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# Application of Center-Periphery Theory to the Study of Vietnam-China Relations in the Middle Ages\*

Nguyen Thi My Hanh\*\*

Based on the generalizations in international researchers' views on the relationship between the center and the periphery, the author maps out a theory on the relationship between Vietnam (as the periphery) and China (as the center of East Asia) during feudalism. On the basis of the theory of central-peripheral relationships and the realities of a diplomatic relationship between Vietnam and China during feudalism, the article proves not only that China considered itself to be the center of East Asia with the role of "educating" surrounding peripheries, but also that surrounding countries were influenced by Chinese Confucian ideologies. For example, Vietnam also followed the Chinese-centric order. Accordingly, acts such as requesting investiture and tribute from Vietnam to the "center" (China) were sustained for a long period, although there was no balance in interest between the two countries. In addition to the subordinate tendency of the periphery in relation to the center, there is a centrifugal tendency because of the asymmetry in interest. In the case of the Vietnam-China relationship at that time, Vietnam's subordinate tendency was relative and superficial, while the centrifugal tendency was mainstream. The author shows that the strong centrifugal tendency led to the transformation of Vietnam's position from a Chinese vassal/peripheral state into a center in relationships with smaller countries in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** center, periphery, subordinate tendency, centrifugal tendency, Chinese-centric order

## Introduction

The center-periphery theory and the interaction between the two elements is a well-established research subject. At the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, some scientists of the geography-anthropology school, such as L. Frobenius, F. Ratse (Ratzel 1882), and F. Grabner (1911) introduced diffusionism theory to explain

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the geographic spread of culture. Since then, many researchers around the world have continued to discuss the multidimensional interaction between the center and periphery on a geopolitical level from the perspectives of political sociology (Galtung 1971; Gunder Frank 1971; Naustdalslid 1974) and cultural anthropology (Wissler 1922). Furthermore, several researchers have discussed the cultural interaction between the center and periphery, with the periphery receiving the spread and dissemination of the central culture. In fact, the center-periphery concept is used for different purposes, but all are based on the idea that societal relations can be analyzed using the center-periphery model, and that the relationship between center and periphery is of fundamental importance for an understanding of the society or sector of society one is concerned with (McKenzie 1977, 55–74). Within the scope of this article, the author can only select some of the most prominent works that deal directly with the relationship between the center and the periphery as well as the degree of interaction between them to illuminate a specific case. This case is the diplomatic relationship between the great nation of China (regarded as the center) and the smaller country of Vietnam (considered the periphery) since the beginning of the tenth century.

The period of study begins in 938, when Vietnam gained independence after centuries of Chinese rule, and ends in 1885, when France and China signed the Tianjin Treaty ending the tributary relationship between Vietnam and China. Vietnam was no longer a vassal state of China, nor did it see China as a mother country anymore; instead, it depended on France (*Documents diplomatiques* 1885, 259–260). During this period, the relationship between China and Vietnam was indeed a relationship between two nations, between two sovereign states. At the same time, this was also when Vietnam was a peripheral, or vassal, state in its relations with China and under the tributary system of which China was the center. It should be noted that the periods immediately before 938, when Vietnam was a Chinese district, and after 1885, when Vietnam was a French colony, are not suitable for applying center-periphery theory. This is because the relationship between Vietnam and China just before the tenth century and after 1885 was essentially a relationship between geopolitical entities in which Vietnam was not an independent state that had the right to take the initiative in diplomatic relations with China.

The current study focuses on the following problems: What are the similarities and differences between this central-peripheral relationship at the regional level and center-periphery theory? In addition to being a cultural center, did China cultivate other superior elements to form its own “center” in the contemporary East Asian order? As a peripheral country, was Vietnam somehow attracted to Chinese culture, politics, and economy? Was Vietnam completely absorbed into the orbit of the Chinese center, or did it ceaselessly attempt to be centrifugal, to itself become a center in Southeast Asia with

a similar position to China? In the present context, China's strong rise—coupled with its ambition of establishing an Asia-centric world order in which it is in a global dominant position—is becoming a challenge for many countries in the region and around the world. Therefore, studying the above questions using the center-periphery model is necessary in order to draw lessons that can be applied to the current context.

This article begins with an overview of the center-periphery theory as discussed in the works of prominent scholars such as John Scott, Gordon Marshall, Edward Shils, Samuel P. Huntington, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Brantly Womack. The article does not mention every aspect of center-periphery theory but focuses on the most fundamental issues of the theory that can be applied to relations between Vietnam and China in the tenth to nineteenth centuries. In addition to pointing out the strengths of this theory, the author also points out the shortcomings. Subsequently, this article applies the basic tenets of the theory to the practical study of Chinese-Vietnamese relations from the tenth century to the nineteenth century, a period in which China played a central role and Vietnam acted as a peripheral state. The paper concludes with the parallels between theory and practice, as well as pointing out the contributions and additions of practice to theory.

## Center-Periphery Theory

The concept of center and periphery is becoming popular in social science research. In the literature there are many pairs of concepts with similar categories, such as nucleus and periphery, core and periphery, urban and suburban satellite, and urban and suburban. Whatever it is called, no researcher can deny the interaction between center and periphery. As the English sociologists Scott and Marshall said, “The centre-periphery (or core-periphery) model is a spatial metaphor which describes and attempts to explain the structural relationship between the advanced or metropolitan ‘center’ and a less developed ‘periphery’” (Scott and Marshall 1994, 71). Accordingly, it is impossible to determine what an advanced center is if it is not placed in a comparable position with less advanced peripheries. Thus, there is no center without a periphery, and vice versa: there can be no periphery without a center for reference.

The center-periphery theory, born in capitalist countries, is used by researchers to refer to the relationship between developed capitalist societies and developing countries, with the former playing the role of center and the latter existing as peripheries. However, because of the universality of this theory, it is now applied to research not only in the capitalist world but also in various social regimes and in geography, cultural anthropology,

literature, or diplomatic history.

The theory of the relationship between the center and periphery shows three points of view, with almost opposite opinions. The first shows that the relationship is based on consensus rather than confrontation. The typical expression of this opinion was stated by the American sociologist Shils (1910–95) in his “Center and Periphery” (1961). He made a great contribution by introducing the center-periphery concept into the social scientific academic vocabulary. According to Shils, no confrontation exists between the center and periphery: there is always a certain consensus. The center (on a cultural level) is the place where traditional values converge, especially rituals and sacred beliefs, and it receives prestige from peripheral countries. Accordingly, Shils defines the center concept as something that is paramount and extremely sacred in the field of symbols, values, and creeds (Shils 1961a, 117; 1975, 3). He uses the concept of center-periphery when examining the relationship between cities and provinces in a country (Shils 1961a). Through the specific case of cities and provinces in India, he clarifies the relationship between the center (city) and periphery (province). According to Shils, the city is the center of vitality and a cradle of creativity, while the provinces are rude, unimaginative, clumsy, subtle, crude, mediocre, and narrow. He realizes that in order to have “affluent dependence” and not be impoverished, provinces (peripheries) need to be culturally saved by the center (city), which has a respectable culture (Shils 1961b). From that respect, the center causes the periphery to follow it. This thought is the premise for the diffusionism theory, which discusses characteristics of culture and the diffusion of culture from the center to the periphery. The propagation of culture from the center to the periphery was later described by Robert Winthrop in his *Dictionary of Concepts in Cultural Anthropology* as being “both contingent and arbitrary” (Winthrop 1991, 83–84).

Contrary to Shils’s point of view, there is a second opinion stream represented by Huntington. Huntington is well known for his work “The Clash of Civilizations?” (1993), which was later developed into a book titled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996). In his opinion, “Civilization identity will be more important in the future, and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight major civilizations.” These civilizations include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Muslim, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and possibly African (Huntington 1993, 22). Thus, Huntington divided the world into seven—possibly eight—civilizations. He states that when looking at the relationship between the center of a civilization and its periphery, he sees no consensus and cooperation like Shils did; rather, he predicts (almost asserts) a clash among them: “Conflict between civilizations will be the latest phase in the evolution of conflict in the modern world” (*ibid.*, 25).

Not agreeing with the views of either Shils or Huntington, the American scientists

Wallerstein and Womack came up with a fairly neutral view between the two. Although they do not specifically mention center-periphery theory, the asymmetric theory of international relations, which Womack put forward, is essentially about asymmetry in the relationship between the center and the periphery, between larger and smaller countries. From works such as “Asymmetry Theory and China’s Concept of Multipolarity” (Womack 2004, 351–366), *China and Vietnam: Politics and Asymmetry* (Womack 2006), “Asymmetry and China’s Tributary System” (Womack 2012a, 37–54), and *Asymmetry and International Relationships* (Womack 2012b), we see that Womack chose China as the main axis in his study of international relations in Asia. China’s centrality to its neighbors gives it territorial and political advantages in the forms of security, wealth, and economic prosperity, especially in times of weakness and political disorientation among its neighbors (Womack 2012a, 39). In particular, the influence of Chinese Confucian culture on neighboring countries and, consequently, the survival of the tributary system for a long time makes Womack recognize China as a “solid center” in comparison with other centers around the world. In this regard, Womack states: “In contrast to the traditional West that had a ‘liquid center’—the Mediterranean—around and through which regimes swirled, China has been Asia’s ‘solid center’ of greatest productivity and population” (*ibid.*). However, he still has to acknowledge the relative power of the relationship between the center and the periphery, between large and small countries. According to him, it is an asymmetric relationship: the smaller countries always carry their “vulnerability” (Womack 2004, 365). If “larger states are prudent, consultative and cooperative . . . smaller states are less likely to be worried about their vulnerability” and thus will “tend to accept the international order led by the larger state because it is inclusive of their interests” (*ibid.*). Conversely, when large countries do not cooperate with small countries and threaten their interests—actions that make small countries vulnerable—the tendency to become dependent decreases, even to the point of the two sides confronting each other. Thus, Womack affirms, “The key to a peaceful frontier did not lie in dominating neighbors, but rather in managing a mutually acceptable relationship” (Womack 2012a, 42). In addition, he points out that one of the most important factors that can weaken China’s central position is the expansion of other peripheral relationships around the center (*ibid.*, 44).

Wallerstein’s views are similar to Womack’s. In more than 20 books and more than 300 scientific papers, Wallerstein discusses world system theory associated with a central-peripheral perspective. Although his theory is based on the study of European cases and capitalism, many of his arguments are generalized, reflecting the universal nature of central-peripheral relationships around the world through historical periods.

Among his works, the four-volume *The Modern World-System* can be considered the

most representative. In Volume 1, *Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (Wallerstein 1974), and Volume 4, *Centrist Liberalism Triumphant, 1789–1914* (Wallerstein 2011), Wallerstein initially shows unequal development relations among countries in the same world system. Specifically, he emphasizes inequality and exploitation between the center and periphery: resources such as capital and labor were exploited in the capitalist society that he lived in. Moreover, he states that the allocation of capital, resources, and labor takes place under unequal competition between the center and periphery, and among central areas. He also initially discusses this asymmetric relationship under feudalism, saying, “During the feudal period, political power of empires was dependent on the economic power of government through commercial monopoly combined with the usage of force from which governed the flow of commerce from Periphery into the centre” (*ibid.*). In Volume 3, *The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730s–1840s* (Wallerstein 1989), Wallerstein takes a global economic perspective to assert that Latin America, Africa, and Asia, including China, existed as the periphery in the nineteenth century, while Europe played the role of center.

Continuing in this research direction, he published two works, *The Capitalist World-Economy* (1979) and *Geopolitics and Geoculture: Essays on the Changing World-System* (1991) to further illustrate the theory of center-periphery relationships. In the former, Wallerstein analyzes the basic contrasts between the center and peripheries. In his opinion, the unequal distribution of resources in the economy and the “superiority” of institutions in central states are key determinants of the center’s power versus peripheries’. As a result, the center plays the dominant and decisive role while peripheries tend to be isolated and dependent (Wallerstein 1979, 1–164). An asymmetry of interests in the relationship between center and periphery is thus inevitable. Consequently, the periphery is constantly looking to fight insidiously or publicly to change the current order. As V. E. Davidovich, in *Under the Lens of Philosophy*, asserts, “The whole play of world political forces depends on its struggle and confrontation (periphery) with center [*sic*]” (Davidovich 2002, 433). Davidovich emphasizes the unstable nature of the center: in addition to the center and the periphery, there are also semi-peripheral countries. The semi-periphery is in the buffer position between the center and periphery. It constantly tries to improve its position by getting out of its peripheral status and becoming the new center, which is complementary to the original center. Therefore, there are semi-peripheral areas that act as a periphery to the center but are the center of other peripheries. This results in unpredictable changes in the positions of centers, semi-peripheries, and peripheries (Wallerstein 1979, 88–90).

Thus, through the central-peripheral theoretical analysis of a number of scholars,

we find the basic issues that can be applied to a study of the relationship between Vietnam (periphery) and China (center) from the beginning of the tenth century to the late nineteenth century. First, researchers have pointed out the fundamental factors that determine the central location of a large country in a region: natural advantages, geographic location, cultural superiority, economic and political development, and the ability to provide security for smaller countries. These advantages of the center make peripheral countries respect it and accept the international order it leads.

Second, researchers have shown that the relationship between the center and the periphery is an asymmetric one of powers and interests. This gives peripheral countries a feeling of “vulnerability” that no country can eliminate (Womack 2004, 365).

Third, while Shils asserts that the relationship between the center and periphery is based merely on consensus with no confrontation, Huntington makes a negative forecast about the inevitable confrontation between the center and periphery. Based on prior research and historical facts, Womack and Wallerstein reevaluate it as a two-sided relationship. According to them, the periphery depends on the center out of respect and because it seeks cultural, economic, and institutional salvation from the center to escape from poverty. On the other hand, the periphery and center are always in covert or overt confrontation because of the centrifugal tendency and expectation of escape from the dependence of the periphery on the center. Among these two trends—centrifugal and dependent—when was the centrifugal trend and confrontation stronger in the context of Vietnam-China relations? When was the trend for dependency stronger? What factors influenced the strengths and weaknesses of these two trends? These are questions that emerge from existing scholarship that this study hopes to clarify when looking back at the reality of Vietnam-China relations during the period of feudalism.

## **Application of the Theory to the Study of the China-Vietnam Relationship from the Early Tenth Century to the Late Nineteenth Century**

### *Factors That Make China's Position Central*

The relationship between big country and small country, and between center and periphery, has always been a core issue in international relations. The word “small” or “big” in terms of “small country, big country” is only relative. A country is smaller when compared to countries with a larger territory that are more populated or have stronger military, economic, political, or cultural ability to influence and control other countries. A country may be bigger than one country but smaller than another one. Similarly, the terms “center” and “periphery” are also relative. A country can be considered the cen-



ter of certain peripheral countries, but it can be a peripheral or semi-peripheral country in relation to another center. In these relationships, the center often has many plans and options to induce peripheral countries to follow it. Meanwhile, small and peripheral countries are vulnerable: “The vulnerabilities of small nations have been demonstrated countless times throughout history” (Goodby 2014, 32). Therefore, it is not random that Thucydides, in *The Peloponnesian War*, stated that “the strong do what they want to do and the weak accept what they have to accept” (Thucydides 1954, 358–366). Although this statement is not true in every case, it reflects the superiority of the center and the vulnerability of small countries (i.e., peripheries).

At least until 1860, China was considered the center of East Asia. The year 1860 was when China formally accepted diplomatic relations directly with the Western powers after its defeat in the Second Opium War of 1856–60 and reluctantly abandoned the tributary system, although the last remnant of the tributary system lasted until 1885 in Vietnam and 1894 in Korea. China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 lost it its last tributary country—Korea (Kim 2008, 35–56). Surrounding the center (China) and its civilized space, peripheral countries were divided into two rings. The inner one was next to the Hua Xi center and included BaiYue (百越/百粵) in the south, Beidi (北狄) in the north, and Xirong (西戎) in the west. The second—outer—ring included countries influenced by the Han civilization, such as Japan, North Korea, and Vietnam.

To gain the central position, China had to have certain advantages over its smaller neighbors. The first advantage came from territory and geographical position. China had the largest territory and population. In addition, it is in a geographically central position, sharing a border with more countries than any other country in the world (it shares a border with 14 countries). Accordingly, China holds a position of “respect,” at least in terms of geography.

In terms of economy and politics, China’s favorable natural conditions give it another advantage: it has developed a relatively strong agricultural production. Since ancient times, China has reached a high level of socioeconomic development compared to other nations. China was a highly centralized state during the ancient and middle ages. As a centralized feudal political institution and an administrative and social organization model, China became the model for Vietnamese feudal dynasties, and many other countries in the region learned from China and followed it. Therefore, China had a preeminent political position in the region during the feudalism period. It had such a strong position that other countries did not want to oppose it.

Chinese culture was at that time considered “one of the brightest flames in the East” (Đặng Thai Mai 1994, 30). Due to its advantages of being rich in material resources as well as a large country with a large population, China soon reached a relatively high

socioeconomic level compared to other nations. Very early in its existence, under the Han Dynasty, it developed norms of lifestyle, ethics, human behavior, social order, family order, and social order. These norms were called Confucianism. Standards were set by the center and spread to the peripheries, including Vietnam. Among the ideological determinants must be mentioned the unique idea of China's position in the galaxy. At that time, the Chinese ruling class called its own clan "Huaxia." *Hua* means "essence of the universe," and *xia* means "strength" (Nguyễn Anh Dũng 1982, 91). After that, the concept of "inside are the Xia, outside are the Yi" was introduced, where Huaxia played the central role while the peripheral countries were Nanman, Dongyi, Xirong, and Beidi (Four Barbarians in the Four Directions). The Chinese emperor implicitly attributed to himself the role of granting prestige and virtue to all. He used the Huaxia culture to teach the Beidi and Dongyi (also known as "Use Huaxia to change Beidi and Dongyi"; Lê Tấn 1961, 43–45). Liam Kelley, in his book *Beyond the Bronze Pillars*, asserts that in a nutshell, at least since the Shang Dynasty (eighteenth to eleventh century BC), peoples classified as "Chinese" have felt that their society, scripts, and complex rituals are superior to those of wandering desert dwellers, people living in the grasslands in the north and northwest, as well as those living in the rain forests in the south (Kelley 2005). Therefore, it is logical for Chinese to have hierarchical relationships with others. Those who want to have relations with China must recognize the superiority of the Chinese ruler—the Son of Heaven—by kowtowing and offering presents (*ibid.*, 9–23). Obviously, China does not consider itself as the center solely in order to educate peripheral people. Those who are influenced by Chinese Confucian ideology maintain the superior and inferior positions between them, between the larger country and the smaller one, in accordance with the Theory of Righteousness and the Command of Heaven. Peripheries themselves admit the central role of China. In the case of Vietnam, Alexander Barton Woodside in *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* does not hesitate to affirm that the Vietnamese court was under "Confucian rather than Nationalist" influence (Woodside 1988, 21) and that in Vietnam, as in China, it was commonly believed that men received their nature or their endowment of abilities and aptitudes from heaven, which was the ultimate source of all things. This belief made the Son of Heaven the humanly incarnated source of education and economic sustenance, the "father and mother" of the people (*ibid.*, 13).

Vietnamese dynasties did not formally acknowledge Chinese emperors as their rulers, but they expressed submission through activities such as offering presents and requesting investiture. In a letter to the Qing Emperor, Gia Long—the first King of the Nguyen Dynasty—wrote: "Although people have a lack of allegiance, I still did not know

the opinion of Heaven. I assigned Le Quang Dinh and Trinh to bring along presents to show our honesty to rank in the list of vassal states” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2002, 510). From this point of view, a common Confucian cultural linguistic circle or a system of centrally orientated regional order was established, where “all peoples at one level or another are subject to the influence of Chinese civilization” (Konrat 1997, 59).

Vietnam was one of the countries most influenced by Chinese culture, especially with regard to Confucianism. If Japanese elites had an attitude of respectful rejection when it came to Confucianism, then the Vietnamese elites in the Ly-Tran Dynasties had an attitude of resistance and non-refusal (Trần Quốc Vương 1991, 32–44) while the Vietnamese elites during the Le-Nguyen Dynasties had one of resistance and imitation. The Vietnamese Confucians tried to show that Confucianism in Vietnam was similar and not inferior to Chinese Confucianism. They considered this as something to be proud of and a way for them to affirm Vietnam’s position in relation to other countries in the region. The influence of Chinese Confucian culture on its neighbors, including Vietnam, contributed to making China a “hard center,” a “solid center” in relation to other centers in the world as identified by Womack (Womack 2012a, 39). Under the influence of Confucianism, especially the ideals of “mandate of heaven” and “righteousness,” the Vietnamese Kings constantly strove to fulfill their duties according to the rites and rules of a vassal in relation to the center, China (i.e., righteousness).

*The Subjection to the “Center”—China—of the Periphery—Vietnam—through Requesting Investiture and Tribute*

The recognition and respect for China’s central role in all aspects, especially its cultural superiority, and the acceptance of Confucian influence from the cultural “salvation” of the center, had the inevitable consequence of obedience of the center by peripheral countries. Thus, Vietnam voluntarily joined the ranks of peripheral countries that China considered as vassals despite knowing that there could be no symmetry of interest in this relationship. This was a root cause for the activities of requesting investiture and tribute that were sustained for a long time in the feudal Vietnam-China relationship.

Requesting investiture and tribute in the feudal Vietnam-China relationship indicated a special relationship, which was found only among China and neighboring countries. Vietnam was often considered a typical example, with all its complexity (Tạ Ngọc Liên 1995, 49). Researchers have classed Vietnam’s activities as part of the “tributary institution.” According to J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng in “On the Ch’ing Tributary System,” this tributary institution was “the medium for Chinese international relations and diplomacy” and “a scheme of things entire . . . the mechanism by which barbarous non-Chinese regions were given their place in the all-embracing Chinese political, and

therefore ethical, scheme of things” (Fairbank and Teng 1941, 137, 139). In that environment, the Emperor felt the need to “civilize” the populace in order to maintain a stable social order. Some Chinese scholars view the term “tributary system” as a Western invention, dating back to at least the nineteenth century, which was then translated back into Chinese as *chaogong tixi* (Yang 1968; Liu 2010; Suisheng 2015). The terms *chao* and *gong* do appear in the Chinese historical sources, but the Chinese had no conception of such a system (Feng 2009, 545–574). However, it is undeniable that there was a hierarchical system where China played a central role and neighboring countries (which China considered as Nanman, Dongyi, Xirong, Beidi), such as Vietnam, were classified as vassal-peripheries. Liang and Khilji in *China and East Asia’s Post-Crisis Community: A Region in Flux*, assert that “China, the primus inter pares state in this tribute system, constituted the core together with Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, with the system extending to southeast Asian States in varying degrees” (Liang and Khilji 2012, 2). Thus, one of the principles for creating and sustaining the tributary system was that China had to consider itself as a center and be willing to accept investiture and tributary activities from peripheral countries such as Vietnam. This activity was considered a way to prevent the central-peripheral relationship from being cut off. On the one hand, the existence of vassal-peripheries like Vietnam served China’s political and economic interests; on the other, it helped to prevent attacks on China by other countries, creating a stable external environment to maintain domestic stability.

From the Vietnamese perspective, Vietnam remained close to a feudal China so that it could learn from that country. Maintaining a relationship with the center was considered by Vietnam to be necessary for its own survival. In fact, Vietnam felt a need to maintain a relationship with China not only during the feudal era but throughout its history. As stated by Tuong Vu in “State Formation on China’s Southern Frontier: Vietnam as a Shadow Empire and Hegemon”: “The threat of assimilation and annexation by ‘China’ is often portrayed as the paramount existential problem confronting all ‘Vietnamese’ throughout their history who have yearned to preserve their independence even while adapting to the ‘Chinese’ culture and worldview” (Tuong Vu 2016, 39). Thus, the “Chinese world order” could not be “merely a unilateral” effort as viewed by Yu Insun (2009, 84); it was actually based on demand from both China and Vietnam. Accordingly, Vietnam’s tributes and requesting of investiture from China were born and maintained for a long time.

Table 1 lists the times Vietnam requested investiture from China between 938 (when Vietnam gained independence after centuries of Chinese rule) and 1885 (when France and China signed the Tianjin Treaty, which ended the tributary relationship between Vietnam and China).

**Table 1** Times When Vietnam Requested Investiture from China (938–1885)

Name of Dynasty	Vietnamese Missions Going to China to Request Investiture	Titles That Chinese Emperors Bestowed upon Vietnamese Kings
1. Ngo Dynasty	954: Ngo Xuong Ngap sent a mission to the King of Southern Han requesting investiture.	Ngo Xuong Ngap was ordained as naval generalissimo.
2. Dinh Dynasty	972: Dinh Tien Hoang sent his son Dinh Lien to the Song Dynasty for ordination as a King.	Dinh Tien Hoang was ordained as Giao Chi King. Dinh Lien was ordained as Annam naval generalissimo. 975: Dinh Tien Hoang was ordained as Nam Viet Vuong, and Dinh Lien was ordained as Giao Chi King.
3. Earlier Le Dynasty	980: King Le Dai Hanh sent two envoys—Giang Cu Vong and Vuong Thieu To—to the Song Dynasty for ordination as King. 985: King Le Dai Hanh sent a mission to the Song Dynasty applying for chief.	Song Dynasty did not approve. Song Dynasty agreed to ordain Le Dai Hanh as a chief. 993: Song Dynasty ordained Le Dai Hanh as Giao Chi King.
4. Ly Dynasty	1010: King Ly Thai To sent his people to the Song requesting investiture. 1055: King Ly Thanh Tong sent his people to the Song requesting investiture. 1138: King Ly Anh Tong sent a mission to the Song requesting investiture.	1010: Ly Thai To was ordained as Giao Chi King. 1028: King Ly Thai Tong was ordained as Giao Chi King. 1038: King Ly Thai Tong was ordained as Nam Binh Vuong. 1055: King Ly Thanh Tong was ordained as Giao Chi King. 1074: King Ly Nhan Tong was ordained as Giao Chi King. 1130: King Ly Than Tong was ordained as Giao Chi King. 1138: King Ly Anh Tong was ordained as Giao Chi King. 1175: King Ly Anh Tong was ordained as Annam King. 1177: King Ly Cao Tong was ordained as Annam King.
5. Tran Dynasty	1229: King Tran Thai Tong sent a mission to visit the Song. 1368: King Tran Du Tong sent a mission to visit the Ming.	1229: King Tran Thai Tong was ordained as Annam King. 1262: King Tran Thanh Tong was ordained as Annam King. 1368: Tran Du Tong was ordained as Annam King.
6. Ho Dynasty	1403: Ho Han Thuong sent a mission to the Ming Dynasty requesting investiture.	1403: Ming Dynasty ordained Ho Han Thuong as Annam King.
7. Primitive Le Dynasty	1427: King Le Thai To sent a proposal to the Ming Dynasty requesting investiture for Tran Cao. 1429: King Le Thai To sent a mission to the Ming Dynasty requesting investiture. 1434: King Le Thai Tong sent a mission mourning Le Thai To and requesting investiture. 1442: King Le Nhan Tong sent a mission mourning Le Thai Tong and requesting investiture. 1460: King Le Thanh Tong sent a mission requesting investiture. 1497: King Le Hien Tong sent a mission mourning Le Thanh Tong and requesting investiture. 1504: King Le Duc Tong sent a mission mourning Le Hien Tong and requesting investiture. 1510: King Le Tuong Duc sent a mission requesting investiture.	1427: Ming Dynasty ordained Tran Cao as Annam King. 1431: King Le was ordained as the Annam national advocate. 1435: Ming Dynasty sent messengers to inform the King to take care of national affairs. 1443: Ming Dynasty sent messengers to take the decree to ordain the King as Annam King. 1462: Ming Dynasty sent messengers to take the decree to ordain the King as Annam King. 1499: Ming Dynasty sent messengers to ordain the King as Annam King. 1506: Ming Dynasty sent messengers to ordain the King as Annam King. 1513: Ming Dynasty sent messengers to ordain the King as Annam King.
8. Mac Dynasty	1540: Mac Dang Dung sent a mission carrying sea produce to Yenqing requesting investiture.	1540: Mac Dang Dung was ordained as the Annam ambassador.
9. Restored Le Dynasty	1597: King Le The Tong sent a mission to the Ming Dynasty requesting investiture. 1637: King Le Than Tong sent a mission to the Ming Dynasty requesting investiture.	1598: King Le The Tong was ordained as Annam governor. 1647: King Le Than Tong (now retired Emperor) was ordained as Annam King. 1667: King Le Huyen Tong was ordained as Annam King. 1683: King Ly Hy Tong was ordained as Annam King. 1719: King Le Du Tong was ordained as Annam King. 1734: Ordained King Le Thuan Tong as Annam King. 1761: King Le Hien Tong was ordained as Annam King. 1778: King Le Chieu Thong was ordained as Annam King.
10. Tay Son Dynasty	1789: King Quang Trung sent a mission to the Qing Dynasty requesting investiture. 1792: King Quang Toan sent a mission to the Qing Dynasty mourning King Quang Trung and requesting investiture.	1789: King Quang Trung was ordained as Annam King. 1792: King Quang Toan was ordained as Annam King.
11. Nguyen Dynasty	1802: A delegation led by Le Quang Dinh applied for ordination to King Gia Long. 1820: A delegation led by Ngo Vi applied for ordination to King Minh Menh. 1841: A delegation led by Le Van Phuc applied for ordination to King Thieu Tri. 1848: A delegation led by Bui Quy applied for ordination to King Tu Duc.	1804: A Chinese delegation led by Sam Nghi Dong carried the decree and the national seal to Thang Long, proclaiming Gia Long as Annam King. 1822: A Chinese delegation led by Phan Cung Thi carried the decree from the Emperor of China to Thang Long to confer on Minh Menh the title of Annam King. 1842: A Chinese delegation led by Bao Thanh carried the decree from the Emperor of China to Thang Long to confer on Thieu Tri the title of Annam King. 1849: A Chinese delegation led by Lao Sung Quang carried the decree from the Emperor of China to Hue imperial city to confer on Tu Duc the title of Annam King.

Sources: Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn (2002; 2004; 2007d; 2007e); Hongnian (2006); Phan Huy Chú (2007).

Clearly, such beseeching activities started in the tenth century (from the time of Ngo Xuong Ngap [r. 951–54]), after Vietnam had broken free of Chinese feudalistic rule and regained full independence. It was only through military defeat that China returned Vietnam its sovereignty and admitted its new King. In other words, the peaceful relationship through the beseeching of investiture between the center—China—and periphery—Vietnam—existed only when China could not expand to or occupy Vietnam. If pre-modern Sino-Vietnamese relations are divided into the three states of interaction outlined by James A. Anderson—Strong China/Weak Vietnam, Weak China/Strong Vietnam, and Strong China/Strong Vietnam (Anderson 2013)—the requesting and receipt of investiture took place only when the two countries were in the second (Weak China/Strong Vietnam) or third (Strong China/Strong Vietnam) state. Only in the second or third state would China become a “benevolent big brother” of Vietnam (Tuong Vu 2016, 53). This was the reality of the Vietnam-China relationship during feudalism. Phan Huy Chu, in his *Dynasty's History*, also noted this characteristic:

Our country started to communicate with China since the Hung King, but with small title and not to participate in the ranks of the vassals gathered in the “Ming Tang” to meet the Emperor. Then our country was conquered by Zhou Tuo, the Han assigned him as South Viet King which was considered as a Chinese vassal rather than being a country. Then our country was turned to be a district in the Han Dynasty. After Dinh Tien Hoang swept away missions, recovered and expanded the territory, the beseech investiture was received from China to be a country. (Phan Huy Chú 2007, 534–535)

Since then, through the dynasties of Dinh (968–80), Earlier Le (980–1009), Ly (1009–1225), Tran (1225–1400), Ho (1400–7), Primitive Le (1428–1527), Mac (1527–92), Restored Le (1533–1789), Tay Son (1789–1802), and Nguyen (1802–1885), the requesting of investiture in accordance with the regulations became particularly important in diplomatic relations between Vietnam and China. Most of the Vietnamese dynasties requested investiture with China.

According to normal practice, when Vietnam's King died his successor sent an ambassador to China to announce the funeral, and a mission began to apply for the King's investiture. In response, China would assign a mission to ordain the King of Vietnam. In such cases, the Vietnamese King was “soft” and implemented solemn rituals to be ordained and receive the title from the Chinese Emperor (*Friends of Hue Ancient Capital* 1993, 306). Even after those rituals, Vietnamese dynasties had to give presents and hold parties for Chinese missions (*ibid.*, 90–92).

Along with beseeching investiture, the vassal Vietnam tried to implement many tribute activities to show respect to the “upper country” and assure its own national security and sovereignty. In some dynasties, such as the Nguyen, this was also a way to

ensure the value of investiture that the Emperors of China granted the Kings of Vietnam. This assurance was necessary for the legitimacy and independence of the dynasty. This is something that the Nguyen Dynasty had not had since its inception. Tributary activity was considered by both Vietnam and China as a means of exchanging products due to the natural needs of the two countries' economic development. Obviously there was a real match between reality and Shils's, Womack's, and Wallerstein's theories, as they acknowledged the reverence of peripheral states toward the center and the humility of the periphery while maintaining a relationship that was interdependent with the center even if it was an unequal interest relationship.

From the Dinh Dynasty, Earlier Le Dynasty, and Ly Dynasty in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, Vietnamese missions were sent to the Song Dynasty; they did not carry tribute but brought presents for building friendships and showing gratitude. It was not until the thirteenth century, when Tran Thai Tong sent a mission to China, that the rule was made about a tribute every three years; this is when the Chinese tribute regime by Vietnam is considered to have started. However, Table 2 shows that due to various reasons (on both the Vietnamese and Chinese sides) the tribute did not always follow the rules. However, tribute was always a diplomatic activity dictated by the Vietnamese feudal dynasties because it was an indispensable means of communication in maintaining diplomatic relations with the center—which was China at the time.

When assessing and explaining the long-term existence of tributes between central China and peripheral countries in a vassal position, such as Vietnam, Kelley states that there must have been a logical reason why the outward kingdoms accepted the inferior relationships, which Western countries did not accept in the nineteenth century when dealing with China. According to him, the above tribute activities from Vietnam represented a state of "self-consciousness," not a "defensive strategy." Therefore, they might have been just a formality (Kelley 2005, 9–23). After Kelley, Fairbank, Teng, and Keith Taylor emphasized the dual nature of the tribute system. Taylor said, "Vietnam is doing so based on a realistic assessment of strategic interests, especially when there is always a choice between accepting the unfair terms of tribute system and bearing the risk of attack from the centre" (quoted in Lam 1968, 165–179). According to Taylor, these activities on the part of Vietnam were "pretending" in order to maintain independence and harmony and avoid a bloody war (Taylor 1983, 271).

*Independence, Centralization of the "Periphery"—Vietnam—in Relation to the "Center"—China*

There are two opposite views when evaluating tributary activities between Vietnam and China. However, if we observe the evolution of these activities, especially their specific

**Table 2** Years in Which Vietnam Went to China for Tribute (938–1885)

Name of Dynasty	Years in Which Vietnam Went to China for Tribute	Frequency of Tribute
1. Ngo Dynasty (938–67)		0
2. Dinh Dynasty (968–80)		0
3. Earlier Le Dynasty (980–1009)		0
4. Ly Dynasty (1009–1225)		0
5. Tran Dynasty (1225–1400)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 1258: King Tran Thai Tong sent envoys to take tribute to China. The two sides decided on the frequency of tribute: once in three years.</li> <li>– 1275: King Tran Thanh Tong sent envoys to take tribute to the Yuan Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1292: King Tran Nhan Tong sent envoys to take tribute to the Yuan Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1331: King Tran Hien Tong sent envoys to take tribute to the Yuan Dynasty.</li> </ul>	4
6. Primitive Le Dynasty (1428–1527)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 1444: King Le Nhan Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1447: King Le Nhan Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1450: King Le Nhan Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1453: King Le Nhan Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1462: King Le Thanh Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1471: King Le Thanh Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1474: King Le Thanh Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1477: King Le Thanh Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1480: King Le Thanh Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1483: King Le Thanh Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1486: King Le Thanh Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1489: King Le Thanh Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1492: King Le Thanh Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1498: King Le Hien Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1501: King Le Hien Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1504: King Le Hien Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1510: King Le Tuong Duc sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1513: King Le Tuong Duc sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> </ul>	18
7. Mac Dynasty (1527–92)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 1542: Mac Dang Dung sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1548: Mac Phuc Nguyen sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1580: Mac Mau Hop sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1584: Mac Mau Hop sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> </ul>	4
8. Restored Le Dynasty (1533–1789)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 1595: King Le The Tong sent a mission to offer tribute but failed.</li> <li>– 1596: King Le The Tong sent a mission to offer tribute but was not approved by the Ming Dynasty and returned.</li> <li>– 1597: King Le The Tong sent a mission to take local produce as tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1606: King Le Kinh Tong sent a mission to take two tributes to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1613: King Le Kinh Tong sent a mission to take two tributes to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1619: King Le Than Tong sent a mission to take two tributes to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1626: King Le Than Tong sent a mission to take two tributes to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1630: King Le Than Tong sent a mission to take two tributes to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1637: King Le Than Tong sent a mission to take two tributes to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1646: King Le Chan Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Ming Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1663: King Le Huyen Tong sent a mission to take local produce as tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1667: King Le Huyen Tong sent a mission to take local produce as tribute to the Qing Dynasty and applied to offer tribute as in the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty: tribute was offered once every six years.</li> <li>– 1673: As a rule, King Gia Long sent envoys to take two tributes to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1682: King Le Hy Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1685: King Le Hy Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1690: King Le Hy Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1697: King Le Hy Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1702: King Le Hy Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1715: King Le Du Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1721: King Le Du Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1726: King Le Du Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1729: Hon Duc Cong (Le Duy Phuong) sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1741: King Le Hien Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1747: King Le Hien Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1753: King Le Hien Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1760: King Le Hien Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1765: King Le Hien Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1771: King Le Hien Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1777: King Le Hien Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1783: King Le Hien Tong sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> </ul>	30
9. Tay Son Dynasty (1789–1802)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– April 1789: King Quang Trung sent a mission to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– September 1789: King Quang Trung sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> </ul>	2



10. Nguyen Dynasty (1802–85)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 1804: King Gia Long sent his envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty, replacing the tributes of 1803 and 1805.</li> <li>– 1809: As a rule, King Gia Long sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1813: As a rule, King Gia Long sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1817: As a rule, King Gia Long sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1824: As a rule, King Minh Menh sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1828: As a rule, King Minh Menh sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1832: As a rule, King Minh Menh sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1836: As a rule, King Minh Menh sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1844: King Thieu Tri sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1849: As a rule, King Tu Duc sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1853: As a rule, King Tu Duc sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1857: As a rule, King Tu Duc sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1860: As a rule, King Tu Duc sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1868: As a rule, King Tu Duc sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1872: As a rule, King Tu Duc sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1876: As a rule, King Tu Duc sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> <li>– 1880: As a rule, King Tu Duc sent envoys to take tribute to the Qing Dynasty.</li> </ul>	17
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Sources: Ngô Sĩ Liên *et al.* (1993a; 1993b); Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn (2002; 2004; 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2007d; 2007e; 2007f); Hongnian (2006); Phan Huy Chú (2007, 570–608).

movements in each historical period through the feudal dynasties in Vietnam, we see that no matter how strict, activities of Vietnamese Kings were dependent on the strength of Vietnam in relation to China, as well as the potential and positions of the two countries. After Dinh Tien Hoang (r. 968–79) and Quang Trung (r. 1788–92) took the throne, missions were sent to China to ask for investiture. However, in many cases it was the Chinese imperial court that sent missions to ordain the head of the Vietnamese state. Instances of these are during the reigns of Tran Thai Tong (r. 1225–58), Tran Thanh Tong (r. 1258–78), and Tran Nhan Tong (r. 1279–93). These periods are associated with Dai Viet’s great military victories over invasions. These Kings assigned the throne to each other rather than going to China to beseech investiture.

Even though the Vietnamese mission knelt in the presence of the Chinese Emperor in Beijing, the head of the Vietnamese state still claimed to be the Emperor of the Vietnamese people and the smaller surrounding countries. Clearly, the use of the Sino-Vietnamese title of Emperor by Vietnam was a deliberate decision. It showed simultaneously the tendencies of “Heavy sinicization” and “Heavy cultural resistance” coexisting in Vietnam until the end of the monarchy (Woodside 1988, 13).

According to Tsuboi Yoshiharu, the Nguyen Dynasty—Vietnam’s last feudal dynasty—had cultural self-respect because they regarded themselves as having a better tradition than the Qing Dynasty and an orthodox Confucianism protector (Tsuboi 1992, 134). Therefore, if the Qing did not behave appropriately, the Nguyen Dynasty immediately expressed their dissatisfaction. For example, in 1840 the Ministry of Rites reported to King Minh Menh that the procession of envoys to the Qing Dynasty had been arranged by the Qing Dynasty behind the envoys of Goryeo (North Korea), Nan Zhang (Laos), Siam, and Liu Qiu and asked how to respond. Minh Menh immediately replied:

This is due to the negligence of the Ministry of Rites of the Qing Dynasty. Goryeo is the country of culture, Nan Zhang is our vassal offering us tribute, and Siam and Liu Qiu are barbarian countries (夷狄). This is unacceptable. If anything like this happens, get out of the row; it's better to be punished. (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2007c, 872)

Minh Menh's national pride came from his view that Vietnam was a civilized country and therefore this mistake by the Ministry of Rites toward the Qing Dynasty was a great insult to Vietnam (Yu 2009, 93). Even the ability to express the linguistic and cultural qualities of Vietnamese ambassadors in the Chinese court was an important way to show that Vietnam was a "civilized" country and did not need China's "modernization" (Taylor 1983, 298).

It is noteworthy that until 1838, without being approved by the Qing Dynasty, King Minh Menh decided to change the name of the country from Vietnam to Dai Nam (Great South) to signify a strong southern country. As Minh Menh explained: "Now we have the South, the wider territory, an eastern strip to the South Sea, around the West Sea, our people belong to the map, forests and beaches belong to us." Thus, changing the name to Dai Nam was suitable, "showing the scale, while keeping the word Viet" (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2007c, 276). In his explanation for naming the country Dai Nam, Minh Menh also cited the Qing Dynasty's naming of China: "To the Qing Dynasty once called Manchuria, then renamed Great Qing, is the right thing to do" (*ibid.*). This explanation reveals Minh Menh's high self-esteem and is "an expression of Minh Menh's antagonism toward the Qing dynasty and his reaction to the 'Ta Qing' (Great Qing) designation" (Yu 2009, 103). From here on, the country was called Dai Nam; all vocatives, documents, even diplomatic documents were required to adhere to it and "not to say Dai Viet" (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2007c, 277).

It has been suggested that Vietnam's submission to China was self-sacrifice rather than pretense, as Kelley has commented. However, according to Kelley, if this were the case then Vietnam would not have achieved true independence. Obviously there is no logic in the requesting of investiture and tribute, just survival behavior between the center and periphery in the contemporary context. Such behavior is wise in the context of a small country interacting with a bigger and stronger one. Hence, a nominal "pretender" (also known as the pretense, according to Taylor) may accept a vassal, peripheral role rather than confrontation, as that was clearly beneficial for Vietnam. It was because of that pretense, when the fate or honor of the country was violated, that Vietnamese dynasties did not hesitate to declare their own existence. The resistance war against the Song during the Ly Dynasty (1009–1225), two resistance wars against the invasion of the Yuan by the Tran Dynasty (1225–1400), the resistance war against Ming invaders during the Ho Dynasty (1400–7), and the resistance war against the invaders of the Qing

in the late eighteenth century (1788–89) clearly proved the independent trend of the periphery Vietnam. Although it was an act of soft, humble submission through the requesting of investiture, tribute, and offerings to the center (China) to maintain peaceful relations between the two, when the fate of the nation was threatened, Vietnam was ready to stand up and fight to defend its independence. Obviously, smaller countries like Vietnam are always “vulnerable” (Womack 2004, 365). If large countries like China cooperate with Vietnam, Vietnam will be less worried about its vulnerability and tend to accept a world order driven by China because it achieves its own interests by doing so (*ibid.*). Conversely, when a large country like China does not cooperate and threatens the interests of the smaller nation, thereby making the latter vulnerable, the trend of dependence becomes increasingly loose and the two countries may even confront each other, producing a conflict and maybe a war like the examples mentioned above. As a result, the borders of peace that have been built on a “mutually acceptable relationship” (Womack 2012a, 42) between the two sides are inevitably disrupted.

A centrifugal effort to change the national status of the Nguyen Dynasty Kings was vividly demonstrated in the setting up of a new center in the South, similar to the Chinese one in the North, where Southeast Asia, a region that China had few relations with, had to recognize Vietnamese moral values and greatness in the same way that the Nguyen Dynasty acknowledged the Chinese court. In fact, in the first half of the nineteenth century countries to the southwest of Vietnam such as Chenla (Cambodia), Van Tuong (a part of Central Laos, bordering Nghe An north of Vietnam today), Nam Chuong (in the west of Hoa Binh province and in northern Thanh Hoa province of Vietnam today), Thuy Xa (in western Phu Yen province of Vietnam today), and Hoa Xa (a tribe in the west of Thuy Xa, also in the west of Phu Yen province of Vietnam today) carried out tribute and “besech investiture” for the Nguyen Dynasty. Clearly, in its relations with many other Southeast Asian countries at that time, Vietnam played the role of a center (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 1994; 2002; 2004; 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2007d; 2007e; 2007f). This is in line with Womack’s theory, which points out that one of the most important factors that can weaken China’s central position is an increase in relations among peripheral countries (Womack 2012a, 44). Not only is it consistent with Womack’s theory, it also coincides with Wallerstein’s insight that an asymmetry of interest in the relationship between center and periphery will cause the periphery to move, to fight for centrifugation and escape from dependence on the center, changing the current order publicly or insidiously. That centrifugal tendency led to the formation of new centers complementing the original center, like the case of Vietnam in the nineteenth century.

*Difference between “China-Centered” and “Vietnam-Centered” Models*

It is worth mentioning that although Vietnam still used the Chinese world model, Vietnamese authorities had a different viewpoint. The North and South were divided in two, with one side celebrating China and recognizing China’s world order, and the other keeping its own world order. Hence, despite receiving the title of King from Chinese Emperors, the heads of Vietnam proclaimed themselves as Emperor to their own people, placing themselves at the same level as the Emperor of China. This was also a manifestation of Vietnam’s independence in its relations with China. For example, in the relationship between Vietnam (center) and Champa (periphery), if Champa delayed or neglected to fulfill its obligation to contribute, Vietnam as a “mother country” could even rebuke Champa and ask it to pay tribute. This was seen in 1094, when King Ly Nhan Tong sent the academic Mac Hien Tich to Champa to claim tribute (Ngô Sĩ Liên *et al.* 1993a, 283), and in 1346, when King Tran Du Tong sent Pham Nguyen Hang to Champa to ask about the lack of annual tribute (Ngô Sĩ Liên *et al.* 1993b, 130). In 1435, when the Champa envoys went to Vietnam, King Le Thai Tong immediately asked, “Why don’t you offer annual tribute?” According to the King, it was a manifestation of “Failure to keep the rite of a small country to a big country” (*ibid.*, 333). Obviously, this was a straightforward rebuke. In many cases when Champa offered tribute, the Dai Viet court brought troops to fight Champa. For example, under Ly Thanh Tong, in 1065–69, Champa did not pay tribute and King Ly Thanh Tong brought the army to fight (Ngô Sĩ Liên *et al.* 1993a, 274–275). In July 1176, after not receiving tribute, offerings, or any other gestures from Champa for a long time, the Ly Dynasty again sent General To Hien Thanh to fight Champa. In October of that year, Champa hurried to offer tribute to ask for peace (*ibid.*, 324). Obviously, the peacetime relationship between Vietnam and Champa at that time was deeply influenced by the theories of Son of Heaven, the Mandate of Heaven of the Chinese-style world order. The Vietnamese dynasties had to make dependents like Champa periodically send envoys and offer tribute to the Vietnamese court to acknowledge their devotion to the Sino-Vietnamese culture (Woodside 1988, 234). Symbols (such as Heaven, Son of Heaven) and the formula of the Chinese tribute system were also used by Vietnam to justify the King’s reign and the existence of a Vietnam-centered order.

Although the two orders coexisted, the order of the “China of the South” was much looser than “the real Chinese one” (*ibid.*). Unlike China, Vietnam was never the largest “center” in East Asia. Vietnam was always subjected to invasions from China and promoted a spirit of harmony to subdue the weaker countries around it to make them respect it and rely on its protection. Vietnam did this in order to achieve a relative balance of power in its relations with Great China. On the other hand, if the Chinese world-centered order was operating in strict accordance with the principles of Confucianism—principles

that were deeply imbedded in both China and its vassal countries—in the world order in which Vietnam played a central role, there was no common bond of Confucian ideology. Many vassal states within Vietnam, typically Champa, were more deeply influenced by Hinduism than Confucianism. Thus, the two sides of the Vietnam-Champa relationship did not have the ideological unity found in Vietnam-China relations. Accordingly, beseeching of investiture and tribute, which were considered a duty and responsibility that the vassals (peripherals) needed to perform in relation to the master (center) to ensure the latter's honor and position according to Confucianism, were not fully and regularly implemented by Champa and were often ignored for a very long time, as seen in the complaint of King Ly Thai Tong (r. 1028–54) (Ngô Sĩ Liên *et al.* 1993a, 263).

Following the evolution of relations between Vietnam and small (peripheral) countries in the West and South in the nineteenth century, we see that the Nguyen Dynasty followed a foreign policy of “being soft for the far.” This means that they implemented soft and clever policies for peripheral and distant countries (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 1994, 355). The “being soft for the far” foreign policy made the Nguyen Dynasty sympathetic toward vassals. For instance, after the 1824 tribute ceremony, when Van Tuong was at war, King Minh Menh (1820–41) exempted all ceremonies. Sympathetic to the distance and the difficult situation of the “vassals,” the Nguyen Dynasty often exempted other countries' missions from going to the capital Hue to provide tribute. For example, when the Chenla ambassador went to Gia Dinh province in 1832, the Emperor sent an exemption, rewarded him, and allowed him to go back home (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2007a, 315). And in 1834, when Chenla had to deal with Siamese invaders, King Minh Menh gave it permission to not provide tribute and let it “combine two times into one next year”; by doing so, the King showed the kindness of the Nguyen court toward vassals (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 1994, 1776). In addition, in 1852, when the countries of Thuy Xa and Hoa Xa sent missions to provide tribute, the Tu Duc King allowed them to perform a ceremony in Phu Yen province (rather than going to the capital Hue) because of the distance of their trip and the poor crop the previous year (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2007e, 248–249). These are actions that were not encountered in the relationship between China and Vietnam from 938 to 1885.

Clearly, Vietnam's attitude toward small countries and its surrounding periphery was not to act as the big guy or big country. It remained nonthreatening. In fact, the big country of Vietnam was supportive and helpful and even protected and sheltered small countries that were endangered and annexed. For example, in 1313 King Tran Anh Tong immediately sent his troops to save Champa when it was invaded by Siam (Ngô Sĩ Liên *et al.* 1993b, 99). This was an act of responsibility by the superior to the vassal/periphery, the rite prescribed by Confucian thought. Under the Nguyen Dynasty, King Minh Menh

used to send the following message of support to vassals: “If neighbors cause catastrophe, we will have the way to manage, don’t worry” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2007a, 545). That statement was proven by Minh Menh’s concrete actions during his rule. For example, in 1822 when Chenla experienced a severe famine, Minh Menh did not hesitate to open stockpiles of food and deliver rice to the hungry people of Chenla (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 1994, 1748). In 1833, when Chenla encountered a crisis with Siam, the King of Chenla had to flee with his wife and children into the interior of Vietnam. Once again, Minh Menh showed his sympathy by providing rice and money. He also sent troops to Chenla to fight the Siamese enemy and escorted the Chenla King back to his country (*ibid.*, 1775). In 1840 Chenla faced an internal rebellion led by Tang Ke, which was a problem it could not solve. The King sent his envoy to Vietnam to ask for troops to help rescue the kingdom. Minh Menh honored the responsibility of a master and immediately sent troops to the rescue, cutting off the head of Tang Ke and making the rebels surrender. Minh Menh also left some soldiers to protect Chenla and escorted the arrested rebels for the King of Chenla to punish (*ibid.*, 1745–1746). These were all noble gestures and show the benevolence of the King of the Nguyen Dynasty at the time. On the other hand, they also show the sense of responsibility felt by the superior Vietnam toward its vassals when the latter were in jeopardy.

Smaller countries like Van Tuong, Chenla, Thuy Xa, and Hoa Xa worshipped Vietnam partly because of their desire to be “civilized” and educated. As King Minh Menh said when Hoa Xa went for tribute in 1834:

Their country is far from overseas, knotted to mark main things, plowing the field to eat, be backward, but they also have teeth, hair like everyone else; there is also conscience, and virtue, why we cannot do the same thing together? So he used Chinese religious ceremony to convert habits, teach politeness and reason, and was increasingly penetrated by the Kinh people’s culture. (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2007b, 306)

According to Shils’s, Womack’s, and Wallerstein’s theories, the allegiance of small states (i.e., peripheries) comes from an attitude of respect for the political, economic, and cultural potential of the center in addition to security concerns. It was very important for China, Vietnam and Southeast Asian countries to contribute to maintaining the activities of beseeching investiture and tribute between China and Vietnam, and Vietnam and Southeast Asian countries for a long time.

It is worth noting that in their central role, China and Vietnam behaved differently toward their peripheral countries. While Vietnam was soft in its conduct, willing to share responsibility and help peripheral countries when needed, China was stricter in demanding tributes and sacrifices from vassals; during feudal times China even threatened and

directed troops to invade the periphery Vietnam on several occasions. Especially when Vietnam was under the Nguyen Dynasty, China failed to fulfill its responsibility by abandoning and “selling” its vassal Vietnam to France in exchange for selfish interests through a series of peace treaties with France in the second half of the nineteenth century. The treaty for “peace, friendship and trade” in Tianjin (commonly known as the Tianjin Treaty) was signed on June 9, 1885 between the representatives of France—Jules Patenotre—and China—Li Hongzhang. At the beginning, when outlining the reasons for signing, the treaty expressed a spirit of compromise for the benefit of both France and China on the issue of Vietnam:

The President of the Republic of France and the Emperor of China desiring to end the difficulties of intervening each one in the internal affairs of Annam, restoring and improving the existing friendship and trade relations between France and China, decided to sign a new treaty to meet the common interests of the two countries. (Documents diplomatiques 1885, 259–260)

Accordingly, each side was asked to maintain security in its territory adjacent to the border, and the militaries of the two sides were asked to not cross the border into the territory of the other. China once again acknowledged France’s dominance in Vietnam and pledged no harm to France’s pacification program there. The signatories to the treaty agreed to respect present and future treaties, conventions, and agreements signed between France and Vietnam (Article 2 of the Tianjin Treaty of 1885) (*ibid.*, 260–261). Obviously, China sold its vassal Vietnam to France based on its own selfish interests. After that, it was inevitable that the formalism and “pretending” in the tribute and beseeching investiture of Vietnam to China was bolder than these activities from the Southeast Asian countries to Vietnam. Accordingly, Vietnam’s centrifugal tendency to break out of the influence of the Chinese center was also stronger and more drastic than that of the Vietnamese vassal states at the time. The birth of a new, centrally located order that coexisted with the old-centric order was an inevitable consequence of this strong centrifugal tendency.

## Conclusion

The center-periphery theory is born of real life, and in turn it serves the realities of life, especially in explaining phenomena taking place in practice. In this particular case, the theory is used to help us understand the expressive and substantive aspects of the Vietnam-China relationship during feudalism. Specifically, from Shils’s, Womack’s, and Wallerstein’s theories, we know that the factors that made China the center were its

superiority in politics, economy, military, and culture. China's great advantages, especially its dominant cultural tradition, made smaller countries such as Vietnam respect and rely on protection or "civilizing" from China for a long time. This was particularly true under the influence of Chinese Confucianism, especially the notions of "mandate of heaven" and "righteousness." Not only did China place itself at the center to educate people from the peripheral countries, but these peripheries—influenced by Confucian ideology—respected the upper and lower order between the great country and the small country to be compatible with righteousness and the rules of heaven. This explains why the requesting of investiture and tribute in the relationship between China and Vietnam was maintained from the tenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. It is the persistence of this tributary system based on Confucian ideology that has contributed significantly to China being a "hard center" and "solid center" in relation to other centers of the world (known as Womack's discovery) (Womack 2012a, 39).

It may be said that maintaining the requesting of investiture and tribute for a long time to keep the harmonious relationship between the two sides is the most important manifestation of the dependence of the periphery (Vietnam) on the center (China). However, based on the theory of Womack and Wallerstein, we get a better understanding of the duality of the relationship. As they noted, besides the trend of dependence of the periphery on the center, there is a centrifugal or confrontation trend between them because of asymmetries of interest. However, the theorists have not pointed out these two tendencies, in which situation one plays the leading role and why. When looking at the Vietnam-China relationship of this period, we see that the dependence of the periphery is relative; the centrifugal trend is the dominant one. This is also the contribution of research practice, clarifying some issues that the center-periphery theory has not addressed. As the asymmetry of benefits between the center and the periphery increases, the position of the periphery gets stronger, and the responsibility and assistance of the center for the periphery decreases, the centrifugal tendency of peripheral countries increases. Therefore, in many cases when Vietnam's position became higher after the great military victories before China's aggression, the Chinese court had to actively send people for ordination and Vietnamese Kings did not go to China requesting investiture. For instance, Kings Tran Thai Tong (r. 1225–58), Tran Thanh Tong (r. 1258–78), and Tran Nhan Tong (r. 1279–93) of the Tran Dynasty ceded the throne to each other and did not go to China requesting investiture. And though Chinese Emperors ordained them as Vietnamese Kings, Vietnam's heads of state still claimed to be Emperors or "Son of Heaven" in relation to people in the country and smaller countries around, in the way that the Emperor of the Chinese court claimed. In addition, the centrifugal tendency of the periphery was manifested in Vietnam's willingness to fight as the destiny of the nation



was threatened by the center. Thus, despite Vietnam's posture of humility, softness, and tribute to China in order to keep the "borders of peace" on the basis of a "mutually acceptable relationship" (*ibid.*, 42), when the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties invaded, Vietnam was willing to resolutely fight to maintain its independence. This centrifugal trend was vividly shown by the construction of a new order in the South (Vietnam-centered) on a par with the North (China-centered), in which Vietnam simulated how to operate the new order through the tributary system as China did with its peripheries, despite the "Chinese order of the South" being looser than the true Chinese order.

Clearly, just as the theory has shown, there is no permanent center because the positions of the center and periphery are always changing. It is this positional shift that explains why the periphery, Vietnam, became the center in its relationships with smaller countries in Southeast Asia. The coexistence of the two orders (a China-centric order and a Vietnam-centric one) helped Vietnam achieve a balanced position in comparison with neighboring China for a long time.

At some point, when the center no longer represents the progressive forces of the times, it will be replaced by other centers. This has been vividly confirmed in the East Asian region. Since the end of the nineteenth century, China has no longer been the only major center of influence in East Asia. There are new centers, such as Japan, Korea, and advanced countries in the West. That has required Vietnam to reselect the center. The reselection does not mean that Vietnam completely renounces China, because it cannot be denied that Vietnam and China are neighbors. Whether Vietnam wants to or not, it cannot deny that the development and growth of China at present, especially in the context of globalization, has a great influence on other countries in the region and around the world and Vietnam is no exception. Vietnam can still use active resources from the center, China, without being dependent on it in all respects, and should choose other centers to set up partnerships with. This is extremely advantageous in today's flat world, where geographic distance no longer plays a decisive role in establishing a center-periphery relationship. It is important to take advantage of active resources from centers around the world while constantly moving to escape the peripheral position (or the centripetal tendency, as stated by Wallerstein). This will allow Vietnam to become a center alongside China, Japan, and Korea. This is an issue that needs to be resolved to ensure the sustainable development of Vietnam at present and in the future.

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