and Phu Xuan, who were all Christians, see Kirsop, p. 243.

<sup>72</sup> *Voyages et Travaux des Missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jesus: Mission de la Cochinchine et Tonkin*, Paris: Editions Charles Douniol, 1858, p. 319. The event is not mention in any of the Nguyen sources.

too happy to further denounce the French and other Europeans living in Nguyen Southern Vietnam. This resulted in the bureaucracy being isolated.

The emergence of different factions among the mandarins and ruling elites had a strong influence on the conduct of foreign affairs for the Nguyen. However Vietnamese sources are not informative on the question of factionalism within the ranks of the mandarins, all that can be deduced is that the possibility of factionalism spilling over into foreign policy as in this incident with Poivre cannot be discounted. The French however, were not discouraged by the expulsion of Poivre and other Europeans. In 1753, the French East India Company dispatched a new French mission under Rabac who came and obtained permission to rebuild their trading house and also a shop. They were allowed to take part in the interior and exterior trade. The French also sent back Poivre's interpreter, Michael Ruong.<sup>73</sup> But the French venture in Vietnam came to an abrupt end when the Seven Years War broke out between France and Britain. More eager to defend their interests in India against the British, the French factory in Hoi An became less importance and was closed in 1756. French presence in Nguyen Vietnam was continued by the missionaries who were allowed to stay on by Nguyen Phuc Khoat.

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<sup>73</sup> Nguyen Thanh Nha, *Tableaux Economique du Vietnam*, p. 216.

## Nguyen Phuc Khoat and the Christian Missionaries, 1738-1765

When he first succeeded his father, Nguyen Phuc Khoat was considered by the missionaries as someone who was tolerant towards the Christian religion.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps due to his father, Nguyen Phuc Tru's influence, Nguyen Phuc Khoat's liberal stand toward the Christian missionaries was consistent throughout his reign.<sup>75</sup> In fact, many missionaries attributed the flourishing of the Christian religion in southern Vietnam at that time to "the freedom of religion granted by the King (Nguyen Phuc Khoat)".<sup>76</sup> At the time of his visit in 1749, Pierre Poivre, who was a Catholic missionary before becoming a trader, estimated that there were 50,000 Christians in Nguyen Southern Vietnam, and another 30,000 in Cambodia.<sup>77</sup> Even though there is no way to verify the figure, suffice it to say that the Christian religion was thriving during Nguyen Phuc Khoat's reign. Part of this development can be traced to the linkages established between Nguyen Phuc Khoat and the priests who were serving in the Nguyen Court.

Shortly after Nguyen Phuc Khoat started his reign, he had in his service, Father Joseph Neugebauer, a German Jesuit who arrived in southern Vietnam in 1740. After he proclaimed himself as king in 1744, Nguyen Phuc Khoat appointed Neugebauer to the rank of a court physician and mathematician (astronomer). After Neugebauer passed away in 1745, the same title was conferred to Father

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<sup>74</sup> "Father Rivoal to his superior", 4 August 1738, AMEP: Cochinchine, Vol. 740, f. 446; see also "Journal of Father Delacourt", February to September 1738, AMEP: Cochinchine, Vol. 740, f. 448.

<sup>75</sup> "Father Favre to Connain", 17 July 1740, AMEP: Cochinchine, Vol. 741, f. 143.

<sup>76</sup> "Father Bourguine to de Combes", 1 June 1744, AMEP: Cochinchine, Vol. 741, f. 533 & "Father Bennetat to Favre", 1 July, 1745, AMEP: Cochinchine, Vol. 741, f. 533. Father Edmond Bennetat was sent to southern Vietnam in 1735 and served in Thuan Hoa and Phu Yen. He was later given responsibility to negotiate the reestablishment of economic relations between the Nguyen authority and the French East India Company.

<sup>77</sup> Poivre, "Descriptions de la Cochinchine", p. 102.

Siebert, followed by Father Slamans and Father Koffler successively.<sup>78</sup> Despite his outburst against the missionaries due to the Pierre Poivre incident in 1750 when he ordered the expulsion of Christian missionaries, Nguyen Phuc Khoat resumed the employment of missionaries in his service two years later by inviting two Jesuits, Father Xavier de Monteino and Father Jean de Loureiro to serve as geomancer and court physician respectively.<sup>79</sup>

Perhaps the most important Catholic priest to ever serve Nguyen Phuc Khoat was Father Johannas Siebert, a German Jesuit. He was employed as court mathematician when he arrived in 1738 and served until he died in Phu Xuan in 1745. According to Pierre Poivre, Nguyen Phuc Khoat was extremely fond of Father Siebert and made him a mandarin of the first rank.<sup>80</sup> According to Le Quy Don, the palace continued to keep Siebert's collection of books long after he had passed away. The collection was kept at the Astronomical Institute in Phu Xuan.<sup>81</sup>

After Siebert passed away, his position was filled by Father Jean Koffler, another German Jesuit who arrived in Nguyen Southern Vietnam in 1741.<sup>82</sup> When the missionaries were expelled in 1750 after the Poivre-Cuong affair, Koffler was the only one allowed to remain since his services as court physician were still

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<sup>78</sup> Nguyen Thanh Nha, *Tableaux Economique du Vietnam*, p. 39.

<sup>79</sup> C. B. Maybon, *Histoire Moderne du Pays d'Annam*, pp. 140-141.

<sup>80</sup> Pierre Poivre, "Descriptions de la Cochinchine", p. 104. The actual rank held by Siebert cannot be confirmed as Court Mathematicians and Physicians were normally ranked as mandarin of Fifth Rank, while the First Rank were normally reserved for prime ministers and senior ministerial ranks such as Do Doc, See *Lich Trieu Hien Cuong Luai Chi*, Vol. 13: 17-18. Koffler mentioned three classes with the doctors and astrologers in the last of three ranks of mandarins in Nguyen Phuc Khoat's court, see Jean Koffler, "Description Historique de la Cochinchine", p.282.

<sup>81</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 6: 15.

<sup>82</sup> Koffler left a very detailed account of his observations on southern Vietnam, see Jean Koffler, "Description Historique de la Cochinchine", *Revue Indochinoise*, 1911, No. 5, pp. 448-462; No. 6, pp. 566-575; No. 9, pp. 273-285; No. 12, pp. 582-609.

needed by Nguyen Phuc Khoat.<sup>83</sup> Pierre Poivre however, had very bad impression of Koffler whose ability he questioned, possibly due to French-German rivalry. Poivre appear to be critical of Koffler's habit of dressing in "a flowered black gauze gown, a flame-coloured shirt and pants, with an enormously big doctor's cap, spangled with imitation gems",<sup>84</sup> which was closer to the fashion favoured in Nguyen Southern Vietnam for better acceptance by the Vietnamese. This, he succeeded, especially in winning the trust of Nguyen Phuc Khoat.

Nguyen Phuc Khoat allowed the Christian religion to grow in southern Vietnam, i.e., his willingness to allow the missionaries into Nguyen Southern Vietnam was not well-received by some members of his court. Some time in the 1740s, several Buddhist monks were trying to influence Nguyen Phuc Khoat to go against the Christians. According to Koffler, the prime minister and some ministers blamed the presence of the Christian missionaries for a series of natural catastrophes. In 1750, out of the four chief ministers (also known as the Four Pillars of the Kingdom), three were against the Christians, while the fourth, an uncle of Nguyen Phuc Khoat, and the minister of war, advised the king to treat the Christian missionaries as he had treated the Buddhist monks.<sup>85</sup>

The identity of this fourth minister mentioned by Koffler as sympathetic to the Christian religion is the subject of one of Cadiere's studies on the personalities in the Court of Nguyen Phuc Khoat.<sup>86</sup> Father Favre, the French priest who went to Nguyen Southern Vietnam in 1740, mentioned that the mandarin who was

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<sup>83</sup> *Voyages et Travail des Missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jesus: Mission de la Cochinchine et Tonkin*, p. 320.

<sup>84</sup> Pierre Poivre, "Description de la Cochinchine", p. 104.

<sup>85</sup> L. Cadiere, "Le Changement de Costume sous Vo Vuong", pp. 264-266.

<sup>86</sup> L. Cadiere, "Quelques Figures de la Cour de Vo-Vuong", *BAVH*, Oct.-Dec. 1918, pp. 253-306.

sympathetic to the Christian missionaries held the rank of Ta Ngoai (Chancellor of External Affairs).<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, Pierre Poivre called him On Tha Tloan, the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Palace, who he identified the uncle of Nguyen Phuc Khoat, whose two sons married the daughters of Nguyen Phuc Khoat.<sup>88</sup> The description fitted Truong Phuc Loan, who also held the rank as one of the four pillars of the kingdom.

The position of the Christian religion and the struggle against it in the Court had effects on the development of Nguyen Phuc Khoat's kingdom and on its foreign relations. Even though Nguyen Southern Vietnam was liberal in its trading policy toward European merchants, it seemed to be much more critical of the Christian faith. Indeed, most Nguyen Lords before Nguyen Phuc Tru were suspicious of the Christian religion. Given this reaction, the issue of Christianity being given preferential treatment by Nguyen Phuc Khoat was probably never openly debated in the Nguyen Court circle. It was mainly due entirely to Nguyen Phuc Khoat's good disposition toward the Christian religion and the western missionaries.

Nguyen Phuc Khoat's good disposition toward the Christian missionaries ended briefly during the Poivre-Ruong incident. Nguyen Phuc Khoat's anger however, was not vented solely against the Christian missionaries, but rather, toward all Europeans. For a while from 1750 to 1752, after Nguyen Phuc Khoat expelled the Christian missionaries from his kingdom, the anti-Christian faction

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<sup>87</sup> Favre as cited in Cadiere, "Le Changement de Costume sous Vo Vuong", p. 264. Favre was the secretary to Bishop La Baume, the vicar apostolic who was sent by Rome to preside over the rivalries among missionaries of different orders operating in southern Vietnam at that time.

<sup>88</sup> Poivre, "Journal d'un Voyage a la Cochinchine", pp. 379-380.



seemed to hold sway. It was reported that more than 200 churches were demolished with the Vietnamese Christians being subjected to some very harsh and brutal treatments by the soldiers. Led by the governors of the provinces, the soldiers also pillaged the houses of the Christians. The severity of the anti-Christian campaign eventually also rendered Koffler's position unbearable so that he also left for Macao at the end of 1750.

Nguyen Phuc Khoat's outburst ended quite soon, and in 1752, two Jesuits priests, taking opportunity of the return of calm to Nguyen Southern Vietnam, arrived in the court of Nguyen Phuc Khoat. The two priests, Father Xavier de Monteiro and Jean de Louveiro brought with them expensive gifts for Nguyen Phuc Khoat. Both priests were reputed for their knowledge in science. Father Monteiro for instance was knowledgeable in physics and geometry. It was he who constructed the fountain in the garden of Nguyen Phuc Khoat's palace. Father de Louveiro was famous for his medical practice and natural science. He too offered his service to Nguyen Phuc Khoat. Nguyen Phuc Khoat allowed the two to stay.<sup>89</sup> Since then, restrictions against the Christian missionaries were relaxed.

From the reports of the missionaries, it seems post-1752 Nguyen Southern Vietnam tolerated to the presence of the Christian missionaries. There were no more major anti-Christian campaigns like the 1752 occasion. The missionaries reported that Nguyen Phuc Khoat's successor, Nguyen Phuc Thuan, or Hue Vuong was even more tolerable towards Christian missionaries. Apparently,

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<sup>89</sup> *Voyages et Travail des Missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jesus: Mission de la Cochinchine et Tonkin*, p. 322.

Nguyen Phuc Thuan even helped to rebuild some of the churches and Christian homes destroyed during the campaign of 1752.<sup>90</sup>

Anti-foreigners sentiments as explained in the earlier chapters reveal a state directed by nationalistic concerns. The so-called anti-Christian campaign of 1750 can be read as another example of Nguyen strategy to galvanise the nation towards dealing with the security of its southern borders.

However, within the court, the Nguyen welcomed mathematicians and other conveyors of technology. While it is undeniable that there was a faction cautious of the real motives of the missionaries (read foreigners), the Nguyen were practical enough to exploit public fears for the sake of national interest.

Here again, the treatment of western foreigners cannot be equated with the treatment of western countries or western trade – the determining factor being the utility of such elements to the Nguyen state. The next section on the subject of the uplander tribes “states” clearly demonstrates this policy.

### **The Uplanders in Late Nguyen Foreign Relations**

If Italian Jesuit Christoforo Borri had reported that the Nguyen Lordship had no control over the uplanders whom he termed as Kemoi during the early part of 17<sup>th</sup> Century,<sup>91</sup> the situation had definitely changed by the time of Nguyen Phuc Khoat’s reign. It was during Nguyen Phuc Khoat’s time that Vietnamese authority was extended into the highlands of present day Savannakhet province in Laos. Partly due to the efforts made by Nguyen Phuc Chu in 1699 where a garrison was

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323.

<sup>91</sup> Cristoforo Borri, *Cochin China: Containing Many Admirable Ranties and Singularities of that Countrey*, London: Robert Ashley for Richard Clutterbuck, 1633, pp. B1 & B2.

established at the Ai Lao Pass, (named Dinh Ai Lao), inroads into the mountainous region were made. Since then, Vietnamese traders, along with their Chinese counterparts, began to venture into the Ai Lao area to trade with the uplander tribes.

In the context of the Nguyen's tributary relations with the hill tribes, trade was an essential component. Vietnamese as well as Chinese traders or possibly Japanese in the earlier period, had taken the opportunity made possible by the cordial tributary relations between the Nguyen and the uplanders to venture into the highlands. Usually, this lowland-highland trade had brought more benefit to the Vietnamese compared to the uplanders.

Tangible trade aside, the Nguyen Court looked upon this trading activities in a different light. They regarded the permission to trade for the uplanders as part of the tribute-trade arrangement permitted by the Nguyen Court, though in actual fact, it was the Vietnamese and their Chinese counterparts who usually took the initiative to venture to the highland in carrying out trading activities.

The Nguyen's attempt to link trade with tribute is evident in the manner in which the sending of tribute from Ban Tuong (present day Van Chang in Laos) in 1761 was recorded. The tribute mission came through the route that linked Ai Lao and Cam Lo via Luu Hoa'n. In return for the tribute gifts, Nguyen Phuc Khoat rewarded the King of Ban Tuong with clothes and official robes.<sup>92</sup> According to the *Tien Bien*, the trading relations between Viet people and the uplanders (hence Barbarians in the Vietnamese sense) at Cam Lo, existed much earlier. The Nguyen had granted permission for the uplanders from Cam Lo to

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<sup>92</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 31.

trade with the Vietnamese as a means of manifesting the greatness of the Nguyen Court. The 1761 mission was the last recorded tribute mission from the uplanders in the Nguyen chronicles. It is possible that further missions were sent but went unrecorded.

Writing about his brief visit to Nguyen Phuc Khoat's court in 1749 to 1750, Pierre Poivre observed how every year, Nguyen Phuc Khoat viewed with great pleasure, the arrivals of the tribute delegations from Thuan Thanh (Champa), Cambodia and the various uplanders or smaller kingdoms like Laos. According to Poivre, these four entities sent regular tributes to the Nguyen.<sup>93</sup> Poivre also observed how Nguyen Phuc Khoat was extremely arrogant towards tribute emissaries from Champa.<sup>94</sup> This reflected the Nguyen Court as the centre of a tributary system in relations to its immediate neighbours. This was especially so after the unilateral proclamation by Nguyen Phuc Khoat as *Vuong*, or King in 1744. This new found confidence in assuming the central position in a tributary system they created was important as a means to equalise its position vis-a-vis the Trinh. However, this system was not as clearly defined as the tributary system practiced in the later Nguyen Dynasty.<sup>95</sup>

At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the Pheng Ly a Mon-Khmer speaking group that the Nguyen chronicles conveniently termed as Ai Lao, and who was reported to have paid tribute to the Nguyen were attacked by the Tai

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<sup>93</sup> Pierre Poivre, "Journal d'Un Voyage a La Cochinchine (du 29 aout au 11 fevrier 1750)", *Revue Extreme-Orient*, Vol. III, 1887, p. 488.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 488.

<sup>95</sup> For a discussion on the tributary relations of the Nguyen Dynasty, see Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, pp. 246-261. Even then, Woodside was suggesting that it was still very much a case of "model versus reality".

speaking Phuthai tribe from northern Laos and the Sue. As a result of the attack, the Pheng Ly dispersed. Many later came down to the Vietnamese plains via the Cam Lo River and settled at the vicinity of Cam Lo in Thuan Hoa. The Phuthai divided the former Pheng Ly land into the principalities of Vang, Champone, Tchepone and Pheng which acknowledged the authority of the Phuthai, based in Vientiane. In his efforts to reassert authority over the former Pheng Ly area, Nguyen Phuc Khoat notified the four principalities and Vientiane that the former annual tribute of an elephant would continue to be paid by the four principalities.<sup>96</sup>

During Nguyen Phuc Khoat's reign, there were on no less than three occasions where the Nguyen's foreign relations had involved the uplanders. All these events connected to the Nguyen's relations with Cambodia. On all three occasions, the uplanders were on the side of the Nguyen. The involvement of uplanders in Nguyen's foreign relations was inevitable mainly due to two reasons, namely strategic considerations and tributary relations.

As some of the uplander tribes were living in the southern highlands areas which covered Vietnam's boundaries with Cambodia, they were also inevitably in control of passes and routes which armies had to pass through before getting into Cambodia. The control of mountain passes or routes by the uplanders was known among the Vietnamese. In 1754, Nguyen Phuc Khoat ordered the Gia Dinh native chiefs appointed as head of the various nguon (tribes) in the Son Phong System (mountain defence system) at Vu Truong (near Cam Lo) to

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<sup>96</sup> Bernard Bourotte, "Essai d'histoire de Populations Montagnards du Sud-Indochinois jusqu'a 1945", *Bulletin de la Societe d'Etudes Indochinois*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1955.

monitor the entries to the passes which linked the northern borders of the Nguyen domain with the Cambodian borders. This was to detect any movement of Trinh army allegedly in league with the anti-Vietnamese Cambodian king.<sup>97</sup>

More importantly, the uplanders were also caught in the middle of conflicts that took place between the Vietnamese and the Cambodians. On several occasions, the *Tien Bien* recounted how the anti-Vietnamese Cambodians rulers had attacked the uplanders, which resulted in the latter seeking help from the Nguyen. In the second month of 1750, the Chru and Maa tribes were attacked by a Cambodian army. The *Tien Bien* remarked that many of these tribes or the 'Kun Moi' drifted into the borders of Cambodia. The text was probably referring to the occupation of the Maa country by the Vietnamese in the late 17th century (1698) when the Nguyen army under General Nguyen Huu Canh attacked and annexed the area which corresponds with present day Phuc Long , Bien Hoa, Thanh Binh and Gia Dinh. A garrison was set up and more than 40,000 Viet families were moved from an area south of Bo Chinh (Quang Binh and Binh Thuan) to the newly annexed region.<sup>98</sup> The mass emigration of the Vietnamese undoubtedly had started the exodus of the Maa and the Chru into the Khmer region. In many ways, the uplanders were considered 'pawns' in the major game of the Vietnamese-Siamese (and Cambodian) contest.

What happened subsequently was rather confusing. This is especially so when the Nguyen chronicles did not offer much insight on the period immediately between 1750 and 1753. The *Tien Bien* recorded how Nguyen Phuc Khoat sent a

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<sup>97</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 24.

<sup>98</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 7: 14.

letter to the Siamese Court at Ayudhya rebuking the Siamese King for supporting the Cambodians who were “threatening our [the Nguyen’s] subdued barbarians”.<sup>99</sup> The letter to the Siamese Court was considered necessary as the Cambodian Court at Oudong was under the suzerainty of the Siamese Court. The ruler there, King Ang Im was installed by the Siamese King in 1748.<sup>100</sup> Ang Im was the sole ruler for Cambodia at that time, his chief rival, the Vietnamese-supported king Ang Ta had died in Gia Dinh as a political refugee in 1748.

What transpired during the period between the letter to Siam in 1750 and 1753 when the Nguyen Army was preparing to attack Cambodia is not mentioned in the *Tien Bien*. Father Piguel, a French Missionary who was at that time serving in Cambodia, reported to his superiors of a devastating war between the Vietnamese and the Cambodians which took place in 1752. As a result of that, the Nguyen installed a new king in Cambodia. According to Father Piquel, the new king was even compelled to follow the new edict of the Nguyen Lord in persecuting the Christians, issued after the Poivre affair.<sup>101</sup> No mention however, was made by Piguel of the hill tribes whose welfare the *Tien Bien* claimed to have been the main concern of Nguyen Phuc Khoat in launching the 1752-1753 attacks against the Cambodians.

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<sup>99</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 17. It is interesting to note that despite this rebuking letter, whose existence has yet be verified, the Nguyen and the Siamese probably maintained a cordial relationship, especially in matters relating to trade. See records on trade and shipping arrangements between Siam and the Nguyen, *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 25. The Nguyen-Siam relations only turned for the worst in the 1760s when open conflict took place between the two over Ha Tien and Cambodia.

<sup>100</sup> Since 1711, as the Nguyen further extended their influence into the Cambodian territories, they had to be content with the fact that over the other side of the Cambodian borders was Siam. Siam’s tussles with the Nguyen inside Cambodia mainly took the form of supplanting one another with their respectively installed Cambodian kings.

<sup>101</sup> “Piguel to the Directors of the MEP”, 15th July 1752, AMEP: Cochinchine, Vol. 744, f. 11.

As the Nguyen army was entering Cambodia in the sixth month of 1753, they recruited the Chru tribe to join them in the fight against the Khmers. The campaign against the pro-Siam Cambodians lasted into the spring of 1755. In the ensure battles in 1755, the Chru had more than 5,000 men serving in the Nguyen Army.<sup>102</sup> And at the battle near present day My Tho, the Chru army was routed by the Cambodians. Only at the intervention of a Vietnamese army under Nguyen Cu Trinh that the Chru forces were able to retreat to safety. At the closing stage of the campaign, the Chru served as guides and soldiers in the Vietnamese army that defeated the Cambodians and entered Phnom Penh.<sup>103</sup> The Chru were eventually settled at the Noi Ba Den, or Black Lady Mountains, near Tay Ninh.

The involvement of the uplanders, and in this case, the Chru in the Nguyen Army against the Cambodians had to some extent, demonstrated the binding ties that existed in the tributary relations between the Nguyen and its vassal states. In this case, the Nguyen coming to the rescue of its vassal subject, the Chru. On the other hand, the decision to extend protection to the Chru was also made on the need to crush the resurgence of anti-Vietnamese Cambodia under the influence of Siam. This was especially important in the absence of a credible pro-Nguyen Cambodian king since the demise of Ang Ta in 1748.

The Nguyen Lords were also quick to exploit, to their favour, the sticky relations between the uplanders and Cambodia. This was especially true of the Jarai who were traditionally Cambodia's ally. The Jarai were in fact, important to the national identity of the Cambodians as they were regarded the sacred keeper

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<sup>102</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 25. The Chru are closely related to the Chams. Po Rome, the most celebrated King of Champa (1627-1651) was in fact of Chru origin.

<sup>103</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 25.



of the royal relics of the Khmer kings until quite recently, possibly in 1920s.<sup>104</sup> The traditional bond of these two peoples was broken and it was to the advantage of the Nguyen when the Jarais came under its control.

The incorporation of the Jarai into the Nguyen tributary system had a significant bearing upon the former's relations with Cambodia. Divided into two tribes, namely, the Fire Jarai (or Hoa Xa in Vietnamese) and the Water Jarai (Thuy Xa), the Jarais were led by two shaman chiefs. Historically, the two shaman chiefs were keepers of the treasures of the Khmer Royal family, having assisted the Khmer kings in defeating an invading Cham Army in the ninth century.<sup>105</sup> With yje breaking up of the Jarai-Cambodian ties, the Cambodians were left without their traditional ally. Apart from the problem of tributary relations, the Nguyen were also trying to use the Jarai who were living in area between the Nguyen and Cambodia to filter Vietnamese influence into Cambodia.

The Jarai probably started to acknowledge Vietnamese suzerainty through the Nguyen during the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century. In return, the Nguyen, first under Nguyen Phuc Chu, accorded the status of kingship to the two chieftains of the Jarai tribes and elevated the tribe to the status of a kingdoms. Such a status probably meant little to the chieftains who were called Patao, as they were the de facto rulers over their people. The move however, meant a great deal to the Nguyen as it inevitably placed the Nguyen Lordship in a world of tributary relations they created, which elevated the Nguyen's status to a tribute granting

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<sup>104</sup> See Gerard Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*, pp. 140-141.

<sup>105</sup> Hickey, *Sons of the Mountain*, p. 140. For a recent study on the relations between the Cambodians and the Jarais, see Michel Tranet, "Etude sur la Savatar Vatt Sampuk", *Sasa Khmer*, No. 6, 1983, pp. 75-107.

entity. The move also confirmed that the tributary relations that was practiced by the Chinese Court, later aptly applied by Emperor Gia Long (1802-1819) and especially Emperor Minh Menh (1820-1840) in the later Nguyen Dynasty, was already in place during Nguyen Phuc Chu's (1691-1725) time and perfected during Nguyen Phuc Khoat's reign.

Father Jean Koffler, the Jesuit, provides us with the only account of the reception of tribute from the uplanders by the Nguyen:

Every five years, they [the uplanders tribes] sent a delegation to the Court at Cochinchina to foster friendship with the king and to offer different presents. Each of these delegations normally consisted of around 50 officers and well-equipped robust soldiers. From the capital, the King of Cochinchina sent four galleys to receive the ambassadors with great honour and accompanied them into the royal city with a mandarin, and five cohorts of soldiers as escort. They were treated by the King to a sumptuous function all day at the court. At the end of the reception, the ambassadors received their presents, destined for their masters, and they returned via the same way with similar ceremony as they had arrived.<sup>106</sup>

At the Court, there were interpreters who assisted the mandarins to conduct the transactions with the uplander delegations. But Koffler remarked that as the language of the uplanders was difficult to understand, they were often misunderstood.<sup>107</sup>

Unlike the Trinh in the North which strictly prohibited Vietnamese from having contacts with the uplanders, the Nguyen's relations with these uplanders was much less restrained. This is especially so in the military aspect. Under

<sup>106</sup> Jean Koffler, "Descriptions de la Cochinchine", *Revue Indochinoise*, pp. 457-458.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 458.

Nguyen Phuc Khoat, the Nguyen Army was made up of Vietnamese as well as non-Vietnamese troops. The inclusion of the uplanders as part of the Nguyen armed forces was something unheard of in the Trinh army or traditional military forces.

According to *Phu Bien Tap Luc*, there were at least three units of Nguyen Phuc Khoat's army that were made up of non-Viet people, namely the units attached to Vietnamese garrisons at Binh Thuan, Tran Bien and Phien Tran. Part of the garrison at Binh Thuan was made up of units who were entirely Cham. This force, consisting of four troops of calvary and seven boats troops, was under the direct command of the king of Thuan Thanh. The Nguyen administration only exempted the province from paying rice tax for the troops but the King of Thuan Thanh was responsible for the wages and supplies. Though under the king of Thuan Thanh, the troops also had a Vietnamese Cai Bo and a Cai Doi (administrator and commander of a company of troops). The rest of the officers were Chams<sup>108</sup> At Tran Bien, there were three boat units each with nine boats and 50 soldiers on each boat. All the members of these units were members of the uplanders or Khmers who had drifted into Nguyen Southern Vietnam. In Phien Tran, there were three boat troops, each with 12 boats and each boat with 50 men. Like those in Thuan Thanh-Champa, the two garrisons were exempted from paying rice tax for the troops but the rest, including the wages and food supplies came from the local commanders.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 3: 83.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

Father Jean Koffler reported that even part of the royal guard of Nguyen Phuc Khoat was made up of tanned-coloured uplanders called Lai [possibly Jarai] who lived in “Upper Cochinchina”. There were four companies of them and they were called Young Guards of the Palace. Koffler thought they were rather fearsome and feared by all.<sup>110</sup>

The policy of incorporating non-Vietnamese troops in the Nguyen Army was a very important decision. Thus far, the Nguyen prided itself with the continued employment of Viet people in their armed forces, with those from Thanh Hoa regarded as the prime troops. However, it became clear that as the Nguyen had annexed more territories, the task of garrisoning these newly acquired lands also became increasingly more difficult. Hence the decision to allow the formation of the non-Vietnamese units in its armed forces. This practice was not confined to the southern-most territories. In fact, the practice was also carried out in Quang Nam.<sup>111</sup> Together with the resettling of Vietnamese in the newly acquired territories, this strategy, according to Le Quy Don, effectively suppressed Champa and the Khmers. It also beefed up Vietnamese defence against Siam.<sup>112</sup>

As early as the reign of Nguyen Phuc Chu (1691-1725), the growing confidence had already become visible. When it became more apparent by the 1740s, Nguyen Phuc Khoat felt confident enough to allow the ruler of Champa (King of Thuan Thanh) to maintain an army of his own.<sup>113</sup> The Nguyen army that

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<sup>110</sup> Jean Koffler, “Descriptions de la Cochinchine”, *Revue Indochinoise*, 1911, p. 570.

<sup>111</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 3: 85.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 3: 83.

was stationed at Binh Thuan was partly made up of the Chams under the jurisdiction and command of the Cham ruler. The Champa army under Nguyen jurisdiction was made up of four troops of horse cavalry and some riverine flotillas. Under this arrangement, the Nguyen administration was responsible in the provision food and supplies to the Cham serving in the Nguyen army, while the Cham ruler paid the salaries. All the recruitment of this Champa army was done through the Cham ruler.<sup>114</sup> According to *Phu Bien Tap Luc*, the Nguyen allowed the practice of recruiting natives of Champa and Khmer as well as other non-Viet people including hill tribes to serve in the local army in the four southern most prefectures of Dinh Khanh, Binh Khanh, Binh Thuan and Gia Dinh.<sup>115</sup> Such practices can be traced back to the 1720s when the Nguyen began to face challenges from Siam over their contest for influence in Cambodia. Just like the Champa units in the Nguyen army, these non-Vietnamese hill tribe (Thu Nhan) troops made up different branches of the Nguyen forces, including foot soldiers and riverine flotillas. Unlike the Champa troops and the Khmer troops that were meant for defence,<sup>116</sup> the uplanders were used by Nguyen Phuc Khoat to attack Cambodia in 1753.<sup>117</sup>

The extent of the Nguyen's confidence in dealing with foreigners was also evident in the court. Unlike previous practices where trusted high officials were normally of Thanh Hoa origins, Nguyen Phuc Khoat had in his service, a Khmer-born commander by the name of Tam who held the rank of a Cai Doi (captain).

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 3: 90.

<sup>116</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 3:83.

<sup>117</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 24a.

According to Poivre, this Tam, who worked as a general of palace guards and was well-placed. He was also known to be trusted by Nguyen Phuc Khoat.<sup>118</sup>

However, the Nguyen's belief in the trustworthiness and allegiance from its tribute-sending vassal states did not always guarantee peaceful co-existence. In 1746, a rebellion took place among the Cham community in Thuan Thanh. The rebels, who were led by Duong Bao Lai and Ye Ma Linh, attacked Tran Bien near Gia Dinh. However, it was quickly put down by the Nguyen army.<sup>119</sup>

The last disturbance caused by the hill tribes as recorded in the official chronicle was that of 1770, a year before the Tay Son Rebellion. In July of that year, Nguyen Phuc Thanh, the Ky Luc of Quang Nam, was appointed Cai Bo (Magistrate-administrator). He was responsible for the welfare of five prefectures (phu) in the south and was ordered to lead the Nguyen forces from Qui Nhon and Phu Yen. His army's mission was to stop the uplanders around that region from conducting raids and plundering activities at the vicinity of Phu Yen. It is not clear if the disturbances at Phu Yen was a prelude to the Tay Son, considering the fact that Qui Nhon, the Tay Son's original base is just situated next to it.

Nguyen's relations with the uplander tribe "states" reflect its realist, almost utilitarian approach. In its early days, the Nguyen did not directly exert control over these tribes but encouraged active trading with them. Eventually, this policy developed into an open tributary system where Nguyen aggression was tampered by tributes. Trade was also more regulated.

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<sup>118</sup> Pierre Poivre, "Voyage en Cochinchine". P. 373.

<sup>119</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 14.

In the final years before its decline, the Nguyen ruling elite saw itself fit enough to exert more control over these tribes requiring them to serve in its war efforts against Cambodia. This policy not only guaranteed the safety of its settlements, it also expanded its military capacity. Nguyen expansion into the Mekong already partly described in the previous chapter, brought it into direct conflict with Cambodia and a resurgent Siam.

### **Wrestling Control of Mekong Delta, 1738-1765**

Like his predecessors, Nguyen Phuc Khoat continued to be preoccupied with the affairs in the south. After the subjugation of Champa, the Nguyen turned on the kingdom of Cambodia. Cambodia remained important in the state-formation process of the Nguyen as evident from the attention given to it by successive Nguyen rulers since Nguyen Phuc Nguyen in the early part of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. The vastness of its territory and the richness of its resources was an attractive prize. Further more, Cambodia was in a state of decline plagued with power struggles.

Thus far, the Nguyen had encountered little problem in exerting their authority over Cambodia. However, by the time Nguyen Phuc Khoat took over, a new factor entered the scene in determining the extent of the Nguyen's venture in Cambodia. A powerful Siam based in Ayudhya was eager to re-establish its influence in Cambodia. It started supporting the anti-Vietnamese faction among the Khmer Royal family and assisted the latter's assault on Ha Tien in 1748. So

great was the Siamese-Cambodian threat to the Nguyen's position in the Mekong Delta that Jean Koffler, a Jesuit, records how each month, units of Nguyen soldiers were sent to Baria (Gia Dinh) to repulse enemy troops, principally, the Cambodians.<sup>120</sup>

Several questions could be asked regarding Ha Tien's actual position vis-à-vis the Nguyen, particularly under Mac Thien Tu, the son of Mac Cuu. Pierre Poivre explained that Mac Thien Tu was "paying tribute to the king of Cochinchina,"<sup>121</sup> who put him under his protection, and gave him a hundred soldiers for his defence; at the same time, he [Mac Thien Tu] pays a minimal tribute to the king of Cambodia who has no choice but to permit it."<sup>122</sup> Poivre had not been to Ha Tien, his information could have come from Monseigneur de Noelene, the French missionary at Phu Xuan. What is striking is the fact that Ha Tien was still paying tribute to the Cambodian Court in the 1740s. This was an attempt to counter a possible attack on Ha Tien by Cambodian forces, backed by Siam.

Another aspect of Ha Tien's autonomy is reflected in the minting of its own currency. This started during Nguyen Phuc Tru's time.<sup>123</sup> And finally, the assumption of Mac Cuu's official positions and titles by Mac Thien Tu, his son, also indicated hereditary succession. This was a system that could only apply to cases of principality or royal fiefdom. Thus in many ways, Ha Tien was an

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<sup>120</sup> Jean Koffler, "Description de la Cochinchine", p. 572.

<sup>121</sup> The term was used by the Europeans to describe the Nguyen Southern Vietnam.

<sup>122</sup> Pierre Poivre, "Voyage du Pierre Poivre en Cochinchine, Description de la Cochinchine (1748-1750), pp. 81-121 & 364-510.

<sup>123</sup> The coins minted in Ha Tien were called Sapeques. Mainly made of zinc, they were of little value, and were made of zinc, see Nicholas Sellers, *The Princes of Ha Tien*, p. 42.



autonomous entity under the political patronage of the Nguyen. It was under this framework that a tribute relationship developed between Ha Tien and the Nguyen. Instead of being part of Vietnamese territory, Ha Tien was very much an independent principality.

In explaining the various Cong or tribute received by the Nguyen, Le Duy Dan (or Le Dan),<sup>124</sup> who wrote the Nguyen apologetic *Nam Ha Tiep Luc*, mentioned that every three years, Ha Tien sent a major tribute (Cong) to Phu Xian amounting to 3,000 silver; and an annual minor tribute of between 200 to 300 silver.<sup>125</sup> Even though Dan wrote this account of the various Nguyen institutions during the reign of Gia Long (1802-1819), he claimed to have consulted various surviving documents of the Nguyen. The assertion that Ha Tien actually paid tribute instead of tax further support the notion of Ha Tien's autonomy in relations to the Nguyen.

Unlike other newly acquired regions of the Nguyen, Ha Tien had no Nguyen troops stationed there. The nearest Vietnamese garrison was at Gia Dinh where the Mac would appeal for help whenever Ha Tien came under attack from Cambodia. The Mac family depended very much on a militia raised in Ha Tien to defend the town and port from Siamese or Cambodian attacks. In 1739 for instance, when a Cambodian army under King Thommo Reacha II (Prey Srey Thomea) attacked Ha Tien, the Ha Tien militia successfully defended the town

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<sup>124</sup> Le Duy Dan or Le Dan was one of the last few winner of the Tien Si examinations during the Le Dynasty in 1775. He served as a provincial governor at Son Tay. It is doubtful if he had ever been to the south. See Nola Cooke, "Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Confucianization in Historical Perspective: Evidence from the Palace Examination (1463-1883)", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, March 1994, p. 283.

<sup>125</sup> *Nam Ha Tiep Luc*, p. 37a.

without the help of the Vietnamese army.<sup>126</sup> The response from the Nguyen Court was to reward Mac Thien Tu and his family.

The next incident in the Nguyen-Cambodia relations involving Ha Tien was in 1751 when the Nguyen army attacked Cambodia. The aggressive Nguyen policy began in 1747 when the Nguyen sponsored Ang Chi (Satha II), a pretender to the Cambodian throne, attempted to succeed King Thommo Reacha who died that year. Ang Chi led an army that was aided by two Vietnamese generals known as Kham Say Dai and Ba Ho.<sup>127</sup> Within a short period of time, the combined army entered Oudong. Ang Tong, who was placed on the throne at Oudong by the Siamese, fled to Siam.

Ang Chi however, was challenged by Thommo Reacha's son, Ang Snguon (Srei Chey Chettha, 1749-1755) who captured Oudong with the help of a Siamese army in 1749. By then, Ang Chi was too ill and retreated to Gia Dinh where he died.<sup>128</sup> With the death of Ang Chi, the Nguyen temporarily lost its footing in Cambodia. At the same time, Nguyen Phuc Khoat also had to face some security threats from Ang Snguon who was also eager to regain Cambodian territories lost to the Nguyen.

The French missionary, Father D'Azema who was in the Nguyen domains in 1751 provided a different reading of the affair. In his letter to his superior Bishop Lefeure, Father D'Azema related how in the year before (1750), the king of Cambodia had died. The son who succeeded him was not at peace with the

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<sup>126</sup> Nicholas Seller, *The Princes of Ha Tien*, p. 49.

<sup>127</sup> The event was described in detail by Khin Sok in his book, *Cambodge entre Siam and Vietnam*, p. 37.

<sup>128</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol.10: 15.

Nguyen Court.<sup>129</sup> The Cambodian King then launched several attempts to free Cambodia from the Nguyen. Included in his programme was an order to kill all the Vietnamese were living in Cambodia (likely to include the Mekong Delta). According to Father D'Azema, the order was carried out by the Cambodians and lasted for one and a half months. During the massacre, many Vietnamese including women and children were killed. Also according to D'Azema, the massacre also took place in Ha Tien.<sup>130</sup> The revolt against the Nguyen-sponsored ruler and the massacre against the Vietnamese in Cambodia and Ha Tien compelled the Nguyen court to take stern action, as both were deemed to be a paramount threat to the security of the Nguyen's position.

The Nguyen chronicles mention that the 1750 Cambodian attack on the Vietnamese also involved attacking the uplanders who had settled in the borders between Nguyen territories and the Khmer lands. The *Tien Bien* explains that these were actually tribes who were formerly under the jurisdiction of the Cham King at Thuan Thanh (Champa) but who had scattered and settled in the Mekong Delta.<sup>131</sup> This is likely as the Chrus and the Maas were closely linked to the Chams and were former Champa subjects who fled their homeland in the face of the series of Nguyen attacks earlier.

In 1751, Nguyen Phuc Khoat sent an army under the command of Thien Chinh and Nguyen Cu Trinh to invade Cambodia.<sup>132</sup> The *Tien Bien* says that the

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<sup>129</sup> According to Wood, the Cambodian king died in 1748 and not 1750 as suggested by the *Tien Bien*. See W. A. R. Wood, *A History of Siam*, Bangkok: 1924, p. 236.

<sup>130</sup> "D'azema to Mgr. Lefeure", 10 April 1751, AMEP: Cochinchine, Vol. 743, f. 718.

<sup>131</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 15-17.

<sup>132</sup> *Tien Bien* mentioned 1753 as the year of the Vietnamese invasion, whereas report from a French missionary, D'Azema mentioned 1751.

Vietnamese forces was made up of troops from Binh Khang, Binh Thuan, Tran Bien, Phien Tran and Long Ho.<sup>133</sup> This tallied with the French missionary, Father D’Azema’s account. D’Azema, who was in Cambodia at that time, estimated the size of the army to be around 5,000 to 6,000 men and 150 elephants. According to him, the army were gathered from garrisons at the Nguyen Court at Phu Xuan, Nharu and Nha Trang. It also received the support of the king of Champa.<sup>134</sup>

The Nguyen invasion of Cambodia was swift and smooth. With the absence of its ally, the Siamese, the Cambodian King, Ang Snguon was unable to resist the Nguyen army’s advance.<sup>135</sup> As a result, the Nguyen Army captured four Cambodian provinces, including Phnom Penh. Ang Snguon fled to Ha Tien to seek Mac Thien Tu’s protection hoping that Mac Thien Tu would be able to intercede on his behalf. Even though Mac Thien Tu’s role in settling the affair or even to help to avert the complete annihilation of Cambodia was not apparent, the Vietnamese forces’ advance was nevertheless, halted. Apparently, Nguyen Phuc Khoat had to halt his army from advancing further into Cambodia after learning that Ang Snguon was seeking an alliance with the Trinh in the north at Nghe An. Nguyen Phuc Khoat had to send his scouts along the highlands bordering Cambodia and the highlands at the upper part of the Cam Lo River in Thuan Hoa to verify the news.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 21-22.

<sup>134</sup> “D’Azema to Mgr. Lefeure”, 10 April 1751, AMEP: Cochinchine, Vol. 743, f. 718.

<sup>135</sup> According to Wood, a Siamese army under King Boromakot was getting ready to intervene on behalf of Ang Snguon (Rama Tibodi) in 1750. But the plan was not put into action as Prince Ong Eng, a brother of Sattha II had made a formal submission to the Siamese King. Due to that, Sattha was allowed to stay on the throne. Apparently, after the death of Sattha II, Ang Snguon (Rama Tibodi) succeeded the throne. See Wood, *A History of Siam*, p. 236.

<sup>136</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 24.

Ang Sgnoun's decision to throw himself at the mercy of Mac Thien Tu implies that the Cambodians saw Ha Tien as quasi-independent though under the patronage of the Nguyen. Nevertheless, in the settlement of 1755, Ang Sgnoun was allowed to keep his throne while at the same time conceded to the Nguyen, two more districts between Gia Dinh and the Mekong River, namely Tam Don and Loi Rap, just outside My Tho. A year later, a part of Tra Vinh was ceded. Even though the territories gained were not large, it nevertheless had great significance for the Nguyen especially with regard to the Nguyen's position in the Mekong Delta. With the losing of the two districts, the Cambodians only retained a narrow corridor at Bassac River for the the Mekong Delta, beyond that was the region of Ha Tien. This further strengthened Mac Thien Tu's position at Ha Tien with its trading posts at Can Tho and Bac Lieu, both on the West side of the Bassac River.<sup>137</sup>

Owing to its geographical location, Ha Tien was once again involved in a Nguyen-Cambodian conflict. In 1758, a regency was established in Cambodia after the death of King Ang Snguon. Ang Tan (Naray Raja), the late king's son was still a minor, and the country was ruled by his uncle Nac Nhuan. Ang Tan however, did not trust his uncle, and fled to Ha Tien. At Ha Tien, he was received by Mac Thien Tu who also sent word to Gia Dinh. This resulted in the sending of a military detachment from Gia Dinh to help the young Cambodian king to regain his throne. With the Vietnamese army threatening his borders, Nac Nhuan left for Siam, and Ang Tan regained his throne. As a mark of gratitude to Mac Thien Tu's intervention, Ang Tan ceded to Mac Thien Tu, of the trans-Bassac

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<sup>137</sup> Nicholas Sellers, *The Princes of Ha Tien*, p. 51.

territory as far north as Chau Doc, Truc Sam, Kampot, Kompong Som, Sai Mat and Linh Qhynh.<sup>138</sup> With the incorporation of the new territories, Nguyen Phuc Khoat established the last two provinces under Nguyen rule, namely Kien Giang and Long Xuyen. Even though Kampot and Kompong Som were regained by the Cambodians in later days, the incorporation of the trans-Bassac territories under the jurisdiction of Ha Tien effectively ended the Cambodian control of the Mekong Delta.

The Mac family's holding over Ha Tien was briefly threatened in 1767 by the news of an imminent invasion by the Siamese king Boromoraju V (the Leprous King). Mac Thien Tu sent for help from Gia Dinh. Nguyen Cuu Khoi, the commander of Gia Dinh sent 1,000 men and 20 war junks.<sup>139</sup> But this time, the invasion did not materialise as Siam was facing a Burmese invasion under King Hsinbyushin who destroyed the Siamese kingdom at Ayudhya. The Burmese who attacked Ayudhya had brought with them the cholera epidemic which spread to Ha Tien. Among the casualties were some of Ha Tien's important leaders.

The aftermath of the Burmese attack on Ayudhya helped to confirm the actual status of the Mac family rule in Ha Tien vis-à-vis the Nguyen rule. After the fall of Ayudhya to the Burmese in 1767, Mac Thien Tu attempted to position himself as a contender for power in Siam. He was hoping to do so by providing support to the third and fourth sons of the Siamese King, Prince Chien Thuy and

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<sup>138</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 30; *Nicholas Sellers, The Princes of Ha Tien*, p. 52. See also Mak Phoeun, "La Frontiere entre le Cambodge et Vietnam du XVIIe Siecle a l'instauration du Protectorat Francais Presente a Travers les Chroniques Royales Khmeres", P. B. Lafont (ed.), *Les Frontieres du Vietnam*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989, p. 141,

<sup>139</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 11: 5.

Chien Xi, who had escaped to Ha Tien to seek Mac Thien Tu's protection. Even though the plans failed, they nevertheless, demonstrated the independent status of Ha Tien.

After 1767, a new dynasty emerged in Bangkok. Phya Taksin, who was a governor of the Siamese province of Man Long on the Laotian borders, set himself up as king of Siam. Almost immediately after his ascension to the throne, he demanded tribute from Ang Tan of Cambodia who refused to entertain him. A Siamese army was sent under General Bon Ma, supported by a Cambodian contingent under Nac Non. A battle took place at La-Go where the Cambodians were supported by Mac Thien Tu's Ha Tien militia.<sup>140</sup> No Vietnamese forces were involved as political change in Phu Xuan, following the death of Nguyen Phuc Khoat had prevented a clear decision to be made. The Siamese army however, was forced to retreat.

Interestingly, despite their tussles over Cambodia and Ha Tien, trading and diplomatic activities between the Nguyen and the Siamese continued. This is evident from the manner in which Nguyen Phuc Khoat continued to allow Chinese trading junks travelling from Siam and Cambodia to trade in Hoi An.<sup>141</sup> A Siamese letter to Nguyen Phuc Khoat in 1754 highlighted the plight of the Siamese ships involved in the trade with China that drifted into the Nguyen domain. The letter complained how the crew and captains of the ships were not well treated by Nguyen officials, but were even subjected to a tax of certain percentage on the goods carried. The letter called on Nguyen Phuc Khoat to

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<sup>140</sup> *Mac Thi Gia Pha*, p.7-8.

<sup>141</sup> See tariff of ship from Siam during Nguyen Phuc Khoat's time, valued at 2,000 quan upon entry and 200 for exit, *Tien Bien*, Vol. 10: 26-27.

prohibit such practices and to ask for compensation in the form of money taken from these red seal ships.<sup>142</sup> What is interesting is the fact that though the two countries were engaged in a protracted hostility over Cambodia, it is evident that Siamese ships which came into Nguyen waters and ports were taxed, but not confiscated.

There are some features of the Nguyen-Siamese relations that provide some insights of the Nguyen's perception of their actual position in mainland Southeast Asia. In 1753, when a Nguyen delegation was returning from Ayudhya after negotiating with the Siamese Court for the release of some shipwrecked Vietnamese, the Siamese governor sent a letter complaining about the existence of a Vietnamese boat with 46 'pirates' who were robbing boats and people in Siamese waters. Nguyen Phuc Khoat replied angrily by criticizing the Siamese' pretentious intention in asking tribute from the Nguyen. This, according to the Nguyen letter was inappropriate as the Nguyen regarded Nguyen Southern Vietnam and Siam as equals. For this, the Nguyen reply linked the Nguyen-Siam relationship to the case of the four states of Qi, Chu, Yen and Zhao during the Warring States period in China.<sup>143</sup> Such admission on the part of the Nguyen in many ways demonstrated its position and power in the mainland Southeast Asia. While on one hand, the Nguyen were trying to play the role as the centre of a tributary system vis-à-vis its immediate neighbours, on another, it was realistic enough to equate its position with the Siamese when dealing directly with the latter.

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<sup>142</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 5:11.

<sup>143</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 5: 21.



Interestingly, even within its worldview, the Nguyen continued to look at the Siamese as equal to Vietnam. Thus, when Nguyen Phuc Anh (Emperor Gia Long, 1802-1819) proclaimed his new dynasty, Siam was not one of the 14 “tribute-sending states”, listed by the Nguyen which incidentally also included France, England and Burma.<sup>144</sup> Siam is not even mentioned in any of the sources referring to the pre-1802 period. Furthermore Nguyen Phuc Anh owed his position to the Siamese king who supported him during his long struggle against the Tay Son.

Thus, suffice to say that the Nguyen had since the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, regarded Siam as a major contender on mainland Southeast Asia. Successive Nguyen rulers had found that Siam was a formidable foe, but especially so in 1766 when Siam began to have an upper hand over the Nguyen in Cambodia. This stalemate was evident when Nguyen Phuc Khoat sent a letter to Ayudhya in 1751, stating his intention to invade Cambodia. In the letter, he explained that Cambodia was a tribute sending state.<sup>145</sup>

In 1769, Mac Thien Tu, taking opportunity of the absence of, general Phya Taksin, attacked Siam with the largest army he could muster. While the strength of the force was given as 50,000 men and 100 junks, the French historian Charles Maybon estimated the force to be a tenth of that figure.<sup>146</sup> All this time, Ha Tien was acting more like an independent political entity rather than being a part of Nguyen’s southern Vietnam. The Ha Tien-Siamese force however was quickly

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<sup>144</sup> Pham Su Truc, *Quoc Su Di Bien*, Chen Chingho (ed.), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Chinese University, Southeast Asian Research Centre, 1965, p. 88.

<sup>145</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 5: 22.

<sup>146</sup> Charles Maybon, *Histoire Moderne du Pays d'Annam, 1592-1820*, Paris: Librairie Plon, 1920, pp. 122-123.

depleted by an outbreak of cholera that destroyed the army. Mac Thien Tu was forced to retreat. It was not long before Ha Tien itself came under severe attack by Phya Taksin. In 1771, Ha Tien was destroyed and most of the Mac family were being carried off to Bangkok. Phya Taksin also took Phnom Penh and installed a new king, Ang Non. It was only after the death of Taksin that Mac Thien Tu was able to escape to Ha Tien with his family.

Throughout the Siamese attack, Mac Thien had appealed to the Vietnamese commander at Gia Dinh but to no avail. The commander, Khoi Duc Hau only reacted after the Siamese had destroyed Ha Tien. A Vietnamese force of 10,000 men was sent to attack the Siamese. A battle took place near Phnom Penh where the Siamese forces were defeated. The Nguyen army took the opportunity to reinstall Ang Ton on the Cambodian throne. However, Ang Ton was not well received by his people. He abdicated in favour of Ang Non. The latter was obliged to send tribute to both Siam and the Nguyen.

With the victory over the Siamese at Ha Tien, a Vietnamese garrison was established for the first time by the Nguyen at Ha Tien. The force consisted of 3,000 men, equipped with 300 European muskets. The setting up of the Nguyen garrison at Ha Tien marked the end of Ha Tien's autonomy. Since then, Mac Thien Tu never acted independently in foreign affair without consulting Phu Xuan. This further extended Nguyen's territorial boundaries.

The Nguyen's expansion into the Mekong Delta and its incorporation into the Nguyen sphere was an important part of the Nguyen's state-formation process.

By the incorporation of the new territory, the Nguyen's power base was strengthened considerably.

In its dealings with independent states grown strong like the Mac in Ha Tien, the Nguyen demonstrated a sophisticated level of diplomatic manoeuvring. The Mac like the Nguyen had grown strong owing to trade and were able to take advantage of bickering weak states namely on the part of the Mac and a resurgent Siam under Oya Taksin resulted in opportunities for the Nguyen.

In the political chessboard of Indochina the balance of power between east and west seemed to revolve around Siam and Nguyen Southern Vietnam. Both were at times threatened from the rear by the traditional enemies namely Burma from the west and the Trinh from the east. However, it was the decaying kingdoms and the loosely organised uplanders that were pawns for these two powers.

With reference to foreign relations, the example of Champa and later Cambodia reflects a realistic policy of aggression and subjugation. In the case of Ha Tien, it was diplomacy and opportunity which led to the expansion of Nguyen influence in the Mekong. As the Nguyen expanded to the south and to the west, it used weaker states as a buffer with the Siamese. Ultimately, this analysis of Nguyen foreign relations reveals that the Nguyen had developed to become a major power player in mainland Southeast Asia. This early experience paved the way for its later existence as a dynasty with claims to the Mekong in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Decline and End of Nguyen Rule, 1765-1776**

The unilateral proclamation of Nguyen Phuc Khoat as Vuong (king) in 1744 marks the zenith of the Nguyen rule in southern Vietnam. This fulfilment of its vaulting ambition resulted in its downfall. The administrative reforms that were carried out by the Nguyen were a financial disaster. Nguyen Phuc Khoat's effort in styling himself and his court by assuming the manner of a royal household was a severe drain on the kingdom's finances. Massive construction projects especially in the building of the royal palaces that befitted the new status had put a severe strain on the Nguyen treasury. Things became even more serious when Nguyen Phuc Khoat neglected state affairs, and left the day-to-day administration to his senior ministers. Despite Nguyen Phuc Khoat's good disposition towards him, Pierre Poivre was highly critical of the king who was neglecting the affairs of state. According to Poivre, the King indulged in many forms of pleasures and maintained a harem of 300 which he hardly leaves. The affairs of the kingdom were left to three or four mandarins who "abuse the power he gives them and tyrannize the people ... Besides the inordinate tributes .... The people suffered in the hands of the mandarins with little avenue to redress the problem".<sup>147</sup>

The chief of the mandarins mentioned by Poivre was Truong Phuc Loan, who was the maternal uncle of Nguyen Phuc Khoat, and the father-in-law to two of Nguyen Phuc Khoat's daughters.<sup>148</sup> Truong Phuc Loan's position, both

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<sup>147</sup> Pierre Poivre, "Description de la Cochinchine", p. 86

<sup>148</sup> For a biography of Truong Phuc Loan, see *Liet Truyen Tien Bien*, Vol. 6: 34-36.

political and financial was consolidated when Nguyen Phuc Khoat passed away in 1765. Nguyen Phuc Khoat's official heir, his eldest son, Trang died before him. This was followed by his new heir, the ninth son, Nhat who also died in 1760. After that Nguyen Phuc Khoat appointed his second son as his successor.<sup>149</sup> When Nguyen Phuc Khoat passed away, Truong Phuc Loan started his scheme to place his nominee on the throne. He first had Nguyen Phuc Khoat's second son Nguyen Truong Khoang arrested under the pretext of casting his own cannons, an act of treason.<sup>150</sup> He then placed Nguyen Phuc Thuan, who was the 19<sup>th</sup> son of Nguyen Phuc Khoat on the throne.<sup>151</sup> As Nguyen Phuc Thuan was only 12 years old, Truong Phuc Loan assumed the title of regent and manipulated the minor for his own gain.

In order to silence opposition, Loan had his main rivals, Truong Van Tan, one of the main ministers of the kingdom assassinated. Earlier, Tan was entrusted by Nguyen Phuc Khoat to put his second son on the throne. Truong Phuc Loan also had the director of the Han Lam Academy, Le Cao Ky killed.<sup>152</sup> The pieces fell in place when Nguyen Phuc Khoat's second son, Truong Khoang, died a broken man in internment.<sup>153</sup> Without the interference of these ministers and a potential claimant to the throne, Truong Phuc Loan's control over the government was complete.

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<sup>149</sup> The second son was the father of Nguyen Phuc Anh, who established the later Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1945), and reigned with the title of Gia Long (1802-1819). As it was the practice of not giving the personal name of the king, his name is not given in the *Tien Bien*.

<sup>150</sup> This information is found in *PBTL*, Vol. 6: 21-22, which also provided us with his name, Nguyen Truong Khoang.

<sup>151</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 11: 1-2.

<sup>152</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 11: 1.

<sup>153</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 6: 22; *Tien Bien* gives the impression that the second son died in 1765, *Tien Bien*, Vol. 11: 2.

Nguyen Phuc Khoat's grandeur designs for his kingdom was not matched by his son, Nguyen Phuc Thuan. Le Quy Don, the Court historian had very poor opinion of Thuan whom he considered weak and not knowledgeable. According to Don, Thuan who was only twelve when he was made king, was a boy who was fond of playing, singing and dancing. He was also known to be engaged in unnatural relationships with palace courtiers and boys.<sup>154</sup> This had allowed Truong Phuc Loan, to take further control of the rein of government.<sup>155</sup> Upon coming to throne, Nguyen Phuc Thuan appointed Truong Phuc Loan as the prime minister (Quoc Pho), and the minister in-charge of Ho Bo (Board of Revenue), the central elephant force, and as harbour master. Loan was also granted the revenue collected from the various districts of Thu Ban, Kim Thuan, Huong Tra, Son Tra and other hill tribes in Thuan Hoa. Other than this huge income, which Le Quy Don mention as totalling around 40,000 to 50,000 quan per year, Loan's other income came from his control over the harbour and the Board of Revenue, which was estimated at around 30,000 to 40,000 quan annually. He was also reported to have received annual gifts from his subordinates in the form of money, weighing five picul.<sup>156</sup> Truong Phuc Loan was only obliged to pay one-twelfth in taxes.<sup>157</sup>

The extravagant way of life practiced by the Nguyen and the ruling class in Nguyen Southern Vietnam had severe implications on the survival of the entire state. Complacency had crept into the Nguyen psychology so badly that the army

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<sup>154</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 1: 39.

<sup>155</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 1: 41.

<sup>156</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 6: 22.

<sup>157</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 11: 4.

was reported to be poorly fed and shabbily dressed. Pierre Poivre's account of 1749 demonstrated how the Nguyen had not kept up with the times. Since Da Cruz's death in 1682, no new cannons were procured or cast. The cannons Poivre inspected were made between 1650-1660. Even though his son, Clement was still living in Nguyen Vietnam in 1697,<sup>158</sup> the skill was not inherited, neither had there been any report of Vietnamese having mastered the skill in making European-styled guns. When John Crawford visited Hue (Phu Xuan) in 1821, he also recounted how some of the Nguyen's armoury and artillery pieces were those cast during the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>159</sup> This complacency was probably due to the long duration of peace that was in place since the military standstill with the Trinh in 1672.

The deteriorating state of the Nguyen's defences also demonstrated that the Nguyen did not acquire the technological knowledge so important for military power. The antiquity of the Nguyen cannons was to have a lasting impact of the defence of the nation. Thus when the Tay Son rebellion broke out in 1771, the Nguyen army was unable to put them down.

Other than Loan, who was considered the main cause in the deteriorating state of the Nguyen rule, another related factor that further contributed to the decline and fall of the Nguyen was Nguyen Phuc Khoat and later, Nguyen Phuc Thuan's lackadaisical control of the administration and finances of the kingdom. Pierre Poivre's observation on the various abuses caused by the mandarins,

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<sup>158</sup> "Father Pierre Langlois to his superior (possibly Perez?)", 15 March 1699, AMEP: Cochinchine, Vol. 726, f. 269.

<sup>159</sup> John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy to the Court of Siam and Cochinchina*, first published 1828, this edition, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 283.

mentioned earlier, were a direct result of Nguyen Phuc Khoat's decision to sell positions and titles freely to bidders. Le Quy Don reported how mismanagement was rampant and that there was a sharp decline in morality. Even more troubling, Don highlighted, was the corrupt way of life in the Nguyen domain.<sup>160</sup>

Loan's excessive abuse of power was also mentioned by Le Quy Don who had conducted an investigation. According to Don, who obtained his information from Le Cong Binh, a former Nguyen official, Nguyen Phuc Thuan only trusted Truong Phuc Loan in all affairs of state. But Loan used his position to enrich himself. His two sons, who were married to the daughters of Nguyen Phuc Khoat were also known to be most corrupt. Although both of them held the rank of a Cai Khe, in-charge of separate military units, they were drunk most of the time. The younger son kept a harem of 120 women in his household.<sup>161</sup>

By 1770, the Nguyen rule in southern Vietnam entered a period of severe economic difficulty. This brought hardship to the people. Although foreign trade continued, it was unable to sustain an internal economy diseased with low productivity and poor financial management.

Ever since Nguyen Phuc Khoat had introduced the use of *tutenag* for minting money, the value of the Nguyen currency declined progressively. This was caused by an over supply of the *tutenag* money while the earnings of the ordinary people remained low. Many also resorted to minting money illegally in order to make a profit from the process. This inevitably further inflated the prices

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<sup>160</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 6: 21.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*



of basic goods.<sup>162</sup> The inflated grain prices however, did not benefit the farmers who had to sell their produce to the government granaries at normal prices, but the government resold them to the people at very high prices. This had resulted in many farmers abandoning their farms altogether. The only people who gained from such transactions were the grain merchants. Another related problem was the rice merchant's reluctance to sell rice locally as it was more profitable to ship the grain to Phu Xuan. At one point, grain shipped from Gia Dinh to Phu Xuan would earn the merchant twice the amount he would get for selling the grain at Gia Dinh. This resulted in a shortage of grain at the local level.

The inflated prices for daily food requirements and the shortage of grains at local levels brought severe difficulties to the people. Near famine conditions prevailed. The land also became infertile, having suffered from overuse. Le Quy Don made the observation that earlier, places like Gia Dinh was sparsely populated, and the land was rich. Hence, even when the size of the military had increased, the people did not starve.<sup>163</sup> But by the time Nguyen Phuc Thuan started his reign, the land was heavily populated and became poor in quality. Even the resources of the land were stripped empty.

To make things worse, abuse of power was rampant. Most officials who had obtained their positions through the purchase of titles began to oppress the people. There was a decline in the quality of administration for appointing lesser men to positions of responsibility. Apart from that, many of these new appointees also wanted to recoup the money spent in acquiring their positions by engaging in

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<sup>162</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 5: 40-41.

<sup>163</sup> *PBTL*, Vol. 5: 40.

unscrupulous activities. Hence, any chance of obtaining a redress by the ordinary people was slim as observed by Poivre in as early as 1750.<sup>164</sup>

The severe economic conditions coupled with poor administration, especially through excessive abuse of power by officials inevitably brought about reaction from the people. Poivre observed how many in Thuan Hoa and Quang Nam, over burdened with taxes and tyranny, fled to neighbouring islands, while others escaped to the mountains of Cambodia and went as far as the kingdom of Siam and even Condore Islands.<sup>165</sup> While it is difficult to verify Poivre's claims, especially regarding those who escaped to Siam, suffice to say that since 1750, life was getting very difficult for the Viet people living in Nguyen Southern Vietnam.

Others who were equally affected by the problems, but less intimidated by the administration, took to arms and created a series of protests and rebellions in their localities. Even though the compilers of *Tien Bien* did not record the occurrence of rebellions as religiously as the northern historians who compiled the *Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu*, there were at least several rebellions recorded, including the most severe of them all, the Tay Son rebellion of 1771.

There was the culmination of a series of rebellions plaguing a decaying bureaucracy. The Tay Son was started in Binh Dinh by three brothers. It was the largest peasant uprising that started in a mountainous district of Tay Son in Binh Dinh. It was the Tay Son rebellion that led to the fall of Nguyen rule.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Pierre Poivre, "Description de la Cochinchine", p. 110.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>166</sup> There are many works dedicated to the Tay Son, most of them are found in *Thu Muc ve Tau Son Nguyen Hue (A Bibliography on the Tay Son and Nguyen Hue)*, Nghia Binh: Uy Ban Khoa

Other than the above internal factors that had contributed to the decline and fall of the Nguyen rule in southern Vietnam, the Nguyen's territorial expansion policy between 1694 and 1771 also led to its weakened state.

Since Nguyen Phuc Chu's annexation of Champa in 1694, the Nguyen had been actively engaged in the expansion of its power and influence over Cambodia. The momentum built up during the Nguyen's success over Champa had helped to propel its influence first over Gia Dinh in 1698 and eventually, over part of the Cambodian territories in the Mekong Delta. The Nguyen also installed their sponsored Cambodian rulers on the Cambodian throne. The effect of this successful venture in the south however, began to take heavy toll on the Nguyen's administrative effectiveness and its financial situation.

The Nguyen's expansion into Cambodia however, was more problematic and nearly crippled its finances. The initial Nguyen success in annexing Gia Dinh area and the imposition of a pro-Nguyen Cambodian ruler on the Cambodian throne was followed by a protracted struggle to maintain that position. Expansion into the Mekong Delta brought about greater territorial control but the economic gains did not commensurate with expenses incurred. The submission of Ha Tien through the family of Mac Cuu in 1711 as discussed earlier, had also helped the Nguyen to expand further into the Cambodian Mekong Delta, leaving the region between Tien Giang and Ha Tien sandwiched in between. However, the territorial gains it made also presented the Nguyen with the problem of exerting effective control over these newly annexed territories.

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Hoc-Ky Thuat, 1988. The production of this volume coincided with the historical rehabilitation of the Tay Son by the Vietnam Communist Party in 1988. The most recent assessment of the Tay Son is by Li Tana in her *Nguyen Cochinchina*, pp. 139-154.

In its expansion into the region beyond Gia Dinh, the Nguyen was faced with problems in terms of administration. Even though Gia Dinh was made a prefecture, it had to be administered from Quang Nam, which continued to serve as the centre of administration for the southern region. This process rendered poor administrative control over the Mekong region. All forms of command and directives would take considerable time before reaching Gia Dinh. Likewise, it would take several days before a certain message could be delivered to the Nguyen Court. The distance between Phu Xuan and Mekong Delta not only complicates communication but had also eroded any form of direct control by Phu Xuan over its newly acquired territories. The problem of distance and complicating chain of command is most apparent during the Nguyen military campaigns in the Mekong Delta in 1689 and 1690 when local commanders chose to make decisions on the spot without referring to Phu Xuan.<sup>167</sup>

The effect of this loose control is evident among the ranks of the Nguyen officers who were given a free hand to exercise power in the provinces. Many took the opportunity to carry out activities that were aimed at personal gain. Many also wanted to recoup the money they paid for the positions they held. The situation became critical when abuses were rampant to the extent of creating tension within the local population.

Apart from distance which prevented effective communication between Phu Xuan and the Mekong region, there was also the problem of the inability of the administrative structure to cope with the rapid territorial expansion. The lack of an effective administrative structure led to a weakening of Nguyen's territorial

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<sup>167</sup> *Tien Bien*, Vol. 6: 8-17.

integrity. That no new administrative units were created since the establishment of Gia Dinh prefecture administration in 1698 is a case in point. By itself, Gia Dinh simply could not cope with the administration of the newly acquired territories in the Mekong Delta. To further compound the problem, the territory beyond Gia Dinh was a contested region between the Nguyen and a pro-Siam Cambodia.

Nguyen control of the Mekong region was also challenged by Siam. Since 1698, Nguyen expansion into the Mekong Delta had been met with resistance from a Cambodia that was backed by Siam. The Siamese presence had impeded the Nguyen's efforts in the total annexation of the Mekong Delta. In addition to its efforts to support a pro-Nguyen Cambodian ruler, the Nguyen also had to face with the need to defend Ha Tien from being attacked by the Siamese as it did on many occasions. For the Siamese, Ha Tien was the entry point to the most accessible route to attack the Cambodians at Oudong.<sup>168</sup> The many military engagements that broke out between the Nguyen and the pro-Siam Cambodians and Siam that lasted between 1711 and 1765 further drained its treasury.

The combination of both internal and external factors that had taken place between 1698 and 1771 contributed to the demise of the Nguyen. This decline is strangely the paradoxical result of its military success

Nguyen expansionism into the Mekong was originally aimed at strengthening its position as a major military power. This it succeeded in achieving when it was acknowledged as an equal to Siam. However, the demise of Nguyen Phuc Khoat and the ensuing power struggle at its own court, ironically left the Nguyen in the same situation as its weakened neighbours.

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<sup>168</sup> Li Tana, *Nguyen Cochinchina*, p. 143.

As argued throughout this study, Nguyen foreign relations are dictated by its internal needs. Even though the military campaigns were successful, the rotten bureaucracy was unable to exploit the situation. Nguyen's decay and downfall was swift.

If the 1672 stalemate with the Trinh allowed the Nguyen to project its military might southwards, its stalemate with Siam in 1750s, left it weakened and over-extended. The final nail in its coffin was an internal rebellion and an attack from its old enemy, which it could easily repulsed if not for its weakened internal conditions.

With the Nguyen's protracted efforts to maintain its position in the Mekong Delta its energy and resources had been greatly drained to the extent that it was unable to react effectively when the Tay Son rebellion broke out in 1771.

With the Nguyen's continued military defeats by the Tay Son between 1771 and 1775, the Trinh in the north launched an all-out attack against the Nguyen in 1775. The Nguyen army machinery collapsed. This eventually brought about the end of Nguyen rule in southern Vietnam in 1776.

## **Conclusion**

By the time the Nguyen capital Phu Xuan fell to the Trinh army in 1775, Nguyen rule had extended its power to incorporate the area that constitutes what is present day southern Vietnam. This means that the original territories under Nguyen Hoang's governorship of Thuan Hoa and Quang Nam had actually doubled – at the expense of first, the Champa Kingdom, and later, the Khmer

Kingdom. While the conquest of Champa had extended the Vietnamese coastlines extensively, it yielded a much narrower strip of land, half of which were highlands and mountains. On the other hand, the Vietnamese venture into Cambodia resulted in their controlling almost half of the total territories of the Nguyen rule. And with that also came the entire Mekong Delta, perhaps the richest of all the territories in southern Vietnam.

The acquisition and incorporation of this vast area of territories by the Nguyen however, did not come by easily. While the Vietnamese were militarily stronger, the efforts to maintain its position in the Mekong Delta was a difficult task, especially in face of challenges from the Siamese.

Finally, it was a combination of both internal weaknesses and overextension of power that had brought about the downfall of the Nguyen rule in southern Vietnam. Nguyen Phuc Khoat's unilateral proclamation as King and his military intervention in Cambodia probably marked the height of Nguyen rule in southern Vietnam. But they were not matched by the his management of state affairs and finances. These problems spilled into the reign of Nguyen Phuc Thuan who was too weak to institute timely changes in order to curb the decline. By then, the rein of government fell to Truong Phuc Loan, whose greed and manipulation of power only expedited the fall of Nguyen rule in southern Vietnam. In the case of foreign relations, the Nguyen's rapid expansion to the south and the protracted campaign in the Mekong Delta drained the state of its valuable resources to the extent that it had greatly weakened the Nguyen's

resilience and ability to react to the military might of the Tay Son and later, the  
Trinh.



## Conclusion

This study started out with an investigation of the foreign relations of the Nguyen rulers of southern Vietnam during the period from 1558 when the Nguyen rule was established to 1776 when it ended.

In looking at the development of Nguyen rule, it began with the banishment of Nguyen Hoang from the Le Court to Thuan Hoa province in 1558 where he served as governor. However, in the course of 17<sup>th</sup> century, as the Nguyen were able to build their sphere of influence in the south vis-à-vis their neighbours, developed the internal governmental structure, the Nguyen began to act as independent state. By early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Nguyen had clearly transformed their position from being loyal servants of Le to become rulers of a de facto state in the South.

The beginning of this transformation can be traced to the time of Nguyen Hoang. In his efforts to re-establish the family's formerly eminent position in the central government, Nguyen Hoang was unsuccessful. This study takes the position that with the central government firmly in the hands of the Trinh family, Nguyen Hoang had since 1600, turned his attention to building a power base in the south. At the same time, he did not sever his ties with the Le Court but remained hopeful in reinstating the family in the highest hierarchy of power in the Le Court. This was a two-prong strategy that Nguyen Hoang and his successors sought to implement.

Strategy one is based on the consideration of building a separate power-base in the south, with the view of realising the objective of the building of a

separate state. In strategy two, the Nguyen were to maintain their links with the view of waiting for the opportunity to return to their rightful position as the premier aristocrat family in the Le Court, now under the control of the rival family, the Trinh Lords. The pursuit of this second strategy would go as far to the point where it was no longer feasible for the Nguyen to realise their goal in re-establishing themselves as the premier family in the Le Court. Only when there was no chance of that would the Nguyen abandon strategy two and go all out to pursue strategy one.

The pursuit of this two-prong strategy as described in this study is present in the various policies of all Nguyen rulers, beginning with Nguyen Phuc Nguyen who broke with the central government resulting in a civil war that lasted from 1627 to 1672. As discussed in Chapter Two, this situation shaped the early phase of the Nguyen's foreign relations. Trading activities and the occupation of Southern Vietnam proper, gave the Nguyen a new sense of being rooted to their contemporary situation. It must be acknowledged that in this early period, this sense of being a new state was tempered by nostalgia for the Le Court.

One important consequence of this break with the north is the increase by the Nguyen in exercising de facto rule including the conduct of foreign relations with their neighbours and foreign visitors. Nguyen foreign relations have to be understood in the context of the state formation process. The underlying factor being the employment of foreign relations to realise their ambition of defeating the Trinh and to firmly entrench themselves in southern Vietnam. This important phase also solidified for the Nguyen their first impressions of foreign traders,

missionaries and its neighbours characterised by the decaying Cham and Cambodian powers. It is not surprising that the Nguyen thought of itself in highly ornamental terms. Throughout its reign, the Nguyen saw itself as the rightful heirs of the Le Court and in its rebirth in southern Vietnam, felt itself the central military and civilising force. In other words, the Nguyen learned the dynamics of war and power.

This self-image is important when we consider what constituted Nguyen foreign relations. In this study, foreign relations refers to state-to-state relations as well as all forms of contacts with external entities – foreign nationals (traders, missionaries) and non-state groups (non-Vietnamese elements within or beyond its boundaries). Secondly, due to the war and the exigencies of having to immediately deal with 'situations', Nguyen foreign policy in the early phase was definitely propelled by emerging circumstances. If a foreign policy theory has to be applied to elucidate this situation then this study has shown that Nguyen approach to foreign policy is a realist one and is similar to the neo-classical European situation.

This thesis shows that by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Nguyen had shifted their position from being traditionally bound to their northern rulers to being an independent nation with its identity forged in south Vietnam. In relation to the central thesis, four aspects are covered in this study. Firstly, the Nguyen became a de facto kingdom through the exercise of foreign relations. Secondly, the evolution in the growing strength of the Nguyen made possibility of a separate statehood real. Thirdly, a tributary system was being built up through the

Nguyen's relations with smaller nations. And finally, apart from exercising foreign relations, the Nguyen also devoted their efforts in developing internal government apparatus in order to consolidate its position as a polity. This is especially evident after 1672.

In the first instance, the Nguyen had used foreign relations to bolster their image where they were placed in a position to act as a de facto independent state. Geographically and politically separated from the Le Court in the north by the 1627-1672 Nguyen-Trinh War, the Nguyen were thrust into the position of acting as a de facto kingdom, especially in their dealings with foreigners and neighbours. The Nguyen had to react to these foreign elements just as a sovereign state would do so. This amounts to the exercise of authority as de facto rulers of a state.

Contemporaries who were in Nguyen Southern Vietnam also saw the Nguyen as rulers of southern Vietnam. Among the foreign travellers who were in Nguyen Southern Vietnam were Christoforo Borri (1617-1621), Alexander de Rhodes (1624-1645), Da Shan (1695-96), Thomas Bowyear (1695), who repeatedly referred to the Nguyen rulers as Kings and their territories as a kingdom. The Nguyen's de facto status of independent ruler was also acknowledged by their rivals, the Trinh. In fact, it was based on this perception that the Trinh had regarded the Nguyen as a renegade regime.

When the Nguyen felt that they were strong enough after the civil war with the Trinh came to a stand still in 1672, they began to build on their growing strength in order to look into the possibility of becoming an independent state. Efforts in the promotion of trade, the improvement of the administrative system

and the development of religious and cultural activities were keenly pursued. As a culmination to these efforts, the Nguyen in 1702 again drew on foreign relations as a means of attaining their goal by obtaining political recognition from China. Even though the attempt failed, the possibility of attaining independent statehood remained a goal that was unilaterally 'announced' when Nguyen Phuc Khoat declared himself as *vuong* (king) in 1744.

In spite of the importance of foreign relations as a tool to achieve its purpose of state formation, the Nguyen did not have the luxury to formulate a foreign policy, but to react to circumstances and actual situations as they emerged or happened. This is particularly apparent in the discussion in Chapters Two and Three where the Nguyen, being in a weaker position (*vis-à-vis* the Trinh and even occasionally *vis-à-vis* their southern neighbours, Champa and Cambodia), had to adopt a 'Realist' approach when they did not strictly enforce tribute collection.

The Nguyen's realist approach in conducting foreign relations is most apparent during the course of the Nguyen-Trinh war of 1627-1672. During this period when Nguyen survival was threatened by a militarily more powerful Trinh force, they fully utilised foreign relations as a means to bolster the Nguyen's position. This included the opening up of Nguyen Southern Vietnam to international trade through which strategic materials could be obtained, and the coffers of the state enriched. The Nguyen also used marriage diplomacy with Cambodia and Champa when daughters of Nguyen rulers were married off to the Kings of Cambodia and Champa in 1618 and 1631 respectively. The marriages helped to secure peace for the Nguyen in the south when it was facing severe

threat from the Trinh in the north as discussed in Chapter Three. However, when the Nguyen had become stronger in the post-1672 period, it began to intervene in Cambodia and conquered Champa, as traced in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

The Nguyen's treatment of westerners also reflects a realist approach. Throughout their rule, the Nguyen were apt at making use of the Christian missionaries in their capacities as interpreters, mathematicians, teachers, court physicians and astrologers as well as intermediaries to procure arms and strategic materials. This study found that the religious xenophobia factor was not the basis for the anti-Christian campaigns which were actually launched before Nguyen military campaigns against the Trinh, Champa and Cambodia. This indicating that the security factor was paramount.

The exception to this realist approach only came about when the Nguyen felt strong enough to impose tributary relations on its neighbours, notably, on Champa when tribute was first exacted in 1653 and on Cambodia in 1658. Since then, tributary relations became a common practice of the Nguyen in conducting its foreign policy, particularly towards weaker states. The Nguyen's understanding of tributary relations came from the Chinese model of a tributary system. Their adoption of such practices has to be seen in the context of China as the dominant power in Southeast Asia during the early modern era, if not earlier. There were others who also practised tributary relations in Southeast Asia including Burma, Siam and even Vietnam (Le Government) on the mainland and Malacca, Brunei and Sulu in the insular states. The Nguyen also went further in according royal status to rulers and chieftains of uplander tribes as in their

treatment of the Jarai. The imposition of tributary relations by the Nguyen on weaker states signified the assumption of de facto independent status. It also demonstrated the existence of a tributary structure which places the uplander tribes as states under the suzerainty of the Nguyen.

This thesis addresses the question of the growth of the Nguyen state through the study of its foreign relations. Two earlier studies by Li Tana and Yang Baoyun have explored the issue of the growth of Nguyen statehood by examining internal growth and development. These two works are important as the take-off point to further studies on the Nguyen of southern Vietnam, where their focus has been on socio-economic and administrative aspects with their coverage on foreign relations and foreign policy not as detailed. It is the hope of this thesis to fill this gap by addressing the foreign relations dimension in order to contribute another piece of the picture of southern Vietnam under the Nguyen from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century to 18<sup>th</sup> century.