

SIAM–VIETNAM RELATIONS DURING THE REIGN OF KING RAMA I: BURMA AND THE QING IN REGIONAL DIPLOMACY

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ABSTRACT—This article examines Siam–Vietnam relations by analyzing exchanges of envoys and correspondence between Siam, Vietnam, Konbaung Burma, and Qing China between 1782 and 1802. The roles of Burma and the Qing have often been overlooked. King Rama I (r. 1782–1809) sought support from Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, the future Emperor Gia Long (r. 1802–1820), and also appealed to the Qing, but the Qing declined to intervene. Meanwhile, Burmese interference hindered Siamese efforts to aid Ánh against the Tây Sơn regime, which by 1801 had established ties with Burma. Nguyễn unification in 1802 reshaped regional alignments and laid the foundation for closer Siamese–Vietnamese relations.

KEYWORDS: Envoys and Correspondence; Konbaung Dynasty; Nguyễn Phúc Ánh; Qing Dynasty; Rama I; Siam–Vietnam Relations

Introduction

This article explores the dynamics of Siam–Vietnam relations during Rama I's reign (1782–1809) by situating their diplomatic interactions within a broader regional context. It focuses on the exchange of envoys and official correspondence not only between Siam and Vietnam, but also involving the Konbaung and the Qing dynasties, in order to situate bilateral relations within the wider diplomatic and political landscape of mainland Southeast Asia. The article further argues that these early encounters laid the groundwork for the pattern of relations between Siam and Vietnam that persisted until the 1830s.

Historical Background

Siam–Vietnam relations are often said to have developed mainly through Cambodia, with intermittent engagement from the 1670s to the early 1780s and intensifying from the 1810s to the 1840s.²

As the Nguyễn lords of central Vietnam expanded into the Mekong Delta, they increasingly clashed with Ayutthaya over Cambodian affairs (Dutton 2006: 29–30). From the 1670s to the 1730s, Cambodia's royal family

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² The details of Siamese–Vietnamese relations described below are based on the following: DNTLTB; DNTL, 1; DNTL, 2; PRPR1; PRPR2; PRPR3; see also Wenk 1968: 106–118; Gesick 1976; Eiland 1989; Kitagawa 2006; Morragotwong 2011; and also Kawaguchi 2020: 99–102.

was divided into rival factions, with Ayutthaya supporting one and the Nguyễn lords the other; a similar dispute occurred in 1748. Although the Konbaung dynasty of Burma destroyed Ayutthaya in 1767, King Taksin (r. 1767–1782) expelled the Burmese and ascended the Siamese throne. Cambodian King Outey Reachea (r. 1758–1775) rejected subjection to Taksin and relied on the Nguyễn. Taksin installed Ang Non (r. 1775–1779), who was later eliminated by Cambodian officials allied with Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, allowing Ang Eng (r. 1779–1796) to ascend the throne.

In 1782, King Rama I (r. 1782–1809) established a new dynasty in Siam, replacing Taksin. Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, exiled by Tây Sơn attacks, and Ang Eng both sought refuge in Bangkok. Vietnam's internal struggles limited its ability to intervene in Cambodia, allowing Siam to expand influence (Wenk 1968: 109). Ang Eng returned to Cambodia in 1794 under Rama I's suzerainty. Following Ang Eng's death in 1796, a Cambodian high official governed under Siamese supervision, leaving the throne vacant.

Nguyễn Phúc Ánh overthrew the Tây Sơn in 1802 with support from regional powers and unified the territories of present-day Vietnam under his rule, taking the throne as Emperor Gia Long (r. 1802–1820). He exchanged envoys and correspondence with Rama I to maintain friendly relations. Ang Chan (r. 1806–1834), the next Cambodian king, remained subordinate to both Siam and Vietnam. During Rama I's reign, relations among the three polities were relatively stable, although smaller states between Siam and Vietnam could exploit Vietnam to counterbalance Siam. After Rama I's death in 1809,

Nguyễn Vietnam expanded its influence over Cambodia, initiating strained Siamese–Vietnamese relations (Gesick 1976: 141–143, 152; Eiland 1989: 66–96; Morragotwong 2011: 68–74).

Tensions continued as Ang Chan fled to Vietnam in 1812, returning to Phnom Penh in 1813 under Vietnamese supervision. Conflicts persisted: in 1815, Phnom Penh's army clashed with Battambang, controlled by Siam, and King Anuwong's revolt in Vientiane in 1827 further strained relations. By 1832, royal correspondence between Siam and Vietnam ceased. In 1833, King Rama III (r. 1824–1851) sent armies against the Nguyễn dynasty in response to Lê Văn Khôi's revolt; the war lasted until 1846. From 1847 to 1848, both monarchs invested Ang Duong as king of Cambodia, requiring him to present tribute to both courts.

Notably, frequent exchanges of envoys and royal correspondence occurred only between 1803 and 1832.³ During this period, the Nguyễn dynasty sent 16 envoys to Siam and Siam dispatched 17 to Vietnam according to the *Official Compendium of Institutions and Usage of Đại Nam* (*Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ*; 欽定大南會典事例, vol. 136, fols 1a–14a). Prior to this, correspondence was rare, limited to a few letters between the Ayutthaya court and Nguyễn lords in the mid-18th century (DNTLTB, 10: 26ab; Lê 1972–73, 5: 155a–170a). After 1832, diplomatic correspondence ceased until 1879, when

³ Until around 1830, letters in Thai and Chinese between the Siamese king and Vietnamese emperor reflected equal status. Under Rama II, Gia Long's letter was accurately translated into Thai—unlike royal correspondence with the Qing (Kawaguchi 2022: 83–84).

Emperor Tự Đức (r. 1847–1883) sent a letter to King Rama V (r. 1868–1910; Koizumi 2016).

These exchanges raise key questions: Why were envoys and letters exchanged so frequently only between 1803 and 1832? How did Rama II (r. 1809–1824) and Rama III maintain relations with the Nguyễn despite ongoing tensions over Cambodia and Vientiane? Correspondence often addressed not only Cambodia but also broader regional issues, including Burma. Gia Long's earliest surviving letter to Rama I in 1803 expressed concern over a potential Burmese attack on Siam, while Rama I informed him of victories against Burmese forces and requested naval assistance. Even as relations deteriorated, Burma remained a recurring topic during Rama II's reign, reflecting Siam's ongoing threat perception.⁴

Siamese kings sought to maintain friendly relations with Vietnam to secure their rear against Burma, while making compromises over Cambodia (Mayoury & Pheuiphanh 1998: 96–100). To understand these dynamics, it is crucial to consider pre-1802 events that shaped the balance of power. The Qing dynasty in China (1644–1912) also played a role, engaging with Burma, Vietnam, and Siam, and eventually investing lords in these polities as “kings of tributary countries”.

Rama I and Nguyễn Phúc Ánh

Between 1782 and 1802, many aspects of the Siam–Vietnam relationship were established that continued until 1832

⁴ See CMHR1 CS 1164, no. 3, CS 1166 no. 3, and CMHR2 CS 1174–77, no. 9, CS 1175, no. 23; Narinthrathewi 2546: 614–617; DNTL, 1, 38: 12a–13a; also Koizumi 2008.

(Kawaguchi 2020). At the end of 1781, King Taksin ordered Chaophraya Chakri (later Rama I) to march into Cambodia to attack Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, who had assisted Cambodian officials in eliminating King Ang Non. General Chakri garrisoned in Siem Reap, while his younger brother Chaophraya Surasi, later appointed Second King under Rama I, advanced to Phnom Penh to confront Ánh's troops under Nguyễn Hựu Thụy. In March 1782, Phraya San, a Taksin vassal, revolted and imprisoned Taksin. Likely in response, Chakri instructed Surasi to make peace with Thụy while Chakri returned to Thonburi. There he executed King Taksin and Phraya San, and ascended the throne as Rama I.⁵ His swift success was partly thanks to Nguyễn Hựu Thụy.

Meanwhile, Ánh, threatened by the Tây Sơn, fled Saigon to Bangkok in 1784 and received support from Rama I. Although Siamese and Ánh's forces were defeated by Nguyễn Huệ (r. 1788–1792) at Rạch Gầm-Xoài Mút in 1785, Ánh, Lê Văn Quân, and Nguyễn Văn Thành joined the Siamese army to defend against Burmese attacks under King Bodawpaya (r. 1781–1819) from 1785 to 1786. Using firearms, they helped the Second King defeat the Burmese at Chainat; Lê Văn Quân also participated in the attack against Patani.⁶

In Vietnam, the Tây Sơn forces captured Hué and advanced north, destroying the Trịnh lords in Hanoi in 1786. Conflict later erupted between

⁵ Nidhi 2547: 474–506. On this event, the Vietnamese *Genealogy Book of the Mạc Clan* (Hà Tiên trấn Hiệp trấn Mạc thị gia phả; 河僊鎮叶鎮鄚氏家譜; ed. Chen 1956: 119–122; Vũ 1991: 240–242) corresponds to the Siamese sources (Kawaguchi 2020: 106–117).

⁶ See DNTL, 1, 2: 18b–20a; PRPR1: 89; ed. Chen 1956: 129; Vũ 1991: 247; also Watanabe 1987: 139–141.

the Tây Sơn brothers when Nguyễn Huệ attacked his elder brother Nguyễn Nhạc. After Emperor Chiêu Thống (r. 1786–1789) of the Lê dynasty fled to the Qing, Huệ was enthroned as emperor in 1788. In 1789, he defeated a Qing army sent to restore Chiêu Thống, but subsequently dispatched a “tributary” envoy and was invested by Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735–1796) as “King of Annam (Annan Guowang 安南國王)” (Shimao 2001: 290–291; Dutton 2006: 45–49).

Learning of the conflict between Huệ and Nhạc, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh left Bangkok in 1787 and recaptured Saigon in 1788, continuing his campaign against the Tây Sơn while exchanging envoys and letters with the Siamese court. Rama I often provided ships, firearms, and gunpowder to Ánh.

The region of present-day Laos, divided into Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Champasak, and Xieng Khouang, became strategically important during this war. Inspired by Nguyễn Huệ’s 1791 invasion of Vientiane, Rama I and Ánh planned a joint operation in 1792: Siamese and Vientiane armies would attack Nghệ An or Hanoi by land, while Ánh’s navy advanced on Quy Nhơn and Huế. However, the campaign was postponed because Siam had to respond to a Burmese invasion in Tavoy (Dawei) on the Malay Peninsula’s west coast.⁷

Subsequent Siamese support for Ánh depended on Burmese affairs. In 1794, Rama I received an envoy and letter from Huệ’s successor, Nguyễn Quang Toản (r. 1792–1802) in a superficially friendly manner. In early 1795,

Rama I proposed a coordinated land-sea attack on Huế with Ánh, but the plan was canceled. The governor of Martaban in Burma had sent a letter implying peace negotiations and the Siamese court had to focus on this.⁸

In 1797, hearing rumors of a joint Burmese–British attack on Siam, Ánh offered naval assistance. Siam acknowledged his offer and promised a land-based operation via Vientiane. When Burmese forces invaded Chiang Mai in 1798, Ánh sent a navy to support Siam, but it returned without engagement (DNTL, 1, 9: 29b–30a; 10:1b; PRPR1: 162–163).

In 1799, Ánh proposed another joint operation. Although Rama I agreed, Siamese troops could not participate due to a possible Burmese invasion of Lan Na.⁹ Rama I’s support was limited to granting passage for Nguyễn Văn Thoại, who with 150 soldiers reached Vientiane via Cambodia and Ubon Ratchathani. Inthavong (r. 1795–1805), king of Vientiane, promised to attack Nghệ An alongside Thoại. This operation occurred in 1800¹⁰ and, in 1801, Ánh’s general invaded Nghệ An with Vientiane troops.¹¹

Finally, in the third lunar month of 1802, 5,000 Siamese and Vientiane soldiers defeated Tây Sơn forces in Nghệ An.¹² According to the *Cases on*

⁷ See DNTL, 1, 6: 2b–3b; PRPR1: 137–138; also Watanabe 1987: 142 and Maung Maung Tin 2020, 2: 66–73.

⁸ DNTL, 1, 10: 22b–23a, 34b–35a; 11: 7b–8b; PRPR1: 166–167.

⁹ DNTL, 1, 12: 6b, 17b–18a; *Phongsawadan yo mueang wiangchan* 2484: 191.

¹⁰ The Vientiane general, Phraya Supho (พระยาสุพโธ) seen in *Phongsawadan yo mueang wiangchan* (2484: 191), is “Phá-nhã Xo-bô” (破雅舡喃) in DNTL, 1, 15: 1b–2a.

¹¹ See DNTL, 1, 16: 10a, and *Phongsawadan yo mueang wiangchan* (2484: 192).

Friendship with the Neighboring States (Lân hiếu lệ; 隣好例, fol. 2ab), Siamese troops also aimed to capture fleeing generals Trần Quang Diệu and Vũ Văn Dũng. With Burmese forces expelled from Lan Na (except Chiang Saen) by 1802, Rama I had sufficient leeway to support Ánh's capture of Nguyễn Quang Toản in Hanoi in July 1802.

Nguyễn Phúc Ánh collaborated with Rama I in the war against Burma, particularly in the Gulf of Siam and the Malay Peninsula. Conversely, when Burma attacked Siam, Rama I could not spare troops for Ánh. Burmese chronicles report that Bodawpaya could mobilize 55,000–134,000 soldiers, while Rama I had only 40,000–48,000,¹³ making a two-front war impossible. Maintaining good relations with Vietnam was therefore essential for Siam's western defense. These military and strategic constraints were only part of the factors that shaped the later Chakri-Nguyễn relationship.

Envoy Exchanges Between the Konbaung and Tây Sơn Dynasties

Shimao (2001: 308–309), citing a Burmese envoy to the Tây Sơn dynasty (noted in a map described below), argued that Nguyễn Huệ may have sought ties with inland Southeast Asian powers, while Nguyễn Phúc Ánh drew support from maritime ones—the Siamese, French, Portuguese, overseas Chinese, and Cambodians. This section explores these Tây Sơn-Konbaung contacts.

According to *The Veritable Biographies of Đại Nam, First Collection* (Đại Nam chính biên liệt truyện sơ tập; 大南正編列傳初集, hereafter DNLTST, vol. 33, fols 1b–2a), during the Quang Trung era (1788–1792) Burma dispatched a mission via Hưng Hóa in northwest Vietnam to establish friendship with Nguyễn Huệ. No other Vietnamese source corroborates this. Conversely, the *Royal Chronicle of the Rattanakosin Dynasty* (Phraratchaphong-sawadan krung rattanakosin; พระราชนพงศาวดารกรุงรัตนโกสินทร์) records that in March 1792, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh informed Siam that Vientiane had captured Huệ's envoy to Burma (PRPR1: 137), though DNLT, 1 and DNLTST do not mention it.

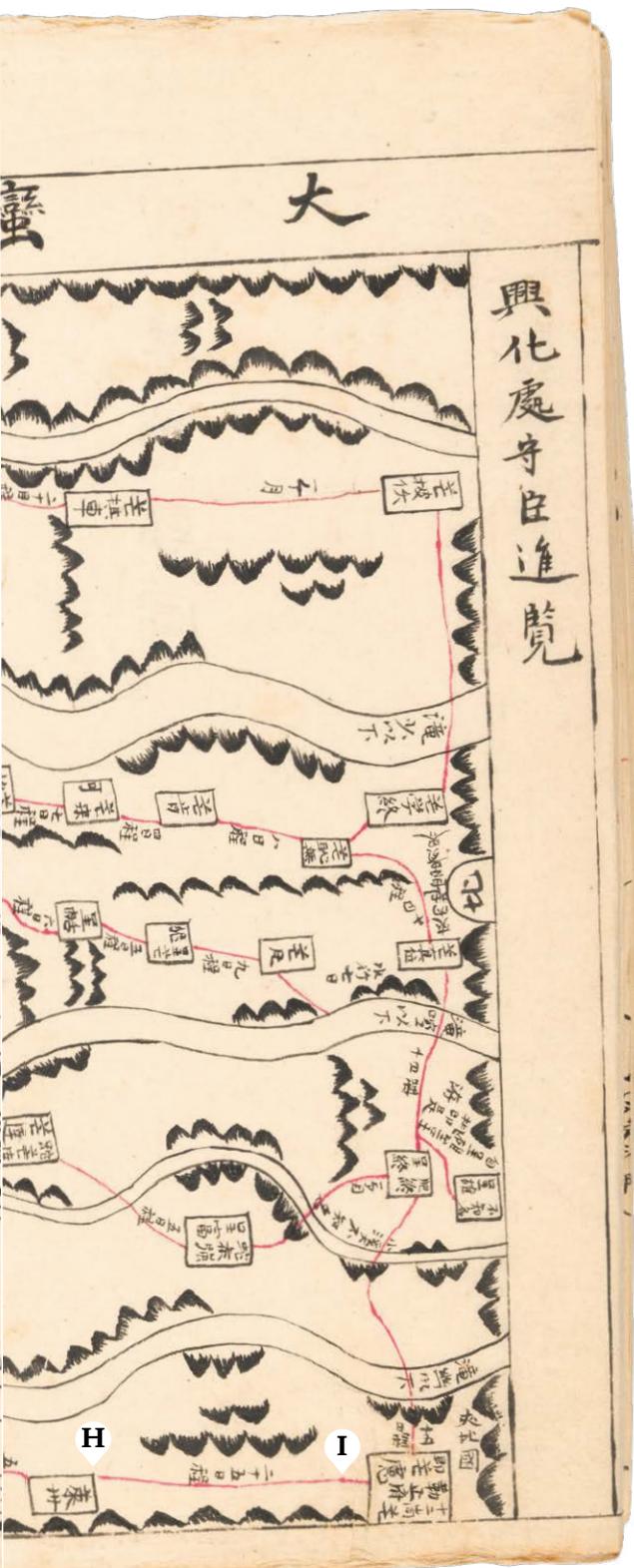
Under Nguyễn Quang Toản, envoy exchanges are clearer. A *Brief Account of the Tây Sơn* (Tây Sơn thuật lược; 西山述略, fols 11b–12a) notes that in 1799, during the Cảnh Thịnh era, an envoy from “Đại Man 大蠻 [Great Barbarian]”, i.e., Burma (DNLTST, 33: 1a), witnessed a miracle at Hanoi's Trần Vũ Temple and remarked, “This is not found in the west”.

Another Burmese envoy is recorded in 1800. Shimao (2001: 308–309) also points to the *Map of the Hồng Đức Era* (Hồng Đức bản đồ; 洪德版圖), preserved in the Japanese Oriental Library in Tokyo (Toyo Bunko; 東洋文庫), which includes the “Map of the Great Barbarian Country” (Đại Man quốc đồ; 大蠻國圖, fols 80b–81a), covering northwest Vietnam to Burma's capital and noting that a guardian official in Hưng Hóa submitted it to the emperor in 1798—suggesting communication between the two courts by then [FIGURE 1].

¹³ See PRPR1: 65–66, 143; also Maung Maung Tin 2020, 2: 34–36, 52, 66–67, 98–99.



FIGURE 1: “Map of the Great Barbarian Country” in *Hồng Đức bản đồ* © Toyo Bunko



North is on the right side of the map.

The following letters indicate:

A: "Capital of the Barbarian country"
(probably Amarapura)

B: "Capital of Siam" (Bangkok)

C: Chiang Mai

D: Chiang Saen

E: Vientiane

F: Luang Prabang

G: Trần Ninh (Xieng Khouang)

H: Lai Châu

I: Sipsong Panna

More importantly, the *Hồng Đức bản đồ* (fols 81b–82a) preserves a comment by Nguyễn Kính-phủ 阮敬甫 (Nguyễn Án 阮案)¹⁴ [FIGURE 2]. The text says:

[I] consider that the Great Barbarian country is to the southwest of our Việt [粵], nearby Siam and Campā in the south and bordering on Yunnan and Guizhou in the north. Generally, it is the land of old Lão Qua [Laos 老撾] and Miến Điện [Burma 緬甸]. The number of tribes and settlements [in that country] is largest. [I] think that therefore the Great Barbarian country is the leader. Its clothes and language are mostly the same as those of Lao-long [Luang Prabang 牢龍] and Thành-chân [Vientiane 城禪].¹⁵

On the 57th year of the sexagenary cycle in the Cǎnh Thịnh era [1800], [the Great Barbarian country] dispatched

¹⁴ He was a scholar and later served Gia Long.

¹⁵ This suggests that the envoy was accompanied with Tai guides. See also note 24.

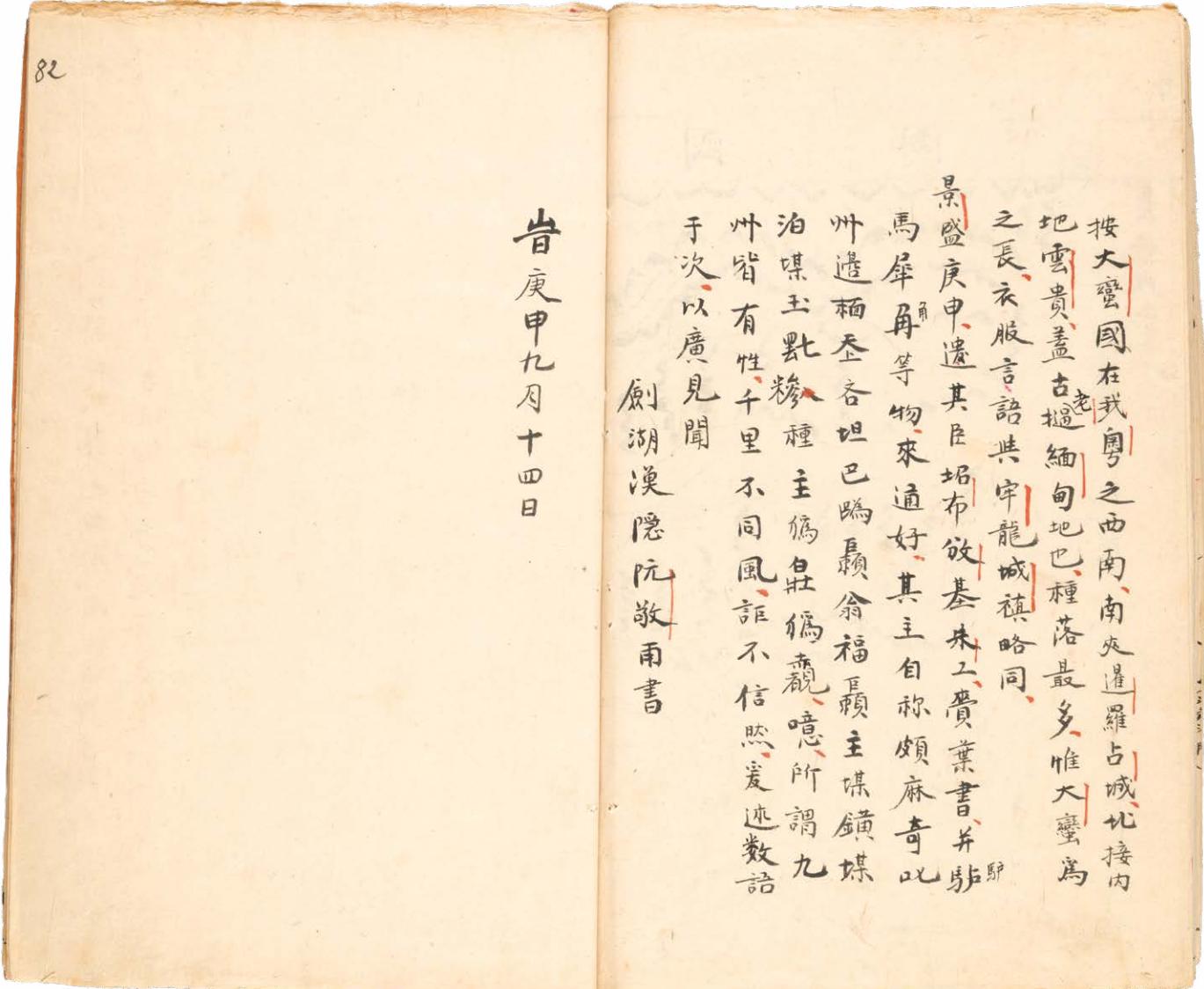


FIGURE 2: Comment on “the Great Barbarian country” by Nguyễn Kính-phủ (Nguyễn Án) in *Hồng Đức bản đồ* © Toyo Bunko

its servants Chậu-bô, Ban-cơ, and Chu-công to bring correspondence and gifts such as donkeys, horses, rhinoceros horns, and so on. [They] came to form a friendship. Its lord calls himself “the king of Burma [Phả-ma-kỳ-sát 頗麻奇叱],¹⁶ [in] the land where the sun sets, bưa vừa lớn [?], lord of great fortune, lord of gold, silver, and jade mines, 78 kinds [?],

and lord of white elephants and red elephants”. Oh, each of the so-called Nine Provinces have natures. [If you travel] a thousand lý away, [you will encounter] different customs. If [you] do not believe that, here [I] will say some words next to enlarge your knowledge.

A fisherman hiding in [Hoàn] Kiếm Lake, Nguyễn Kính-phủ wrote.

¹⁶ This translation follows the interpretation of *Hồng Đức bản đồ* (1962: 172, n. 3).

[Done] On the 14th day of the ninth month, in the 57th year of the sexagenary cycle [31 October 1800].¹⁷

According to this inscription, the Burmese king's envoys came to establish a friendship with the Tây Sơn with a missive and gifts in 1800. While the rest of the text is in classical Chinese, most of the underlined section is written in Nôm script; this must be a translation of the Burmese king's titles on the correspondence. They are somewhat similar to the titles of Bodawpaya in the letters exchanged with the Qing in 1787.¹⁸ However, "where the sun sets" recalls the phrase *tawan tok* (တောင်တောင်; literally, the sun sets) in Tai/Thai, meaning "west", rather than the Burmese word *anauk* (အနောက်; literally, back) which also means "west". The Vietnamese probably translated the Burmese letter first into a Tai language and then Vietnamese.

While no Burmese sources confirm these missions, Nguyễn Quang Toản likely reciprocated: Bodawpaya's order of 17 June 1801 refers to gifts brought by an envoy from "Kyaw pyi gyi"

¹⁷ See also *Hồng Đức bản đồ* (1962: 172–173). I am grateful to Associate Professor Hasuda Takashi for his assistance with the Japanese translation of the text and the Nôm script; however, I alone bear responsibility for any errors.

¹⁸ See Maung Maung Tin 2020, 2: 48–51. Bodawpaya's titles in his reply to the fake imperial letter say: "Ruling over all the parasol-bearing kings of the large countries in the west, lord of white, red and various colored elephants, lord of gold, silver, ruby and amber mines, having the title called *Siripavaravijayānantayas atrabhavanādityādhipatipanḍitamahādhammarājādhirājā* (သီရိပုသတ္တနိသနနှင့်ယသတိတော်နာဒိတ္ထမိပတ္တမိတော်မူရှာဇာမူရှာဇာ), a donor of the [Buddha's] teaching, the Sun-rising king, master of life and the righteous king".

(ကျော်ပြည်က္ခား; Kyaw great country), possibly referring to Đại Việt quốc (大越國) or the "Great Viet country" (ROB, 5: xx–xxii, 715). Bodawpaya also sent another mission, led by Thuyein Mani, via Chiang Saen, as stated in another order of 5 July 1801:

A report brought by Nga Nyo Nin and Nga Shin Kalei accompanying with the governor of Kyaing Thi (ကျိုင်သေည်; Chiang Saen) and the military commander whom Thuyein Mani (သုရိန်မတော်), Pyan Chi Kyaw Zwa (ပုဏ်ချော်စွား), Letwe Ye Gaung, Aka Ye Gaung and Yan Chin Thu, who were dispatched to Kyaw country, sent [...].¹⁹

Nguyễn Quang Toản's turn to Burma reflected both internal weakness and external isolation. By 1799, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh had seized Quy Nhơn with European-style vessels, followed by Hué in 1801 (Mantienne 2003). Northern people, disillusioned with Tây Sơn rule, began favoring Ánh (Dutton 2006: 160–70). In 1799–1801, Vientiane forces allied with Siam attacked Nghê An, while Emperor Jiaqing of Qing (r. 1796–1820) explicitly refused military aid (Toyooka 2006: 52, 55; DNTL, 1, 14: 14ab). Seeking to counter Vientiane and break isolation, Toản thus looked to Konbaung Burma.

King Bodawpaya's motives are not recorded, but likely related to declining Burmese influence in Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Lan Na by the 1790s.

¹⁹ ROB, 5: 738. I am grateful to Emeritus Professor Itō Toshikatsu for helping translate the Burmese royal orders into Japanese; all responsibility is mine.

Although the Konbaung dynasty of Burma had once subdued Chiang Mai, Luang Prabang, and Vientiane under King Hsinbyushin (r. 1763–1776), these shifted to Siamese suzerainty from the late 1770s. By King Rama I's reign, Luang Prabang and Vientiane were firmly tributary to Siam, while King Kawila of Chiang Mai (r. 1775–1816) repeatedly repelled Burmese invasions, leaving Chiang Saen as their last base around 1800.²⁰ In this context, Bodawpaya may have viewed ties with the Tây Sơn as a way to reassert influence in Lan Na and beyond.

Siam Between the Konbaung and Tây Sơn Courts

A key question to address is whether King Rama I's government was aware of the relations between the Konbaung and the Tây Sơn dynasties. As mentioned above, the *Royal Chronicle of the Rattanakosin Dynasty* records an envoy sent by Nguyễn Huệ to Burma, though no other evidence supports this. In contrast, the case of Thuyein Mani shows that the Siamese court certainly knew the two dynasties had established friendly ties.

According to the *Chiang Mai Chronicle* (*Tamnan phuen mueang chiang mai*; တံမန်ပို့မော်မြောင်းရိမ္မား), in April 1802 Kawila's forces invaded Mueang Sat (เมืองสาด), a Shan principality, and captured Racha Chom Hong (ရာဇာချမ်း), who was serving Bodawpaya. When they attacked Kyaingtong (Chiang Tung), the chronicle says:

²⁰ See Maung Maung Tin 2020, 1: 280–282; 2: 52–55, 98–101; *Phongsawadan mueang luang phrabang* (2506: 340–343); PRPR1: 96–99, 131–132, 155; also Wenk 1968; Gesick 1976; Watanabe 1987; Wyatt & Aroonrut 1998: 148–172, and 2543: 145–170; and Breazeale 2002.

At that time, there was a Burmese named Suai Ling Mani (ဆွဲလိုင်မနီ), whom the king of Ava had sent to bid for friendship with the Vietnamese, but he had reached only to Chiang Tung. He was unable to escape and our soldiers were able to capture him. They brought him in and interrogated him and learned all, and then imprisoned him.²¹

Suai Ling Mani is undoubtedly Thuyein Mani (Suring Mani). While the chronicle claims he was caught en route to Vietnam, this was likely a confusion with his return journey, as other records—including the *Royal Chronicle of the Rattanakosin Dynasty* and a royal letter of 1806—place his capture on the homeward leg.

King Kawila sent Thuyein Mani and Racha Chom Hong to Bangkok, where they were handed over to King Rama I on 22 August 1802. A letter from a Siamese minister to the Second King of Chiang Mai, dated 6 October 1802, confirms their arrival, listing “Ai Racha Chom, Ai Mai Khattiya, Ai Suring Mani, Ai Payanthi, and Ai Panyi”.²² “Ai Suring Mani” (အိုမြိုင်မနီ) surely refers to Thuyein Mani, while “Ai Payanthi” (အိုပယ်နဲ့) was likely Pyan Chi Kyaw Zwa, another envoy. The *Royal Chronicle of the Rattanakosin Dynasty* also records the event, noting that “Ai Suring Mani” carrying

²¹ See translation by Wyatt & Aroonrut 1998: 175. “Shwe Lin Mani” is modified to “Suai Ling Mani”. For the modern Thai transcription of the chronicle, see Wyatt & Aroonrut 2543: 172. On its facsimile edition, see Penth 2539: 55.

²² Office of the Prime Minister 2514: 33–38. “Ai” (အို) is a derogatory term used with a name.

two Yuan (Vietnamese) letters bearing seals from the Tây Sơn to the king of Ava, was captured (PRPR1: 174).

This marked the first clear recognition by the Rama I government that the Tây Sơn and Burma had formed relations. Around the same time, the Siamese court received a Burmese letter claiming that the Tây Sơn ruler had offered two princesses in marriage and promised to capture Vientiane and Chiang Mai for Burma (Gesick 1976: 142–143). Such reports raised the prospect of a pincer threat. Although the Tây Sơn dynasty was already collapsing,²³ their pro-Burmese alignment made Nguyễn Phúc Ánh—who had cooperated with Siam in campaigns against Burma—an even more valuable ally once the latter unified Vietnam. Rama I likely hoped the new Nguyễn dynasty would serve as a pro-Siamese power not only around

the Gulf of Siam, but also in the northern uplands of mainland Southeast Asia.

A 1806 letter from King Rama I to Emperor Gia Long explicitly mentions Thuyein Mani (Suring Mani; ສູງມະນີ), noting that he had been sent by the Burmese king, Bodawpaya, and had established friendly relations with the Tây Sơn.²⁴ A Chinese-language version of this letter, prepared by the Siamese court, survives in *Letters on Foreign States* (*Ngoại quốc thư trát*; 外國書札, fols 4a–5b), where Thuyein Mani is referred to as “Sulin Mali/Tố-lán Mạ-lí” (素儻嗎理). Through this correspondence, the Nguyễn court learned that Siam was fully aware of Konbaung-Tây Sơn ties.

Diplomatic Practices: Mainland Southeast Asia and the Qing

To clarify Siam's later stance toward Nguyễn Phúc Ánh and the early Nguyễn dynasty, it is necessary to review diplomatic practices involving the Qing from King Taksin's reign onward, alongside Konbaung–Qing relations.

In the early 1760s, the Konbaung dynasty sought tribute from Sipsong Panna on the Burma–Qing frontier. Emperor Qianlong responded by launching four invasions between 1765 and 1769, all repelled by the Burmese.²⁵

²³ It is thought that between the 10th and 12th lunar months (27 October 1802 to 22 January 1803), the Siamese court received Nguyễn Phúc Ánh's letter reporting his accession, the establishment of the era named Gia Long, the creation of two royal seals, and the fall of Hanoi (*Lân hiếu lệ*, fols 3a–3b). However, DNTL, 1 does not refer to this letter. PRPR1 (pp. 173–174) mentions the letter, which refers to Ánh as “His Majesty the Meritorious Emperor” or *duek kwang thueang* (ดีกกว่างเตื่อง), derived from *dúc hoàng thượng* (德皇上). However, the use of the title *hoàng* (皇), “emperor”, is unlikely, as Ánh had not yet officially ascended the throne as emperor, which occurred only in 1806. *Lân hiếu lệ* (fols 3a–3b) refers to him as “His Honorable Majesty” or *thánh thượng* (聖上), without using the term *hoàng*. It mentions Chaophraya Phrakhlang (เจ้าพระยาพระคลัง), not King Rama I, who sent two replies. One requested that future royal correspondences include the royal seal. Presumably, the Siamese court did not treat Ánh's letter as an authentic royal letter because it lacked his royal seal. Meanwhile, DNTL, 1 (Vol. 18: 17a) states that in the 8th lunar month of 1802, Siam sent an envoy with a royal letter to celebrate Ánh's victory over the Tây Sơn, although neither is mentioned in other Siamese or Vietnamese sources (Kawaguchi 2020: 144–148).

²⁴ CMHR1 cs 1168, no. 2. According to this source, Suring Mani traveled to the Tây Sơn with a Tai man named Thao Kao (ທ້າວນເກົວ), the husband of the younger sister of Nai Khamthip (ນາຍຄໍາທີພ), a son of the lord of Lamphun. After establishing a good relationship with the Tây Sơn, he fled the Burmese envoy and requested to serve King Rama I through Nai Khamthip and another man. The Chinese version found in *Ngoại quốc thư trát*, folio 4a, gives Thâu Cứu (偷究) as Thao Kao. He was probably a guide to northern Vietnam.

²⁵ See Maung Maung Tin 2020, 1: 309–326, 328–340; also *Qingshi gao* 1976–77, 528: 14661–79.

While these wars were unfolding, Burmese forces also sacked Ayutthaya in April 1767, but soon withdrew. In the aftermath, Taksin rose to power, expelled the Burmese, and reunified Siam. He also sent “tributary” missions to the Qing to gain investiture as “King of Siam (Xianluo Guowang 邪羅國王)” as well as to secure Qing hostility toward Burma, his common enemy (Masuda 2007 and 2020: 203–218).

In the 1770s, King Taksin, who called himself Zheng Zhao (鄭昭), repeatedly sent letters, envoys, and captives to Guangzhou, stressing his desire to attack Ava with the Qing army and requesting military materials such as sulphur, iron, and shells. Although Emperor Qianlong came to regard Taksin’s actions as “loyal” from 1771, he consistently refused joint operations against Burma and rejected Taksin’s requests for contraband goods. He allowed Taksin to buy only sulphur and iron.²⁶ Still, even without military aid, Qing hostility toward Burma was strategically valuable for Siam.

King Rama I inherited King Taksin’s diplomatic strategy. He too sent missions to the Qing under the guise of Taksin’s “son” as Zheng Hua (鄭華). In 1786, while expressing hope for reinforcements, he asked for brass or copper armor to use against Burma (National Archives 2521: 34; QLSY, 13: 313–314; GZSL, 1260: 31a–32b). Once again, the Qing Emperor refused.²⁷ Finally, on 6 February 1787,

Rama I was officially invested as “King of Siam” by Emperor Qianlong (QLSY, 13: 648–649; Masuda 1995; 2020: 218–232).

However, the balance shifted quickly. In 1787, officials in Yunnan and the Prince of Gengma (耿馬), a Tai principality in Yunnan, sent a fake envoy and imperial letter to Burma. Accepting them, King Bodawpaya dispatched an envoy to Beijing. This pleased Emperor Qianlong and led to a renewed relationship in 1788. In 1790, Qianlong invested Bodawpaya as “King of Burma” (Miandian Guowang 緬甸國王), only three years after Rama I’s own investiture (Suzuki 1980: 57–68). When Rama I requested that Emperor Qianlong demand the return of Danlaoshi (Tenasserim 丹荖氏), Madao (Mergui 麻叨), and Tuhuai (Tavoy 塗懷) from Burma, he refused, emphasizing neutrality. By the early 1790s, it was clear that the Qing would not intervene in the Siam–Burma conflict, despite Siam’s decades of “loyalty”.²⁸

Ultimately, the basic policy of the Qing was not to intervene in the internal and diplomatic politics of tributary countries in East and Southeast Asia. Only Emperor Qianlong militarily intervened in Burma and Vietnam. However, when Nguyễn Huệ and Bodawpaya made a show of “obeisance”, even if it was not genuine, the Emperor could make peace with them. After investing them as tributary kings, he did not intervene in

²⁶ See QLSY, 6: 801–3, 8: 5, 489; GZSL, 895: 8b–9b, 990: 19a–22a, 1022: 17a–18a; National Palace Museum 1982–1988, 36: 272–273.

²⁷ Taksin and Rama I could procure firearms more easily from the Dutch in Batavia and from English country traders. One of eight Chinese letters preserved at Leiden University Library shows that, in 1806, the Siamese Minister of Finance informed

the Dutch in Batavia of the receipt of 342 guns and requested an additional 400–500 (Or. 27.070, no. 6; Blussé 1996). I am grateful to Emeritus Professor Leonard Blussé for providing copies and an English translation; all responsibility is mine. For information on English country traders, see Koizumi 2015: 174–177.

²⁸ QLSY, 14: 737; 15: 898–900; GZSL, 1312: 11b–12b, 1321: 5b–6b; 1362: 3b–6a.

Vietnam's civil war or the Burma–Siam conflict. The next emperor, Jiaqing, did the same. Either Nguyễn Quang Toản or Nguyễn Phúc Ánh would have been fine with Jiaqing if they only paid tribute. Jiaqing left Toản to die because a careless intervention might have exacerbated the problem, damaging the dignity of the Qing. He also repeatedly declared no intention of getting involved in the Siam–Burma conflict.²⁹

Rama I's disillusionment with the Qing shaped his diplomacy. The Siamese court ceased reporting Burmese incursions—even the fall of Tavoy in 1792—to the Qing. Instead, from 1792 onward, Rama I continued corresponding with Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, asking for assistance against Burma. The Ánh government and the later Nguyễn dynasty were likely expected to be an alternative to the Qing. Although Emperor Gia Long never sent reinforcements after 1802, for Rama I the essential task was to ensure that the newly unified Vietnam did not ally with Burma, as had both the Qing and Tây Sơn.

Rethinking Siam's Diplomatic Position

This article has examined Siam–Vietnam relations from 1782 to 1802 within the wider diplomatic landscape of Konbaung Burma and the Qing. It argues that the key dynamics shaping Siam's later relationship with the Nguyễn dynasty were already established during these two decades. Four elements stand out. First, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh supported Rama I in the struggle against Burma.

Second, Rama I lacked the capacity to fight on both western and eastern fronts. Third, Burma sought to build ties with the Tây Sơn. Fourth, contrary to Siamese expectations, the Qing reconciled with Burma and refused to intervene on Siam's behalf. Together, these developments made it essential for Siam to maintain a favorable relationship with the Nguyễn after 1802.

The sequence of events underscores this logic. Nguyễn Phúc Ánh assisted Rama I in the campaigns against Burma in the mid-1780s, then reclaimed Saigon in 1788 and continued correspondence with Bangkok. By contrast, Emperor Qianlong made peace with Bodawpaya in 1788 and ignored Siam's appeals for support. Rama I, facing Burmese threats, could not send reinforcements to Ánh against the Tây Sơn in the 1790s, though Ánh did send naval support to Siam in 1798. When Kawila captured the Burmese envoy Thuyein Mani in 1802, Rama I learned that the Tây Sơn had cultivated ties with Burma. Even though the Tây Sơn had collapsed, the possibility of a Burma–Vietnam alignment made friendship with the Nguyễn dynasty strategically vital. For Rama I, the Nguyễn could serve as an alternative to the Qing in countering Burma.

This logic continued into the early 19th century. Siamese kings informed the Nguyễn, not the Qing, about Burmese affairs, and sought support only from the Nguyễn. They also worked to prevent any Burmese–Vietnamese rapprochement. Bodawpaya attempted to send missions to newly unified Vietnam by land in c. 1805, 1806 and 1807, and by sea in 1816, but these never succeeded (ROB, 5: 819, 926; 6: 455, 534; CMHR2 CS 1174–1177, no. 9).

²⁹ See *inter alia* Toyooka 2006; 2012; Iwai 2020: 221–262, 279–323; *Renzong rui huangdi shilu* 1986, 111: 14b–17b, 147: 10a–11a, 156: 9a–10b, 185: 26b–27b.

In 1813, despite strained relations with Siam, Emperor Gia Long rejected a scholar's proposal to ally with Burma and attack the frontier with Siam from both sides, citing their long-standing friendship (DNTL, 1, 47: 11b; Woodside 1988: 239). This shows that the Siamese diplomatic policy was effective. Eventually, King Bagyidaw (r. 1819–1837) sent envoys by ship to Saigon in 1823. However, Emperor Minh Mạng (r. 1820–1841) rejected the request to sever relations with Siam.³⁰

Eiland (1989: 1–4, 32–78) noted that personal ties between King Rama I and Emperor Gia Long gave way to new tensions under poet-king Rama II, whose hesitancy and preoccupation with Cambodia allowed Vietnamese influence

to expand. However, the shadow of Burma lingered in the background, as Siamese fears of encirclement reinforced the need to sustain ties with the Nguyễn. Only after Burma's defeat by Britain in 1826 did the threat diminish, reducing Siam's reliance on Vietnam.

In short, the relationship between Siam and the Nguyễn dynasty after 1802 cannot be explained solely through Cambodian affairs or personality politics. The Burmese threat and Qing disengagement were also important. Developments in the international environment in the 1780s and 1790s not only laid the foundation for later Siam–Vietnam relations in the first reign, but also defined their trajectory until the early 1830s.

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³⁰ See DNTL, 2, 24: 23b–24b; PRPR2: 113–116, 139–140; PRPR3: 6–8; also ROB, 8: 384–390, and Maung Maung Tin 2020, 2: 238–239, 241–243; Woodside 1988: 239.

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- CMHR1, 2 = *Chotmaihet ratchakan thi 1, 2* จดหมายเหตุรัชกาลที่ ๑/๒ [Official Records of the First/Second Reign].
- DNTLTB = *Đại Nam thực lục tiền biên* 大南寔錄前編 [The Veritable Records of Đại Nam, Premier Period].
- DNTL, 1, 2 = *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên* đệ nhất, nhì kỷ 大南寔錄正編第一/二紀 [The Veritable Records of Đại Nam, Main Series, First/Second Reign].
- DNLTST = *Đại Nam chính biên liệt truyện* sơ tập 大南正編列傳初集 [The Veritable Biographies of Đại Nam, First Collection].

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- GZSL = *Gaozong chun huangdi shilu* 高宗純皇帝實錄 [The Veritable Records of the Qianlong Emperor].
- PRPR1, 2, 3 = *Phraratchaphongsawadan krung rattanakosin ratchakan thi 1, 2, 3* พระราชพงศาวดารกรุงรัตนโกสินทร์รัชกาลที่ ๑, ๒, ๓ ฉบับเจ้าพระยาทิพกรวงศ์ [The Royal Chronicle of the Rattanakosin Dynasty, Reigns of Rama I, II, III Chaophraya Thiphakorawong Version].
- QLSY = *Qianlong chao shangyu dang* 乾隆朝上諭檔 [Imperial Edicts of the Qianlong Reign], 18 Volumes.
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