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# The Nguyễn Dynasty's Government Purchase System in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century: Multiple Functions and Economic Rationality

Taga Yoshihiro\*

This paper explores the government purchase system implemented by the Nguyễn Dynasty in the first half of the nineteenth century. A close examination of dynastic records reveals that the Nguyễn court purchased a vast range of natural and manufactured products, both those produced in its domain as well as various commodities imported from foreign countries. In order to procure foreign items, the court did not simply rely on commercial networks of Chinese merchants but also dispatched government vessels abroad. Official records demonstrate that government purchases assumed multiple functions in the fiscal administration of the Nguyễn Dynasty. In addition to obtaining necessary goods to maintain the state apparatus, these purchases were also designed for other purposes, such as increasing the money supply, famine relief through rice disbursement at cost, as well as collecting export products for the state-run trade. The massive sugar purchases undertaken in Central Vietnam are very useful in illuminating this point. Unquestionably, the central and regional authorities faced difficulties in their management of this institution; nevertheless, an analysis of the government purchase system provides fresh insight into the economic rationality underlying the fiscal policies of the Nguyễn Dynasty.

**Keywords:** government purchase, nineteenth century, Vietnam, Nguyễn Dynasty, economic rationality, fiscal administration, Chinese merchants, sugar

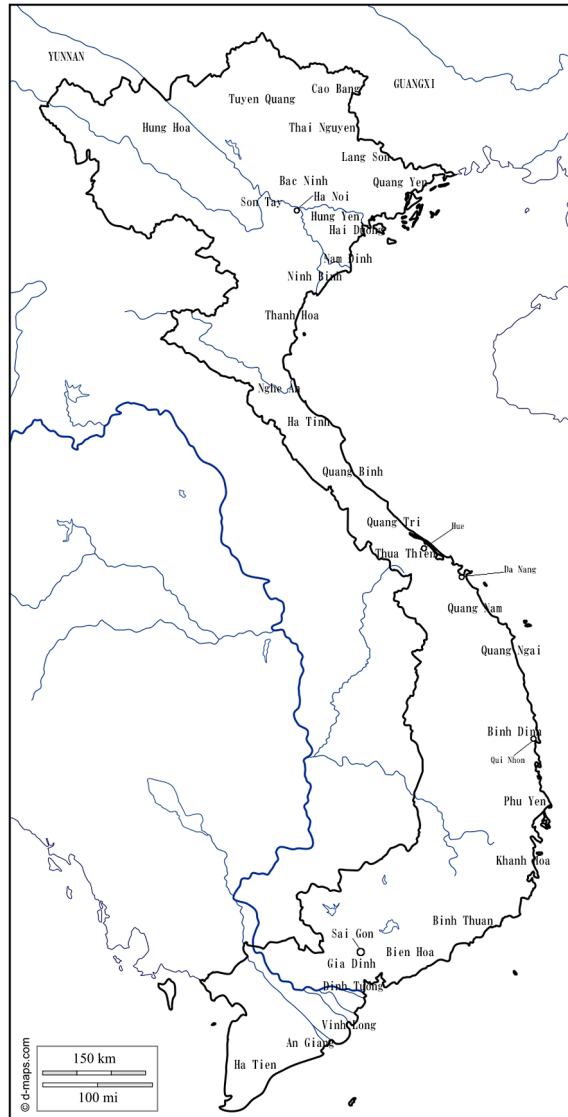
## Introduction

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the significance of the government as an economic actor in Vietnam increased more than ever before under the Nguyễn Dynasty. Compared with its predecessors, the Nguyễn Dynasty developed an elaborate, large-scale fiscal system to ensure that the central government could mobilize various materials and

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human resources nationwide. Given that the imperial capital of Huế was located a great distance from the economic centers of the north (Hà Nội) and the south (Sài Gòn), the redistribution of economic resources through the efficient functioning of the fiscal system was essential to dynastic rule (see Fig. 1). As its fiscal administration expanded, the Huế court wielded ever-greater influence over the economic activities of the private sector.



**Fig. 1** Map of the Provinces and Major Cities of Nguyễn Vietnam: Around 1840

Source: Based on <https://d-maps.com>, accessed February 2, 2023; author has added the names of places.

When discussing the economic role played by the Nguyễn Dynasty, traditional scholarship (especially that produced in modern Vietnam) has argued that its fiscal operations adversely affected economic development. For example, these studies contend that tax-in-kind on various products, combined with the conscription of skilled artisans for state-run workshops—depriving them of any incentive to improve techniques—eventually hindered or distorted the development of rural industry. Although this understanding was originally formed before the 1980s, when the Nguyễn Dynasty was criticized as a “reactionary feudal state” under the heavy influence of Marxist historical interpretation, it still continues to circulate, even after the reappraisal of the Nguyễn Dynasty set in motion at the beginning of the 1990s.<sup>1)</sup> The problem is that these arguments sometimes lacked sufficient evidence and did not take into account the economic motivation guiding Nguyễn fiscal policies.

For the purpose of reexamining the economic role played by the Nguyễn state, the theoretical framework presented by the historian R. Bin Wong seems quite helpful. In his book *China Transformed* (1997), Wong reviewed the economic policies of Chinese states in the imperial era that had been ignored or negatively interpreted by traditional scholarship premised on historical models derived from the European experience. According to Wong, successive Chinese imperial governments had a far stronger interest in peasant welfare than did their contemporary European counterparts. To encourage the stability of the agrarian population, imperial governments intervened in the economy by promoting land clearance and water control as well as regulating the commercial distribution of strategic products such as grain.<sup>2)</sup> A careful reading of the historical source material reveals that a similar consideration for peasant welfare and the stability of the agrarian economy also motivated Nguyễn fiscal policies.

The purpose of this article is to explore the economic rationality underlying the fiscal policies of the Nguyễn Dynasty in the early nineteenth century by analyzing the government purchase system.<sup>3)</sup> Alongside tax collection, the government purchase system constituted a prominent fiscal means by which to procure the economic resources necessary to administer the state. So far, little attention has been paid to the government purchase system in the Nguyễn period, although the products collected by

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1) For example, see Bùi Thị Tân and Vũ Huy Phúc (1998, 120–121), one of the best studies on the development of Vietnamese industry in the Nguyễn period published after the 1990s. For a reappraisal of the Nguyễn Dynasty, an insightful review can be found in Lockhart (2001).

2) For a discussion on the economic policies of Chinese imperial governments, see Wong (1997, 73–151).

3) In Sino-Vietnamese sources, the government purchase system is generally referred to using the terms “harmonious purchase” (*hòa mại* 和買) and “public purchase” (*quan mại* 官買), both derived from Chinese institutional usage.

this system were significant in terms of both variety and volume.<sup>4)</sup>

An analysis of the government purchase system is also important for understanding the relationship between the Vietnamese economy and the commercial networks of nineteenth-century Asia. The pioneering works of Wong Lin Ken (1960), Chen Ching-ho (1990), and Li Tana (1995) show that in the first half of the nineteenth century Vietnam traded actively with commercial centers such as the newly established port of Singapore, and the Vietnamese state's role in this trade was far from negligible. In particular, Li challenged the traditional interpretation that the Nguyễn court enforced a closed-door policy and that foreign trade had limited importance to the Vietnamese economy by demonstrating the importance of the vibrant rice trade in the Mekong Delta (Li 1995, 198–199). While sharing Li's argument about the importance of foreign trade in nineteenth-century Vietnam and the necessity of reevaluating Nguyễn economic policies, this article endeavors to clarify the close connection between fiscal administration and international commerce, which were not fully discussed in the above-cited studies. As will be explained below, the Huế court pulled in a considerable amount of export products from the state-run trade, relying on the government purchase system. The Nguyễn government purchase system reveals how deeply interconnected local producers, the state's fiscal administration, and international markets were in early modern Vietnam.

Considering its importance to the contemporary fiscal administration, it is not surprising that the government purchase system was richly documented in Nguyễn official sources. Stipulations and precedents relating to it can be found in the *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* 欽定大南會典事例 (Official compendium of institutions and usages of Đại Nam, hereafter *KĐĐNHĐSL*) and the *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên* 大南寔錄正編 (Primary compilation of the veritable records of Đại Nam, hereafter *ĐNTLCB*). More detailed information can be obtained from the *Châu bản triều Nguyễn* 阮朝硃本 (Vermilion records of the Nguyễn Dynasty, CBTN), which recently became available to historians.<sup>5)</sup>

Drawing on these sources, this article argues that the government purchase system allowed Nguyễn rulers to procure remarkably diverse items necessary for dynastic rule centered on an imperial capital located far from Vietnam's economic centers (Section D).

4) As an exception, the Japanese scholar Okada Masashi discusses the government purchase system of the Nguyễn Dynasty in relation to the cinnamon produced in Central Vietnam (Okada 2021). Okada emphasizes the importance of the government purchase system as a conduit for collecting cinnamon, a prominent export item in the Nguyễn state-run trade.

5) The *Châu bản triều Nguyễn* or CBTN is a collection of court documents produced during the Nguyễn period, a substantial part of which consists of reports that metropolitan offices and provincial administrators submitted to the emperor. In these reports, the emperor wrote annotations and comments using a red ink brush, hence the title *Châu bản* (vermilion records). Documents included in the ↗

The fact that items bought by the Huế court included many foreign products implies that government purchase was closely related to the vibrant commercial networks of nineteenth-century Asia. Subsequently, multiple functions of the government purchase system will be discussed in order to shed light on the economic rationality of this system (Section II). Nguyễn official sources show that the Vietnamese government purchased items not only to fulfill its administrative demands but also to obtain export products for state-run trade, to increase the money supply available to the market, as well as to distribute rice for famine relief. These multiple functions performed by the government purchase system are particularly evident in the procurement of sugar produced in the central region, one of the most important export items for early-nineteenth-century Vietnam (Section III).

## I Institutional Aspects of the Government Purchase System

### I-1 *Products Procured through the Government Purchase System*

The origins of the government purchase system in Vietnam are obscure. Relying on extant sources, it would seem that it was not until the accession of the Nguyễn Dynasty that the government purchase system played a prominent role in fiscal administration. Before that, successive dynasties presumably acquired the goods required through tax collection and resorted to the government purchase system only on rare occasions. In fact, mentions of the system are rare in contemporary sources up to the eighteenth century. This situation changed at the beginning of the nineteenth century as the Nguyễn Dynasty asserted its rule over the whole country. In contrast to the official writings of preceding centuries, the *KĐĐNHĐSL* set aside four of its 262 volumes (Vols. 64 to 67) to record stipulations concerning government purchases, an illustration of the importance that the Nguyễn authorities placed on the system.

In the *KĐĐNHĐSL*, there were 195 products subject to government purchase. As shown in Table 1, these products were divided into 11 categories: “five grains” (*ngũ cốc* 五穀), “five metals” (*ngũ kim* 五金), “Northern fabrics” (*bắc thái* 北綵), “Western

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↘ CBTN preserve far more detailed descriptions of central policies (as well as details of the situation in local societies) than published materials like the *ĐNTLCB* and *KĐĐNHĐSL*, hence they constitute fundamental source materials for those studying Vietnamese history under Nguyễn rule. The documents that today constitute the CBTN were brought together and partially catalogued from the end of the 1950s to the early 1960s on the initiative of the historian Chen Ching-ho, but it was not until the 2000s that they were opened to the public, including foreign scholars at the National Archives Centre No. 1 in Hà Nội. For an overview of research on the CBTN in English and Vietnamese, see Chen (1962) and Phan (2014, 126–192), respectively.

**Table 1** Categories of Products Subject to Government Purchase

Category	Products (extract of principal products from each category)
1. Five grains (五穀)	paddy, job's tears (薏苡), rice
2. Five metals (五金)	gold, silver, gold and silver leaf, copper, brass, zinc, lead, tin, steel, iron, tin leaf
3. Northern fabrics (北綵)	silk fabrics (錦緞 / 紗 / 綾 / 紬), gold thread, fur garments, buttons, pouch, pillow
4. Western fabrics (洋綵)	wool thread, wool fabrics (羽緞 / 羽絨 / 羽絹), velvet, white cloth, flower printed cloth, striped cloth (線布), canvas, lacquered cloth (漆布)
5. Southern fabrics (南綵)	silk fabrics (紗 / 綾 / 紬 / 紵 / 帛 / 絹 / 南紙), cloth, thread, cotton
6. Medicinal products (藥品)	prescription medication (單號), eaglewood, musk, cinnamon, ginseng, antler velvet, rhinoceros horn, nutmeg, bear gall, mercury, cardamom (砂仁), betel nuts, honey, pepper, lead powder, indigo powder, lotus seed
7. Tea (茶品)	Chinese tea (珠蘭 / 蓮心 / 芳泰 / 龍井 / 德本 / 春茗 / 金英 / 熙春 / 芳美 / 玉圃 / 粵泰)
8. Fruits (果品)	jujube (赤棗 / 烏棗 / 金棗), longan, litchi, grape, dried fruits, oranges, langsat, limes, watermelons, sugared potato (糖蜜芋), green rice (糯糯米 / 札糯米), pear (雪梨 / 砂梨)
9. Local products (產物)	sugar, birds, cattle, sheep, edible bird's nests, animal skins, ivory, tortoiseshell, shell of giant clams, fish fin, fish maw, sea cucumber, fresh and dried fishes, fish source, mulberry liquor, oil, resin, beeswax
10. Utensils (器用)	mat, fan, conical hat, lacquer, paper, lump, porcelain, earthen ware, vase, brazier
11. Miscellaneous materials (雜料)	incense, crude honey, paint (紅丹 / 廣硃 / 硃硃), glue, sulfur, saltpeter, shellac, timber, bamboo, rattan, hemp bark, sedge, palm leaf, firewood, charcoal, stone, caustic lime, firecracker (砲), fringe (纓毛), net, tile

Source: *KĐĐNHĐSL*, Vols. 64–67.

fabrics” (*duong thái* 洋綵), “Southern fabrics” (*nam thái* 南綵), “medicinal products” (*duoc phẩm* 藥品), “tea” (*trà phẩm* 茶品), “fruits” (*quả phẩm* 果品), “local products” (*sản vật* 產物), “utensils” (*khí dụng* 器用), and “miscellaneous materials” (*tập liệu* 雜料). It should be noted that in the Nguyễn sources, the term “Northern fabrics” was commonly used for fabrics imported from China, to distinguish them from Vietnamese ones, called “Southern fabrics.” Likewise, the term “Western fabrics” meant fabrics from Europe (probably including those produced in India), which saw a rapid expansion of circulation in Southeast Asia at the time under study.

The basic purpose of the Nguyễn government purchase system was to satisfy demand in Huế, where imperial court and government offices were concentrated. According to the description in the *KĐĐNHĐSL*, the purchasing procedure was highly centralized. First, the Ministry of Finance (*Bộ hộ* 戶部) and Ministry of Works (*Bộ công* 工部) dispatched inquiries to the provinces ascertaining the availability of the products required in their jurisdictions, and the replies from the provinces were filed for future consultation.

Every July in the lunar calendar, the Imperial Household Department (*Nội vụ phủ* 內務府) and Military Treasury (*Vũ khố* 武庫) submitted estimates of the goods needed for the coming year. Collating these estimates, the Ministry of Finance would then send purchasing orders to the provincial authorities in accordance with the availability of these products in each region. After receiving the purchasing orders, the provincial authorities procured the designated products from the producers or merchants. If the purchase volume was large or the price had appreciated, the provincial authorities were required to send a special report to the ministry apprising it in advance.<sup>6)</sup>

Purchased goods were forwarded to the capital and stored in allocated warehouses. For example, precious items such as gold, silver, and silk were stored in the depots of the Department of the Imperial Household, and base metals like copper and zinc were stockpiled in the Military Treasury. A special depot called the Timber Warehouse (*Mộc thuong* 木倉) was set aside to accommodate wood.

In the capital, purchased goods were dispensed for various purposes. While some were designated for daily use at the imperial court or government offices, others were used as materials in the state workshops attached to the Imperial Household, Military Treasury, and Timber Warehouse.<sup>7)</sup> These workshops employed large numbers of skilled artisans from all over the country to furnish different kinds of items. The workshop of the Imperial Household not only minted medals and ingots of precious metals but also produced fine textiles and garments for imperial wear. The Military Treasury consumed huge amounts of base metal to manufacture various kinds of military hardware and cannons. No less important than these workshops were the mint and the imperial shipyards established in Huế, which also consumed a high proportion of the materials.

Goods collected through the government purchase system were also indispensable for court ceremonies. For example, seasonal festivals in the lunar calendar involved the offering of fruit at the ancestral shrine. At auspicious events such as the celebration of the longevity of the emperor or empress dowager, luxury goods such as Chinese and Western fabrics were distributed as gifts to the participants, who included guests from neighboring countries. Precious items dispensed during or after the ceremony were significant gifts representing the authority and affluence of the Nguyễn monarch (Taga 2020).

Interestingly, as illustrated in Table 1, among the products the Nguyễn court purchased were many that were in high demand in the international market. They included

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6) *KĐDNHDSL*, Vol. 64, 6b–7a.

7) On the state workshops in Huế in the Nguyễn period, see Nguyễn (2001).



forest products such as eaglewood, cinnamon, rhinoceros horn, nutmeg, and cardamom, all of which constituted traditional Vietnamese luxury export items. Various marine products mentioned in the table, such as sea cucumbers, fish fins, and dried marine products, were highly sought after in the Chinese market. Sugar, listed in the category of “local products,” had been a preferred export item since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As will be demonstrated in the following sections, the Nguyễn court effectively employed the government purchase system as a means to procure export products for its state-run trade.

### I-2 *Suppliers and Price Determination in the Government Purchase System*

In the government purchase system, there were two main channels through which products were procured. The first option was to purchase goods directly from producers. The second was to purchase them from private merchants in the market.

In nineteenth-century Vietnam, the court organized the producers of some strategic products into units known as *hộ* 戶, literally translated as “household.” These units were instrumental for the state in collecting taxes levied on local products ranging from handicrafts to marine and forest products.<sup>8)</sup> Unquestionably, the existence of well-organized, productive units allowed the government to efficiently buy the products it needed from producers. In the *KĐĐNHĐSL*, 28 units are set out for different products in the rubrics covering taxes on local products,<sup>9)</sup> sugar producers (*đường hộ* 糖戶) in Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi Provinces also fell under the rubric of government purchase.<sup>10)</sup> There are also some units not referred to in these rubrics in the *KĐĐNHĐSL* but which do appear in the *ĐNTLCB*, such as a timber unit (*mộc hộ* 木戶) in Nghệ An Province. Producers who were grouped into these units are sometimes collectively called the “household of a profession” (*nghiệp hộ* 業戶) in official sources.<sup>11)</sup>

Under the Nguyễn fiscal regime, local officials were supposed to procure products from producers (*nghiệp hộ*) or merchants (*thương hộ* 商戶) upon receipt of orders from the central government. However, contemporary sources reveal that this system was not necessarily followed. To fulfill a purchase order, officials sometimes assigned the

8) In Nguyễn official writings, taxes levied on local products were generally called “product taxes” (*sản vật thuế* 產物稅) or “separate payment” taxes (*biệt nạp* 別納). For a study focusing on these taxes, see Trương (2008) and Taga (2021).

9) *KĐĐNHĐSL*, Vols. 45–46.

10) *KĐĐNHĐSL*, Vol. 66, 1b–4a.

11) Modern Vietnamese translations of the *ĐNTLCB* and *KĐĐNHĐSL* also interpret the term *nghiệp hộ* as *nhà sản xuất* or “producers.” What is troublesome for historians is that in contemporary sources this term is used in a somewhat ambiguous manner, allowing for the possibility of different interpretations. Okada (2021, 90) translates the term as “licensed merchants.”

procurement quota of the required product to communes (*xã* 社, the smallest administrative units established on a village level) that were not engaged in the production or trade of that product. Being ordered to deliver products not at their disposal, these communes were compelled to buy them on the open market to fulfill the quota. Such situations were reported by Lê Đức Tiệm 黎德漸, who was acting inspector of the Hải An circuit in 1833. He reports that on the occasion of a government purchase in northern Vietnam, the local officials just assigned communes to procure the quota based on the number of people registered. Despite the high prices, the peasants had no option but to buy the sought-after products on the open market. Adding insult to injury, peasants were subjected to extortion by commune leaders or local government clerks in the process of procurement. After he had received Lê Đức Tiệm's report, Emperor Minh Mạng (r. 1820–41) addressed the governors-general and treasurers of the provinces, ordering that thereafter these products be purchased only from producers or merchants, and banning the imposition of a purchase quota on peasant communes.<sup>12)</sup> In spite of this edict, inappropriate purchases diverted to the peasant population did not cease. Emperor Minh Mạng had to reiterate similar instructions in 1834 and 1835 to prevent local magistrates from purchasing products from peasants.<sup>13)</sup> As Lê Đức Tiệm's report illustrates, government purchases provided the opportunity for dishonest commune leaders to exploit villagers. On the pretext of procuring designated products, these leaders ran a side hustle to collect extra money from the villagers for personal gain.<sup>14)</sup>

In 1841 Emperor Thiệu Trị (r. 1841–47) ascended the throne as successor to his father, Minh Mạng. In November of that year, Lư Quĩ 劉揆 and four other officials presented a secret memorial to the emperor in which the difficulties accruing to the government purchase system were described as follows:

As for the government purchase system, in purchasing the required goods in the provinces, merchants and producers could not fulfill demand; therefore, (the local government) has allocated (this task of procuring the necessary products) to the ordinary population. However, as they are not producers, they are forced to purchase the designated products elsewhere. When people deliver the products to officials and receive payment, (the total cost of the procurement) can be several times higher than the original price.<sup>15)</sup>

The situation described in this memorial did not appear to improve in the following years. In 1844, three years after the Lư Quĩ memorial, an observation was made about the

12) *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 94, 21b–22b.

13) *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 138, 4a–5a; Vol. 147, 18a–b.

14) *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 173, 6a–b.

15) *DNTLCB* III, Vol. 12, 3b–4a.

heavy burden on the local population arising from the improper allocation of procurements.<sup>16)</sup> As the officials themselves repeatedly pointed out, the procurements assigned to the population, regardless of their specialties, highlighted the flaws in the government purchase system.

In their decisions on the purchase price to be allocated to the population, Nguyễn emperors repeatedly emphasized the importance of paying an “ample remuneration” (*hậu giá* 厚價).<sup>17)</sup> Nevertheless, the officials involved in the purchases often found themselves in a difficult situation because of the considerable discrepancy between the official price (*quan giá* 官價) and the market price (*thị giá* 市價). The official price was decided in Huế by the Ministry of Finance, based on previous purchase records. In contrast, prices in local markets invariably fluctuated but tended to be higher than official prices. In such a situation, insisting on purchasing at the official price could discourage the population from selling their products to the government. Official records are not lacking in examples attesting to the problems associated with these price discrepancies. In 1835, an official named Hoàng Văn Diễn 黃文演 was sent to northern Vietnam to purchase products. During his mission he could not purchase sufficient products because he insisted on buying at the official price decided beforehand and refused to raise his offer, although the local market price had recently appreciated. Hearing of Hoàng Văn Diễn’s failure, Emperor Minh Mạng insisted that purchasing should be done flexibly, taking into consideration fluctuations in the market price.<sup>18)</sup>

The gap between the official price calculated on previous purchases and what could be had on the open market grew so wide that, from the Thiệu Trị era, local authorities frequently submitted requests for the purchases to be based on current market prices. In 1844 the governor of Biên Hòa Province submitted a memorial to the emperor suggesting that products should be purchased at the market price, adding that the final price should depend on the distance over which the product had had to be transported. However, before this request obtained the emperor’s assent, yet more problems arose. Having attempted to purchase at the market price, the governor of Biên Hòa sent another memorial expressing his concern that current market prices far outstripped the official prices, meaning that purchasing at the market price would be detrimental to state coffers. Finally, on the advice of the Ministry of Finance, it was decided that the purchase price should be based on the precedent of the previous year, and additional prices should be paid in proportion to the degree of market price appreciation.<sup>19)</sup>

16) *DNTLCB* III, Vol. 45, 17a–20b.

17) For example, see *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 135, 8b.

18) *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 147, 28b.

19) *DNTLCB* III, Vol. 43, 3a–4b.

The problem of deciding the proper purchase price was discussed also on another occasion. In 1845 Vũ Trọng Bình 武仲平 and other officials maintained that the Ministry of Finance was still adhering to the original purchase price precedent, which led the population to suffer from the disparity in the compensation paid for the difference between the purchase price and the current market price. To resolve this problem, the courtiers proposed that henceforth government purchases should be made at the current price, and extra money should be paid if the prices of products were appreciating. The Ministry of Finance, the courtiers continued, should not insist on clinging to precedent and categorically declining the proposed price. Emperor Thiệu Trị read and approved the courtiers' proposal.<sup>20)</sup> These episodes offer insight into the efforts made by Nguyễn officials to manage the government purchase system without harming the interests of either the producers or the merchants.

### I-3 *Purchasing Foreign Products*

Establishing the government purchase system allowed the Nguyễn Dynasty to obtain not only Vietnamese products but also the foreign commodities they required. This can be seen in the products listed in Table 1. Aside from the aforementioned Chinese and Western fabrics, the items listed in the table include some with an apparently foreign origin, such as ginseng and Chinese tea. In the nineteenth century, the ways in which the Vietnamese government acquired foreign products could be divided into two patterns.

The first involved a purchase commitment to Chinese merchants. There are many cases in the dynastic records of Chinese merchants procuring commodities on behalf of the Vietnamese government. For example, in 1820, upon receiving the instruction from Huế, officials of the Northern Citadel (Bắc Thành 北城, the administrative unit encompassing today's northern Vietnam) had Chinese merchants residing on Hàng Buồm 行帆 Street in Hà Nội buy damask made in Suzhou.<sup>21)</sup> From the early nineteenth century, this street had served as a hub for Chinese merchants, especially those from Guangzhou (Canton) and Fujian (Yamamoto 1959). In 1824, the Northern Citadel again left the purchase of ginseng on the Guangzhou market to Hàng Buồm Chinese merchants.<sup>22)</sup>

Guangzhou, often referred to simply as *Đông* 東 or "East" in Vietnamese documents, figured prominently as a place where the Nguyễn court could procure Chinese commodities. In 1810, Emperor Gia Long dispatched Minh Hương Chinese merchants<sup>23)</sup>

20) *ĐNTLCB* III, Vol. 45, 17a–20b.

21) *KĐDNHĐSL*, Vol. 65, 1a–b.

22) *KĐDNHĐSL*, Vol. 65, 20b–21a.

23) The term *Minh Hương* (明香 or 明鄉) was originally applied to Ming Dynasty loyalists who fled to Vietnam in the late seventeenth century. Through intermarriage with local women, they had become acculturated into Vietnamese society, although to some extent they still preserved their ↗

to Guangzhou with 20,000 taels of silver.<sup>24)</sup> Following this initial foray, Chinese merchants living in northern Vietnam were again dispatched to Guangzhou with 10,000 taels of silver in 1813.<sup>25)</sup> In fact, the government's demand for Chinese goods was so high that in 1832, representatives of Guangzhou and Fujian Streets in Hà Nội were entrusted with the purchase of items produced in the two regions.<sup>26)</sup> There are some instances in which the amount of Chinese goods purchased attained an enormous scale. In 1857 the Vietnamese government asked Hàng Buồm Street Chinese merchants to procure products available in Guangzhou, including outer robes for the imperial court, silk textiles, and utensils. In his reply to this request, a former representative of the Hàng Buồm Street merchants named Quan Ngọc Ký 關玉記 estimated the total cost of the purchase to be 70,000–80,000 taels of silver.<sup>27)</sup> In addition to the Chinese merchants established in Hà Nội, Chinese merchants residing in Quảng Nam also engaged in government trade with Guangzhou. In 1847 a Qing merchant in Quảng Nam Province named Lý Thái 李泰, who also served the court as an interpreter, was rewarded with a promotion because he had been dispatched to Guangzhou many times and had successfully purchased goods for the court.<sup>28)</sup>

Metals mined in Yunnan and used to mint money were also important commodities the Vietnamese government purchased through Chinese merchants. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Nguyễn Dynasty minted brass and zinc cash as national currency; therefore, a stable flow of currency was dependent largely on securing sources of copper and zinc.<sup>29)</sup> Although northern Vietnam was itself endowed with rich mineral resources,<sup>30)</sup> the domestic output of copper and zinc was insufficient to permit minting on a large scale. To supplement the domestic supply, the government

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↘ Chinese traditions. Following its predecessor, the Nguyễn Dynasty established exclusive communes for Minh Hương Chinese (*Minh Hương xã* 明香社) and distinguished them from recently arrived Chinese residents in Vietnam. Newly arrived Chinese were called “Qing Chinese” (Thanh Nhân 清人) and were administered by guilds/communities (*bang* 幫) according to their original homelands. For the Nguyễn policy toward ethnic Chinese, see Fujiwara (1986, 257–282) and Choi (2004, 38–41).

24) *DNTLCB* I, Vol. 40, 14b.

25) *DNTLCB* I, Vol. 48, 19b–20a.

26) *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 79, 2b.

27) CBTN, TĐ, Vol. 62, 84a–87a, Memorial from the Ministry of Finance dated 21/4/TĐ10.

28) *DNTLCB* III, Vol. 64, 12b–13a.

29) On the use of cash coins in the Nguyễn monetary regime, see Fujiwara (1986, 303–324) and Thierry (1999).

30) In the eighteenth century, the Tụ Long 聚隆 copper mine in Tuyên Quang boasted a large output and contributed heavily to the copper cash production by the Lê Trịnh government. The Tụ Long copper mine continued to operate well into the nineteenth century, but its output stagnated and it could no longer match the government's demand for minting. For the exploitation of the Tụ Long copper mine between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Okada (2011).

obtained copper and zinc imports through Chinese merchants. To aid the merchants in their task, the government fund frequently gave them an advance. Between 1842 and 1844, the government funded Chinese merchants residing in Hà Nội to import copper and zinc from China. Using these funds, the Chinese merchants successfully procured 113,552 *cân*<sup>31)</sup> of zinc and 8,381 *cân* of copper, the equivalent value of 34,247 strings of cash.<sup>32)</sup> In another case, Guangzhou and Fujian merchants in Hàng Buồm received money from the Vietnamese government in 1851 to buy copper and zinc in China and consequently obtained about 55,872 *cân* of copper and 778,327 *cân* of zinc, equivalent to 283,783.4 strings of cash.<sup>33)</sup> As for the provenance of Chinese copper and zinc, Nguyễn archival sources relating to Chinese tax farmers note that merchants procured copper and zinc for the Vietnamese government in the mining areas of Yunnan, such as Mengzi and Huize (Taga 2022, 45).

The Huế court also asked Chinese merchants calling at Vietnamese ports to procure the commodities it needed. To regularize such undertakings, a series of stipulations were issued in 1848. As will be mentioned later, this year saw the suspension of the purchase of foreign products by government ships. It would seem that the Huế court was attempting to obtain what it needed by reinforcing procurements made via Chinese merchants. Under the 1848 stipulations, every January or February in the lunar calendar, the Ministry of Finance sent inquiries to Qing trading vessels visiting Vietnam asking if they would find it acceptable to receive government money and procure Chinese products with it when they returned to their home country. Merchants who accepted this offer were given amounts varying from 3,000 to 20,000 strings of cash as a government advance, on the condition that a guarantee from a reliable Chinese merchant settled in Vietnam was obtained. After receiving the government advance, the Chinese merchants procured the goods in their home country and delivered them on their next trip to Vietnam. If the goods ordered were successfully delivered, the merchants could be granted a reduction in harbor dues. When merchants failed in their undertaking, those who provided the guarantee had to pay compensation.<sup>34)</sup>

The second method by which foreign products could be obtained was procurement by officials specially dispatched overseas. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Nguyễn court periodically sent officials to both Guangzhou and Southeast Asian regions under the rule of Western countries, including Singapore, Batavia, and Luzon (Chen

31) *Cân* 斤 was a unit of weight in traditional Vietnam. In the nineteenth century, 1 *cân* equaled 0.6 kg and consisted of 16 *lượng* 兩.

32) *KĐDNHĐSL*, Vol. 53, 14b–15a. In early modern Vietnam, one string of cash consisted of 600 separate coins.

33) CBTN, TĐ, Vol. 36, 25a–b, Memorial from the Ministry of Finance dated 10/11/TĐ4.

34) *KĐDNHĐSL*, Vol. 64, 9a–10b.

1990). The Nguyễn official records generally noted these expeditions as “overseas missions” (*ngoại dương công vụ* 外洋公務 or *hải ngoại công vụ* 海外公務). More specifically, expeditions to Guangzhou were called “eastern-going missions” (*như đông công vụ* 如東公務), while those to Southeast Asia or farther west were “western-going missions” (*như tây công vụ* 如西公務).

The Nguyễn authorities emphasized that the principal purpose of these overseas missions was to collect information and hone navigation skills. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that the ships dispatched were engaged in commercial activities in overseas markets. In 1838, for the official missions to Singapore and Batavia, the articles to be traded in the markets at their destinations were stipulated: zinc, lead, rifles, and woolen and other fabrics.<sup>35)</sup> Western fabrics were a prominent commodity purchased by the Nguyễn Dynasty when overseas missions gave it the opportunity to do so. In the *KĐĐNHĐSL*, there are many entries recording Western fabrics bought and delivered by “dispatched officials” (*phái viên* 派員).<sup>36)</sup> This expression reveals that these fabrics were purchased by Vietnamese officials while engaged in overseas missions. The ample supply accumulated by these overseas missions allowed the Nguyễn emperors to distribute Western fabrics lavishly at court ceremonies and to dress their soldiers in uniforms made of Western cloth (Taga 2020, 100–101).

The activities by Vietnamese government vessels attracted the attention of contemporary Westerners too. Based on the description by the French merchant Isidore Hedde in 1844, Wong Lin Ken described the state-run trade of the Nguyễn court with Singapore as follows:

[T]he Cochin-Chinese King bought the produce of his country from his subjects at arbitrary prices, and sent them to Canton, Batavia and Singapore in five square-rigged vessels and steamers. To Singapore he sent silk from Canton and Cochin-China, green tea, nankeens, cinnamon, rhinoceros horns, rice, sugar, salt, ivory, buffaloes' skins, precious wood and treasure, in return for which he took camlets and common long ells to clothe his army, tin, opium, fire-arms and some Indian goods. (Wong 1960, 156)

The above description well illustrates the highly commercial nature of the Nguyễn court's overseas missions. As for the goods exported by government vessels, they included not only Vietnamese products most likely bought from local producers, but also Chinese goods from Canton (Guangzhou). This indicates a possibility that the Vietnamese government reexported Chinese products it had purchased in Guangzhou markets to Singapore.

35) *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 196, 11a–13b.

36) *KĐĐNHĐSL*, Vol. 65, 7b–10a.

The policy of overseas missions was pursued most energetically by the court during the Minh Mạng and Thiệu Trị periods, from the 1820s to the early 1840s. However, no sooner had the fourth emperor, Tự Đức, ascended the throne than the necessity for these missions was questioned by officials. Trương Quốc Dụng 張國用, who emerged as an influential figure at the late Thiệu Trị court, presented a secret proposal comprising five articles to the newly enthroned emperor. In the first article, Trương set forth the significance of “saving expenditure” (*tết tài dụng* 節財用) and advised the emperor henceforth to cease dispatching overseas missions and the government purchases associated with them.<sup>37)</sup> Consequently, an ordinance that decreed the suspension of overseas missions was promulgated no later than around May of 1848.<sup>38)</sup>

In fact, the cessation of overseas missions did not just mean stopping government purchases in overseas markets. As will be explained in the next section, ships departing for overseas missions were usually loaded with local Vietnamese products to be sold abroad. Since the bulk of these products had been collected through the government purchase system, the stoppage of overseas missions inevitably led to a diminished volume of domestic purchases hitherto devised for this enterprise. After the overseas missions were suspended, the Nguyễn court depended more heavily on Chinese merchants to procure foreign goods. More than ten years had passed since the suspension of overseas missions when Emperor Tự Đức observed:

Purchasing on the occasion of eastern- and western-going missions has now ceased for a long time. The requisite goods are invariably asked of Chinese merchants. As a result, shrewd merchants have capitalized on this situation to pursue their own profit by withholding commodities and allowing the prices to appreciate. Consequently, the cost (of the foreign goods purchased) has been excessively high.<sup>39)</sup>

Following this observation, Emperor Tự Đức ordered the Ministry of Finance that among the goods required, those which could be substituted by domestic ones should be listed in the report, and that for regular requirements, domestic goods should be relied on and the use of Chinese or Western goods suspended.<sup>40)</sup> It was not until 1875 that the Huế court took the decision to resume sending government ships to trade in overseas markets.<sup>41)</sup>

37) *DNTLCB* IV, Vol. 1, 32a–b.

38) *DNTLCB* IV, Vol. 2, 20b.

39) *DNTLCB* IV, Vol. 21, 30a.

40) *DNTLCB* IV, Vol. 21, 30a.

41) *DNTLCB* IV, Vol. 53, 56a–b.



## II Multiple Functions of the Government Purchase System

In addition to procuring products necessary to the state, the government purchase system assumed several functions in the fiscal administration of the Nguyễn Dynasty. This section will examine the multiple functions of the government purchase system from the following aspects: 1) as a means of distributing money to the market; 2) as a means of famine relief; and 3) as a means of collecting export products.

### II-1 *The Government Purchase System as a Means of Distributing Money*

It is quite interesting that in the *ĐNTLCB*, Nguyễn emperors and officials often articulated the importance of government purchase as a means of distributing and circulating money. In 1835, when rewarding officials for buying products advantageously in northern Vietnam, Emperor Minh Mạng pointed out that the government purchase system was originally designed to allow currency to circulate among the population.<sup>42)</sup> In 1844, officials at the imperial court talked about the government buying goods in order to circulate cash and fulfill state demands.<sup>43)</sup> Why did both emperors and their officials have to emphasize the significance of distributing money through the government purchase system? To answer this question, it is necessary to explain how currency circulated in the Nguyễn fiscal administration.

As mentioned above, the Nguyễn Dynasty issued brass and zinc cash as legal tender. This cash played an essential role not only in private commerce but also in the fiscal administration. Under the Nguyễn fiscal regime, tax payment in cash was quite prevalent. First of all, able-bodied adults were liable to pay a poll tax levied in zinc cash, whose annual amount per capita varied from 450 to 1,080 cash according to prescribed categories. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the number of able-bodied adults registered on the tax rolls grew rapidly, from 620,246 in 1820 to 1,024,388 in 1847 (Shimao 2001, 30). Supposing that the average annual amount of poll tax was 765 cash per capita, the total amount of zinc cash collected by the government can be estimated to have been around 474,488,190 in 1820 and 783,656,820 in 1847. In addition to the poll tax, huge amounts of zinc cash were collected through the inland customs system established on the main traffic arteries. Whereas millions in zinc cash were annually siphoned off from the private sector via tax collection, the ways to redistribute the cash collected were fairly limited. The government released stockpiled cash as stipends or expenses to cover public works, but this amount was much smaller than the amount collected as tax. There-

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42) *ĐNTLCB* II, Vol. 142, 17b.

43) *ĐNTLCB* III, Vol. 45, 18a.

fore, zinc cash stockpiled, lying idle in public coffers while the private sector suffered a shortage of money in circulation.

To cope with this discrepancy, the court began to rely on the government purchase system in the 1830s. In the eyes of policy makers, the government purchase system seemed to be an efficient method of redistributing stockpiled cash while procuring products necessary to the state. In 1833, hearing that the supply of ready cash in circulation was inadequate in the provinces of Hà Tĩnh, Nghệ An, and Thanh Hóa, Emperor Minh Mạng issued a royal ordinance to ensure that the provincial authorities purchased products in keeping with the fluctuations in market price.<sup>44)</sup> By doing so, he apparently aimed at augmenting the money supply in regions where the population suffered from a scarcity of cash coins. The next year, discussing the problem of the government purchase system with the Ministry of Finance, Emperor Minh Mạng commented:

Today the population is suffering from a shortage of circulating cash (*tiền hoang* 錢荒). The only remedy for this emergency lies in the government purchase system. If purchasing is done at a high price, the population will benefit from it and cash can be dispersed into a wide circulation.<sup>45)</sup>

It was in the Red River Delta and its adjacent areas that the government purchase system was expected to alleviate the stagnated monetary flow most effectively. In 1838, the cash remaining in the provincial coffers of Sơn Tây was so abundant that 300,000 strings of cash were transported to Hà Nội to purchase goods.<sup>46)</sup> In the same year, the Ministry of Finance sent a memorial to Emperor Minh Mạng arguing for the introduction of a formal financial policy. The memorial began with a reference to the axiom that the value of currency lay in its circulation; therefore, ever since antiquity, those who aspired to good rule dispersed accumulated money and goods and exchanged these with each other, guided by a fiscal administration or trade promotion. The ensuing report said that provinces in the Red River Delta region, such as Nam Định, Sơn Tây, Bắc Ninh, and Hải Dương, had amassed 200,000 to 500,000 strings of zinc cash each, because tax revenues in cash invariably surpassed expenditures. Conversely, in these provinces the number of strings of cash circulating among the population was not abundant. To narrow this gap, the Ministry of Finance proposed expanding the government purchase system to disperse stockpiled cash into the market. To the end of the memorial was attached a list of products to be purchased in the provinces.<sup>47)</sup> After this proposition had been approved, the government purchase system was assiduously implemented in Nam Định, Sơn Tây,

44) *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 101, 23b–24a.

45) *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 136, 22a–b.

46) *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 189, 3b.

47) CBTN, MM, Vol. 67, 18a–20b, Memorial from the Ministry of Finance dated 2/3/MM19.

Bắc Ninh, and Hải Dương in addition to two mountain provinces, Hưng Hóa and Tuyên Quang. The items purchased included metals, textiles, hemp, lac, deer horn, rhinoceros horn, charcoal, and lacquer.<sup>48)</sup> Although we can find no documents referring to how effective this policy was at lubricating monetary flows, there is little doubt that considerable amounts of cash coins were disbursed into the market through government purchases during this period.

Among the products available in northern Vietnam, silver and gold were the most highly sought after. In 1835, aware of the ample cash reserves in Hà Nội, Emperor Minh Mạng gave instructions to buy 2,000 taels of gold and 20,000 taels of silver in order to disperse the accumulated cash.<sup>49)</sup> Gold was again extensively bought in the northern region in 1839, spending the surplus cash reserved in provincial coffers. Speaking about the preference for purchasing gold, Emperor Minh Mạng explained that gold was a valuable, lightweight commodity, hence the high price it fetched could enrich the population, and it would also reduce the burden of transportation.<sup>50)</sup>

## II-2 *The Government Purchase System as a Means of Famine Relief*

As payment for products purchased, the Nguyễn court frequently dispensed not only money but also rice. The disbursement of rice through the government purchase system eased seasonal fluctuations in the rice price and secured food supply in times of poor harvest or natural disaster. Therefore, it would be true to say that the government purchase system functioned as a form of famine relief.

In the Nguyễn official records, references to rice distribution as a form of payment for purchases made under the government system first emerged in the Minh Mạng period. When the price of rice in Huế rose to 900–960 cash per *phuong*<sup>51)</sup> in 1826, Emperor Minh Mạng ordered the magistrates to let people sell their commodities such as timber, firewood, and rattan rope to the government. In exchange for these products, the government handed out tickets that could be exchanged for rice at the state granary.<sup>52)</sup> In the same year, the central provinces of Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Bình Định, Phú Yên, and Bình Hòa also witnessed a rise in the rice price during the pre-harvest season. This time a royal ordinance was issued to purchase 400,000 *cân* of white sugar, 150,000 *cân* of crude honey, as well as 15,000 *cân* of cinnamon and cardamom, paid for with government rice. To immediately increase the food supply, the rice was to be paid for in advance

48) *ĐNTLCB* II, Vol. 190, 6b. See also CBTN, MM, Vol. 70, 73a–74b, Memorial from the acting governor-general of Ninh Thái, Tôn Thất Bặc dated 9/4/MM19.

49) *ĐNTLCB* II, Vol. 154, 26a–b.

50) *ĐNTLCB* II, Vol. 202, 18b–19a.

51) In nineteenth-century Vietnam, one *phuong* 方 equaled roughly 38 liters.

52) *KĐĐNHĐSL*, Vol. 64, 1a–b; *ĐNTLCB* II, Vol. 38, 18a.

at a moderate price.<sup>53)</sup> The Bình Định region also suffered high rice prices the following year, so Lê Văn Lại 黎文禮 and Nguyễn Chí Lý 阮至理 were dispatched there to cooperate with the local authorities in the disbursement of granary rice. After the two officials had left Huế, Emperor Minh Mạng said to the Ministry of Finance:

Referring to a famine relief policy, its essence lies in broad coordination. The government purchases goods and pays for them with grain. This is also one of the vital points by which to enrich the state and benefit the population.<sup>54)</sup>

In relation to the above comment, Emperor Minh Mạng had Lê Văn Lại and other officials seek out local products that could be useful to the state and purchase them with government grain.<sup>55)</sup>

In nineteenth-century Vietnam, the price of rice was especially volatile in the central region, including the imperial capital of Huế. This was mainly because the region's geographic conditions meant it was not possible to set up enough rice fields locally to generate an ample food supply. In the central region, the price of rice tended to appreciate from October or November to the January or February of the next year in the lunar calendar. Sino-Vietnamese sources often refer to these months as the “time of the green-yellow gap” (*thanh hoàng bất tiếp chi thì* 青黃不接之時), which means “the months when the new crop is yet to come and the old crop was practically exhausted” (Hsiao 1960, 152). During green-yellow gap months, the population in the central region invariably lived with the threat of price increases hanging over its head. It has been reported that in Quảng Nam Province, every October and November the price of rice doubled compared to other months.<sup>56)</sup> So, it was quite natural that scarcity of the local rice supply meant that the central region became more and more dependent on rice imported from the fertile southern lands. In particular, the rice shipped from Gia Định to the central region was referred to as “southern rice” (*nam mễ* 南米).

In contrast to its poor rice production, central Vietnam was rich in other valuable natural products such as sugar and cinnamon. This enabled the Nguyễn authorities to combine the procurement of valuable products with the stabilization of food supply by resorting to the government purchase system. As will be mentioned in Section III, the government established annual purchase quotas for sugar and cinnamon in Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi Provinces, and in line with this quota, the government rice (or cash) for the purchase was paid in advance. The disbursement of government rice through the

53) *KĐDNHĐSL*, Vol. 64, 2a; *ĐNTLCB* II, Vol. 42, 6b.

54) *ĐNTLCB* II, Vol. 47, 17b–18a.

55) *ĐNTLCB* II, Vol. 47, 17b–18a.

56) *CBTN*, TT, Vol. 9, 198a–199b, Imperial edict dated 6/9/TT1.

product purchase system was also correlated with the transport of southern rice. This point was made clear by the government purchase conducted in 1842:

Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi witnessed an appreciation in the price of rice. (Emperor Thiệu Trị) said that: Two provinces lie in the region of the imperial capital. Last year, the food supply among the population in Quảng Ngãi was quite unfavorable. It had already been discussed, and orders had been given to release government rice at a reduced price. Moreover, the government funds for sugar and cinnamon were disbursed in advance to buy (sugar and cinnamon) and pay their price with grain (instead of cash). In Quảng Nam Province, too, the disbursing of the government fund for sugar and cinnamon in advance was permitted so that the grain could circulate, thereby augmenting the food supply among the population. Now that the situation seems perilous and the green-yellow gap months are approaching, we should ensure that the population does not go short of food. . . . Subsequently, an official from Quảng Nam Province named Phạm Duy Trinh 范惟真 sent a memorial saying: “Now that the merchant ships loaded with southern rice have arrived to sell their cargo, the food supply among the population is no longer in jeopardy. Besides this, the government funds (for sugar and cinnamon) have already been disbursed, so the population can rely on them.” However, in Quảng Ngãi Province the rice price remains high. The provincial official Nguyễn Đức Hộ 阮德護 requested that (the government) buy up sugar and soybean oil, so that the producers could receive the government funds in advance, allowing the grain to circulate and increase the food supply. This request was granted.<sup>57)</sup>

Other than the provinces of Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, and Bình Định, government purchase directed toward famine relief was pursued also in the Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An regions, where arable land was relatively scarce in proportion to the population; these regions were frequently hit by natural disasters such as typhoons and floods. When the price of rice in the Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An areas rose sharply in 1830, instructions were immediately sent to the local authorities that if anyone could sell ironwood to the state, its price would be paid with rice instead of cash.<sup>58)</sup> Ironwood from Nghệ An was again bought by the government in 1835 for the purpose of disbursing government grain.<sup>59)</sup> When Thanh Hoá Province suffered serious damage as a result of successive typhoons, merchants and producers were permitted to receive grain in advance in exchange for timber.<sup>60)</sup>

Unfortunately, from the extant sources it is very difficult to tell to what extent rice disbursement through the government purchase system was effective as famine relief. Nevertheless, the cases cited above shed light on the fact that the Nguyễn government purchase system was intended not purely to fill state coffers, but also to assure that the population could survive when times were hard. This deep consideration for peasant

57) *DNTLCB* III, Vol. 15, 12b–13a.

58) *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 64, 32a.

59) *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 154, 26b.

60) *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 219, 26b–27a.

welfare had much in common with the economic policies of Chinese imperial governments, which Wong (1997) has emphasized in contrast with premodern Europe.

### II-3 *Government Purchase as a Means of Collecting Export Products*

In addition to the above two functions, the Nguyễn Dynasty pursued another goal through the government purchase system: collecting export products for the state-run trade. As discussed in Section I, the Nguyễn Dynasty periodically sent government vessels to surrounding countries. These voyages were designated as overseas missions. Their ostensible purpose was to gather information and conduct navigation drills, but the real reason was to pursue state-run trade. Government vessels dispatched on overseas missions were loaded with local products for international markets: sugar produced in the central region supplemented by a variety of marine and forest products.<sup>61)</sup> The Nguyễn court could rely on the taxes levied on these products as one method to collect export items, but the revenue thus accrued was not necessarily enough to guarantee sufficient cargoes for shipping. In its search for a more effective way to collect export products, the Nguyễn court turned to the government purchase system.

In this respect, the description in the *KĐĐNHĐSL* is quite revealing. Between the Gia Long and Thiệu Trị periods, the Vietnamese government frequently sent state vessels to trade with Guangzhou. However, with the enthronement of Emperor Tự Đức, this dispatch of state vessels was abolished in 1848. Concomitant with this decision was the stipulation that the government purchase system was to be partly revised as follows:

Concerning products for which a purchase order has hitherto been annually sent (to the provinces) every winter, the Ministry of Finance has sent notices to southern regions as well as the other provinces beforehand to purchase and deliver items such as betel nuts, pepper, cardamom, dried shrimp, dried eels, tobacco leaves, lotus seeds, sea cucumbers, and shark fins, to ensure that these would be ready and waiting for export on the occasion of voyages to Guangzhou. Now that the missions to Guangzhou have been suspended, the need for these products is not as extensive (as it was before). With the exception of occasional purchases for ordinary needs, those for export are to be suspended forever.<sup>62)</sup>

This description clarifies that before 1848, the government regularly bought products—including betel nuts, pepper, cardamom, dried shrimp, dried eels, tobacco leaves, lotus seeds, sea cucumbers, and shark fins—as export cargoes for the Guangzhou market. A close reading of the purchase records in the *KĐĐNHĐSL* proves that the bulk of these products originated from central and southern Vietnam.<sup>63)</sup> In short, the government

61) We take a closer look at the purchase of sugar in Section III.

62) *KĐĐNHĐSL*, Vol. 64, 8b–9a.

63) *KĐĐNHĐSL*, Vols. 65, 66.

**Table 2** Export Products for the 1829 Mission to Guangzhou

Product	Quantity
Edible bird's nests	50 <i>cân</i>
Nutmeg	651 <i>cân</i> 5 <i>lượng</i>
Cardamom (砂仁菓 and 砂仁米)	3,623 <i>cân</i>
Cinnamon	7,694 <i>cân</i>
Silver	1,000 <i>lượng</i>
Dried squid (乾魷魚)	2,442 <i>cân</i> 8 <i>lượng</i>
Dried anchovies (乾鰱魚)	5,172 <i>cân</i>
Dried shrimp (乾蝦米)	4,500 <i>cân</i>
Ironwood (鐵林木)	119 pieces
White sugar	50,000 <i>cân</i>
Zinc	252,600 <i>cân</i>

Source: CBTN, MM, Vol. 29, 150a–b, Imperial edict dated 21/6/MM10.

purchase system and state-run trade were inextricably bound up in the Nguyễn fiscal regime.

Regarding the state-run trade for Guangzhou and its export cargoes, more detailed information can be found in the CBTN. The products loaded as ship cargoes for Guangzhou in 1829 are shown in Table 2. Although there is no specific reference in the document concerning the way these products were procured, it is very likely that they were collected through the government purchase system.

Another document in the CBTN of the Thiệu Trị era casts even more light on the government purchase system for export.<sup>64)</sup> According to this document, written on the occasion of the dispatch of a government vessel named the *Linh Phụng* 靈鳳 to Guangzhou as part of overseas missions in 1845,<sup>65)</sup> the Ministry of Finance proposed a plan to purchase local products to the value of 500,000 *cân* in the provinces to add to the sugar produced in Quảng Nam (400,000 *cân*) and Quảng Ngãi (300,000 *cân*). Following this plan, the provincial authorities had already bought 263,000 *cân* of local products and were continuing their purchases. Sugar purchases were made also in Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi: 320,000 *cân* and 230,000 *cân* respectively. While the *Linh Phụng* was preparing to depart, three Qing merchants named Ngô Hội Hưng 吳會興, Lưu Thuận

64) CBTN, TT, Vol. 30, 359a–362b, Report (*phiên* 片) from the Ministry of Finance dated 30/4/TT5.

65) The corresponding entry in the *ĐNTLCB* reads that this year the court sent the vessel the *Linh Phụng* to Guangzhou for the purpose of repatriating Qing pirates arrested by the authorities in Thanh Hóa Province. See *ĐNTLCB* III, Vol. 48, 5a.

**Table 3-1** Contents of Export Cargo on the *Linh Phụng*

Product	Quantity
Edible bird's nests	138 <i>cân</i> 15 <i>lạng</i>
Ivory	1,000 <i>cân</i>
Cardamom (砂仁葉 and 砂仁米)	1,453 <i>cân</i>
Cinnamon	15,000 <i>cân</i>
Lotus seeds	4,375 <i>cân</i>
Pepper	7,799 <i>cân</i>
Sea cucumbers	2,037 <i>cân</i>
Dried shrimp	10,000 <i>cân</i>
Dried anchovies	30,000 <i>cân</i>
Betel nuts	50,000 <i>cân</i>
Fish maws (魚肚)	142 <i>cân</i>
Shark fins (魚翅)	225 <i>cân</i>
Timber (烏木)	40,500 <i>cân</i>
Sugar	300,000 <i>cân</i>

Source: CBTN, TT, Vol. 30, 359a–362b, Report (*phiên* 片) from the Ministry of Finance dated 30/4/TT5.

**Table 3-2** Contents of Export Cargoes on the Vessels of Qing Merchants

Product	Quantity ( <i>cân</i> )
Dried anchovies	42,448
Dried shrimp	1,677
Betel nuts	100,746
Pepper	2,000
Sugar	400,000

Source: CBTN, TT, Vol. 30, 359a–362b, Report (*phiên* 片) from the Ministry of Finance dated 30/4/TT5.

Thịnh 劉順盛, and Đặng Hợp Long 鄧合隆 notified the local authorities in Thừa Thiên and Quảng Nam of their willingness to export government cargoes on behalf of the Huế court. The volumes of cargo with which each of the three merchants wanted to load their ships were 400,000 *cân*, 300,000 *cân*, and 200,000 *cân*, respectively. In the document, the Ministry of Finance noted the contents of cargoes on the *Linh Phụng* and the Qing merchants' ships (Tables 3-1 and 3-2). Most of the products that made up these cargoes had been obtained via the government purchase system, with a limited amount drawn from tax revenue and reserves in the metropolitan depots.



**Table 3-3** Additional Products for the Qing Merchants' Vessels to Be Supplied by Ongoing Purchases in Provinces

Product	Purchase Amount ( <i>cân</i> )
Dried anchovies	47,552
Dried shrimp	48,323
Betel nuts	49,254
Pepper	10,201
Cardamom	18,896
Tobacco leaves	10,000
Nutmeg	500
Dried squid	50,000
Rice-paper plant pith (通大海菜)	10,000
Total	244,726

Source: CBTN, TT, Vol. 30, 359a–362b, Report (*phiên* 片) from the Ministry of Finance dated 30/4/TT5.

With regard to the cargoes of the Qing merchants' ships, besides the items listed in Table 3-2, the court prepared additional products to make full use of the cargo capacity. These additional products were supposed to have been acquired by ongoing purchases undertaken by provincial authorities (Table 3-3).

The numerical data preserved in the CBTN vividly testify to the enormous scale of the trade sponsored by the Nguyễn court, as well as the significant role played by the government purchase system in assembling export products.<sup>66)</sup>

Having experienced its heyday in the Minh Mạng and Thiệu Trị eras, the government purchase system—whose purpose was the collection of export products—underwent a sharp decline during the reign of Tự Đức, after the decision to suspend overseas missions in 1848. Soon after this decision was made, a senior official at the Ministry of Finance, Nguyễn Cửu Trường 阮久長, proposed that the purchase of products for overseas missions be stopped and thereafter the government purchase system be reduced to items in general use such as timber, stone, and firewood.<sup>67)</sup> A similar proposition was made not long afterward by another official, Nguyễn Văn Chân 阮文振, and Emperor Tự Đức acquiesced to it.<sup>68)</sup>

66) Drawing on a Thiệu Trị era document preserved in the CBTN, Okada also clarifies the breakdown of the export cargo of state-run trade for the Guangzhou market in which both cinnamon and sugar figure prominently (Okada 2021, 89).

67) *DNTLCB* IV, Vol. 2, 20b.

68) *DNTLCB* IV, Vol. 2, 24b–25a.

### III Sugar in the Government Purchase System of the Nguyễn Dynasty

#### III-1 *Vietnamese Sugar as an Export Commodity*

Among the products procured through the Nguyễn government purchase system, sugar stands out because of the huge scale of its purchase and its concomitant significance as an export commodity. Historically, Vietnamese sugar production began to extend from the central to the southern region as early as the seventeenth century. As previous studies have pointed out, sugar was a prominent export product for the Nguyễn lords (1558–1777), the predecessors to the Nguyễn Dynasty. In the seventeenth-century heyday of international commerce, large quantities of Quảng Nam black sugar were exported to the Japanese market; and even in the mid-eighteenth century, more than forty barrels of white sugar were shipped annually from Hội An to the Chinese market (Li 1998, 80–81). In fact, sugar also contributed to the founding of the Nguyễn Dynasty. In the course of his struggle against the Tây Sơn army, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh—the founder of the Nguyễn Dynasty and later Emperor Gia Long—tapped into the sugar trade to obtain advanced Western weapons.<sup>69)</sup> In 1789, he ordered the Trấn Biên protectorate (corresponding to Biên Hòa Province) to purchase 10,000 *cân* (six tons) of sugar annually to exchange for Western weapons. In this instance, ten strings of cash per 100 *cân* of sugar were paid in advance.<sup>70)</sup> Sugar was also bought in the Trấn Biên protectorate in 1795, driven by the exigent need to procure weapons.<sup>71)</sup>

The position of sugar as a significant export commodity did not seem to waver even after the Nguyễn Dynasty was established. In 1820, satisfied with the result of the sugar purchases in the Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi regions, Emperor Minh Mạng said:

With reference to sugar, our people can neither satisfy hunger nor keep from the cold with it. However, Westerners have a preference for it. In the future, we should sell a lot of sugar in exchange for Western commodities. Commodities like rice, silk, and cloth are valuable to our people, so (their export) is unthinkable.<sup>72)</sup>

For the Vietnamese rulers, sugar was an ideal product for export not only because it had a high commercial value on the international market, but also because its export was not detrimental to the subsistence of the domestic population. Sugar export in early-nineteenth-century Vietnam is well documented in the CBTN. As Emperor Minh Mạng's

69) For the external trade of southern Vietnam during the reign of Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, see the monumental work by Pierre-Yves Manguin (1984).

70) *ĐNTLCB* I, Vol. 4, 25b.

71) *ĐNTLCB* I, Vol. 8, 29a–b.

72) *ĐNTLCB* II, Vol. 4, 8b.

statement reveals, sugar was a highly sought after product by Western merchants visiting Vietnam. The Nguyễn court confined its trade with European countries to the port of Đà Nẵng, where a special warehouse was constructed to store sugar from the Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi regions. In 1830, 450,000 *cân* (270 tons) of sugar was sold to a French (Phú lãng sa 富浪沙) merchant at a price of 6.5 dollars per 100 *cân* (60 kg).<sup>73)</sup> In 1834, having obtained information about the plentiful sugar available in Vietnam en route to trading in Batavia, a French ship called at Cần Thơ, a port in An Giang Province, to request permission to purchase sugar. This request was declined by Vietnamese authorities. The reason given was that trade with Western countries was limited to the port of Đà Nẵng and that An Giang Province did not produce sugar.<sup>74)</sup> The French were not the only Western merchants to seek Vietnamese sugar. The CBTN recorded that in 1840, 336,900 *cân* (about 202 tons) of sugar from Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi were sold to an English ship (Anh cốt lòi 曠咭喇).<sup>75)</sup>

It is no surprise that sugar constituted the largest export commodity in the state-run trade. The large quantities of sugar carried as cargo on government vessels dispatched on overseas missions has already been alluded to in the preceding section.<sup>76)</sup> Documents preserved in the CBTN afford yet more examples of sugar exported via government vessels. When the Vietnamese government dispatched five vessels to Singapore and Batavia in 1838 as part of its overseas missions, a huge quantity of sugar was loaded for each destination (Table 4): the total amount of sugar loaded onto the five vessels was 1,315,400 *cân* (about 789 tons). The fact that sugar played an important role in the trade between Vietnam and Singapore can also be confirmed by British statistical records. Drawing on the *Tabular Statements of the Commerce and Shipping of Prince of Wales Island, Singapore and Malacca*, Li (1995, 209) notes that sugar was the principal Vietnamese import item to Singapore in the early nineteenth century and its value reached 174,914 Spanish dollars in 1845. It is highly possible that a large part of this sugar was traded by government vessels of the Nguyễn Dynasty.

Vietnamese sugar was also exported to the Guangzhou market by Chinese merchants. The preceding section mentions the three Chinese merchants Ngô Hội Hưng, Lưu Thuận Thịnh, and Đặng Hợp Long, who requested the government for a cargo to export in 1845, including 400,000 *cân* of sugar (Table 3-2). The following year, the Huế court again consigned export products for the Guangzhou market to the same three

73) CBTN, MM, Vol. 42, 182a–183b, Memorial from Nguyễn Văn Trọng dated 15/5/MM11.

74) CBTN, MM, Vol. 52, 249a–251b, Memorial from the governor of Gia, Định, Hà Duy Phiên dated 29/2/MM15.

75) CBTN, MM, Vol. 80, 219a–220b, Memorial from the Ministry of Finance dated 15/11/MM21.

76) See Tables 2, 3-1.

**Table 4** Amount of Sugar Loaded onto Official Vessels Heading for Singapore and Batavia in 1838

Name of Vessel	Destination	Amount of Sugar Loaded ( <i>cân</i> )
<i>An Duong</i> 安洋	Singapore	100,000
<i>Thuy Long</i> 瑞龍	Batavia	396,000
<i>Phân Bằng</i> 奮鵬	Batavia	350,000
<i>Tiên Sĩ</i> 僊螭	Singapore	220,000
<i>Linh Phụng</i> 靈鳳	Singapore	249,400
Total		1,315,400

Source: CBTN, MM, Vol. 64, 106a–107b, Memorials from Vương Hữu Quang, the acting provincial treasurer of Quảng Ngãi, and three other officials dated 22/2/MM19. The destination of each vessel is supplemented based on its entry in *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 196, 11a–b.

Chinese merchants. This time, of the total amount of goods consigned, weighing 872,535 *cân*, sugar accounted for 600,000 *cân* (360 tons).<sup>77)</sup>

### III-2 Government Purchase of Sugar in Central Vietnam

Almost all of the sugar the Nguyễn court exported to international markets came from two provinces, Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi, where units had been set up for the production of sugar and cinnamon. To ensure the procurement of these two products, the court earmarked government funds known as the “sugar fund” (*đường bản* 糖本) and “cinnamon fund” (*quế bản* 桂本). The government used these funds periodically to buy sugar and cinnamon with zinc cash, silver, and rice.

Judging from the extant records, the government purchase of sugar in the Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi regions operated on the largest scale from the Minh Mạng to the Thiệu Trị period. For example, in 1835 two officials were dispatched to Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi to purchase 700,000 *cân* and 800,000 *cân* of sugar, respectively.<sup>78)</sup> The next year, Emperor Minh Mạng set an annual sugar purchase quota of 1,100,000 *cân* (660 tons) for Quảng Ngãi and 900,000 *cân* (540 tons) for Quảng Nam.<sup>79)</sup> Henceforth, this number was used as a target for sugar purchases until the end of the Thiệu Trị era.<sup>80)</sup> Since most of the sugar was destined for export, the cessation of overseas missions in 1848 inevitably affected the government sugar purchase in Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi. In the same year in which the overseas missions were suspended, it was decided that

77) CBTN, TT, Vol. 34, 230a–234b, Report from the Ministry of Finance dated 29/5/TT6.

78) *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 160, 15a.

79) *DNTLCB* II, Vol. 174, 3b–4a.

80) If the government sugar stockpile grew too large or sugar producers suffered a crop failure, the amount to be purchased was temporarily lowered. For example, see CBTN, MM, Vol. 79, 140a–b, Imperial edict dated 26/10/MM21; and CBTN, TT, Vol. 33, 289a–b, Imperial edict dated 15/10/TT6.

the annual purchase quota of sugar and cinnamon in Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi Provinces would be abolished and thereafter products would be bought if there was a request from producers.<sup>81)</sup>

In principle, sugar producers were not allowed to trade directly with Chinese merchants. Such trade was permitted as an imperial beneficence only when a surplus remained after the government purchase.<sup>82)</sup> Despite this rule, sometimes producers did sell sugar illicitly to Chinese merchants, to the detriment of the government purchase quota. In 1840, although the government purchase quota had not yet been met, a sugar producer in Quảng Nam sold 140,000 *cân* of sugar to a Chinese merchant.<sup>83)</sup>

Initially, the government paid producers the price of sugar with cash. In a purchase conducted in 1821, first-grade sugar was worth 12 strings of cash, second-grade was 11 strings of cash, and third-grade was 10.5 strings of cash per 100 *cân*.<sup>84)</sup> Subsequently, in Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi Provinces, payment in rice prevailed over cash payments. This practice presumably commenced around 1822. That year, sugar producers in Quảng Ngãi requested payment for sugar in rice instead of cash, because the price of rice had appreciated. Local officials conveyed this request to Emperor Minh Mạng and voiced their opinion as follows:

The appreciation of the market price of rice has been caused by the rich who stockpile (rice) expecting an additional increase in price. Now, if the government rice is distributed among the population, the rich who stockpile rice will lose a way to make a profit and the price will stabilize.<sup>85)</sup>

Agreeing with this, Emperor Minh Mạng ordered that 15,000 *hộc* of grain be distributed to producers as payment.

As mentioned earlier, in Central Vietnam—encompassing the sugar-producing areas of Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi—opportunities for rice production were relatively limited. To prevent the price of rice from appreciating too much, the government disbursed rice to pay for sugar during the green-yellow gap months when food supply was at its most stretched. According to the description in the *KĐĐNHĐSL*, before the Tự Đức period the price of sugar was conventionally paid in advance every November in the lunar calendar in the form of either rice or cash, requiring producers to deliver their produce by the next March or April.<sup>86)</sup> In its purchase of sugar, the court pursued two simultaneous

81) *KĐĐNHĐSL*, Vol. 64, 8a–b.

82) *ĐNTLCB* II, Vol. 117, 20a–b.

83) CBTN, MM, Vol. 81, 117a–118b, Imperial edict dated 23/11/MM21.

84) *KĐĐNHĐSL*, Vol. 66, 1a.

85) *ĐNTLCB* II, Vol. 17, 4a.

86) *KĐĐNHĐSL*, Vol. 64, 8a–b. This point can be corroborated by the records in *ĐNTLCB* and CBTN.

goals: securing food supply during the green-yellow gap months and procuring the most important export product for the state-run trade. Based on this article, it is feasible to say that sugar purchase is the most typical example to illuminate the multiple functions assumed by the Nguyễn government purchase system.

## Conclusion

In Vietnamese history, the government purchase system began to take on a substantial role only with the advent of the Nguyễn Dynasty. Arguably this system expanded most between the Minh Mạng and Thiệu Trị periods, then shrank somewhat from the beginning of the Tự Đức era, coinciding with the cessation of overseas missions. Based on the results obtained from this study, the economic rationale underlying the government purchase system was revealed in four ways.

First, in the fiscal administration of the Nguyễn Dynasty, the government purchase system worked smoothly in conjunction with tax collection as a means to acquire the economic resources necessary to maintain the state apparatus on a nationwide scale. Without the government purchase system and the products obtained through it, the Nguyễn Dynasty would not have been in a position to pursue its policy of state integration centered on Huế in Central Vietnam, where economic resources were relatively limited. Furthermore, the Huế court successfully purchased foreign goods by tapping into Chinese trade networks that stretched to Guangzhou and Fujian on the maritime route and Yunnan on the inland route.

Second, the government purchase system was essential to the collection of export products for the state-run trade. The collection of commodities through the government purchase system, such as sugar and various maritime and mountain products, made it possible for the Nguyễn court to participate in the burgeoning maritime trade in Asian markets in the early nineteenth century. The government purchase system, in tandem with the state-run trade, remained significant until 1848, when overseas trading missions were suspended.

Third, the government purchase system was effectively used to increase the money supply in the economy. When the population was suffering from a shortage of circulating money, the Nguyễn authorities could disburse stockpiled zinc cash through the government purchase system. Given the extensive scale of purchases recorded, it is probable that the cash released contributed greatly to improving the money supply and lubricating market transactions.

Finally, the Nguyễn Dynasty counted on the government purchase system to protect

the livelihood of the population. The emperors of the Nguyễn Dynasty thought of the system as a useful means to bestow famine relief and frequently distributed rice as payment for products. This was especially true of the central region, where the rice supply was quite volatile as a consequence of the limited amount of arable land and its subsequent heavy dependence on imported rice from the southern area.

As was the case in imperial China, as discussed by Wong (1997), a keen interest in the stability of the agrarian population guided the fiscal policies of nineteenth-century Vietnam. In addition, a salient feature of the Nguyễn government purchase system was its close connection to international commerce. This leads us to consider two different facets of the Nguyễn Dynasty: an agrarian empire having long-standing traditions in the northern region; and the Nguyễn lords' regime in the South, a different type of polity with a heavy reliance on international commerce.<sup>87)</sup> To the Nguyễn Dynasty, peasant welfare and foreign trade were intimately intertwined. Relying on the government purchase system, Nguyễn rulers in the early nineteenth century successfully created a fiscal connection between the agrarian sector and foreign trade, drawing the regions of Vietnam into a single economy.

In this paper, I have discussed the problem of the government purchase system, drawing on materials written by historians of the Huế court. On the one hand, these materials offer detailed accounts of the institutional aspects of the government purchase system, supplemented by the expectations entertained by emperors or mandarins about working this system. On the other hand, the numerical data contained in these materials are quite sporadic—a shortcoming which makes it difficult to evaluate the significance and effectiveness of the government purchase system in a measurable way. Regardless, this study of the government purchase system has shown that the economic policy of the Nguyễn Dynasty had its own rationale that can be fully understood only if the historical and environmental conditions of the nineteenth-century Vietnamese state are properly taken into account.

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87) Citing the contemporary description of the Nguyễn court's important role in foreign trade, Li also pointed out that "this policy was foreign to northern Vietnamese regime, the Lê, but nothing new to the experiences of the southern Vietnamese regime, the Nguyen" (Li 1995, 212).

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