

*Rendezvous and Interaction between Singapore Malaya and Vietnam in the 19th Century - A Discussion Based on the Works by Vietnamese Ambassadors*

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**Abstract**

From the historical perspective, the development of this multicultural and multiethnic Southeast Asia (SEA) region is closely related to the European political power. In the 19th century, the SEA region became more westernized due to the European colonization, which eventually led to the declaration of independence of several countries after World War II. SEA is consisting of Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Philippine, and Singapore regardless of the huge difference in language, culture, or political background. Indeed, the exchange of information and population plays a significant role to the overall understanding and recognition of SEA by the world. This article focuses on the writings by the Vietnamese ambassadors and Singaporean/Malayan scholars during their journey to SEA to further understand the political, social, and cultural relationships between Europe and SEA. In between 1830s and 1860s, Vietnamese ambassadors were frequently directed to every SEA country for military and trading purposes. Therefore, the writings and poems throughout their journey became some good documentaries about the local cultures, colonization, and the Chinese workers. Coincidentally, the culture and living condition of the Chinese people in Vietnam were also well recorded by Chen Shen-Tang, a Singaporean/Malayan scholar who stayed in Vietnam for years, e.g. "The journey to Vietnam" which is also one of the earliest Chinese literatures written in details. These documents are not just a record of their journey. They are currently important information that reflected the society in the past from different perspective, especially on the geographical and cultural interaction between Vietnam and Singapore/Malaya.

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## **Vietnamese ambassadors and their SEA travel notes**

The work written by the Vietnamese ambassadors including, but not limited to poems, travel notes, petitions to the emperor, and so forth. These work were not personal diary as they were completed under certain historical circumstances or served a diplomatic purpose. Although they were in the same genre, but the contents were very different due to different thoughts and backgrounds of the authors. Before we will be able to understand the work written by these Vietnamese ambassadors, a good understanding regarding the Vietnamese history of this particular time frame is recommended.

According to the *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* (Chronicle of Greater Vietnam, The true record of the Great South), during a war against the Tay Son army, the Nguyen emperor had sent the ambassadors to the “southern region” (Singapore, Indonesia, Gua, Malacca, and Johor) several times to purchase some munitions. After the war was over and Nguyen dynasty was established, there was approximately twenty years of gap without any evidence of Vietnamese ambassadors visiting to the southern SEA region. The travel routes to the south were then re-established started from 1823 to 1846.

It is apparent that Vietnamese government frequently sent envoys ambassador to southern SEA region during the Nguyen Dynasty (1802 - 1883). The main objectives behind it were 1) to serve as navy training, 2) to purchase goods for governmental uses, and 3) to collect diplomatic information particularly between the Europe and East Asia. Some evidence pointed that trips were also made to repatriate pirates, save the sailors or crewmembers in need, send out some scholars and/or other secondary reasons.

Every scholar has different opinions and counts regarding the trips or missions completed by these ambassadors, ranging from eighteen to thirty eight. However, it is almost conclusive that the number of trips made during that period was quite a lot. Among these trips, there was a special phenomenon where trips were made as a punishment or a challenging task appointed to the ambassadors as an expiation. In comparison to complete an expiation in the country, the treatment given to someone completing an expiation aboard on the ocean was better. Moreover, records of the visit of Vietnamese ambassadors were not available in the historical documentation

from the countries in Southern SEA region. This has also resolved the mystery of why the trips were often recorded as “ a mission on the ocean” rather than “ a diplomatic travel”.

Although the Nguyen dynasty was worried about the increasing interests of doing business and/or spreading the Christianity by the Westerners, the government had continued to send out scholars or ambassadors as an indication of looking for a good relationship between Vietnam and the Western countries.

There is a long trading history between Nguyen dynasty with the other countries, partly because Emperor Gia Long (1802-1820) had strengthened His military dominance in Indochina, as the country development and economy were highly dependent on the international trading system. According to the analysis by Li Gui Min, the high frequency of sending out ambassadors as well as the strict management by emperor Minh Mang is highly related to its nation defense against the Western countries. It was hard for the Western businessmen to get approval for trading in Vietnam due to the tributary relationship of Vietnam and China. Indeed, Vietnam was highly influenced by the Chinese culture.

Besides, the folks were not allowed to travel to the Southern SEA region for trading purposes. However, the situation had gradually changed after observing the trading system between Singapore and other countries in SEA. Emperor Minh Mang divided the businessmen into three categories: The Chinese, the Southeast Asian, and the Westerner. The trading ships of the Westerners could only anchored at the harbor and they were not allowed to trade with the locals. This is to reduce the Western influence to Vietnam. Under the strict rules of rejecting Westerners, it was tough to obtain western goods and hence they had to travel to Singapore, China or Japan. A report by a French ambassador Isodore Hedde had pointed out that the silk, opium, fire weapon, and tributes by India were brought back to Vietnam since the government had monopolized the trading port. Since the strict policy did not apply to the Singaporean trading ships, there was a high trading frequency between Vietnam and Singapore. The trading amount grew higher year after year and reached its climax when the French government set up a new harbor in Saigon.

The books listed below were examples written by several famous Vietnamese ambassadors in Nguyen dynasty during their visit to Southeast Asia:

1. Song Fu-wan, Yang Wen-zhu, “Xiêm-la-quốc Lô-trình Tập-lục”(Xianluo Guo Lu Cheng Ji Lu), 1 edition was published in 1966 in Chinese by New Asia College, Hong Kong. The book was written by Song Fu-wan and Yang Wen-Shu from Nguyen dynasty during the mission to Siam, they conducted an interview with the junior officers, interpreters, sailors and etc., and recorded the water and land transportation in detail according to their own knowledge. The living situation of Siam-Chinese at that time was also well documented.
2. Ly Van Phuc, “Accounts of journey to the West”, the institut d'etude han nom Hanoi, no. A243. The book recorded the voyage of Ly Van Phuc through British colonies such as Singapore, Malacca and Penang in 1830. The text was divided into fourteen categories: name, character, culture, costume, diet, writing, rituals, official functions, housing, ground transportation, currency, boats and real estate. There were also forty-eight poems written down by Ly as "Xi Xing Shi Ji".
3. Deng Wen-Qi, “Yang Xing Shi Ji”, the institut d'etude han nom Hanoi, no. VHv.218. The book was not published individually, yet it was attached in his poetry "Hua Cheng Lue Ji". "Hua Cheng Lue Ji" is consisted of poems written by author during the trip to China. "Yang Xing Shi Ji" is made of ambassadors and other friends during the time to Luzon, including a lots of scenery description.
4. He Zong-Quan, “Dương Mộng Tập”, the institut d'etude han nom Hanoi, no. VHv1423/A307. A poetry of author during the mission to Southeast Asia, where he passed by Singapore on his journey to Jakarta.
5. Phan Thanh Giản, “Lương Khê Thi Thảo”, the institut d'etude han nom Hanoi, no. VHv.151. A collection of poems includes a copy of geographical and cultural implication chapter.
6. Phan Thanh Giản, “Tây phù nhật ký”, The institut d'etude han nom Hanoi, no. A100. In 1863, Nguyen emperor appointed Pan Qing Jane to lead a mission to France and Spain to negotiate a few contracts. “Tây phù nhật ký” is a poetry collection of his poems written along the journey. Places visited by him including Singapore and Malaysia.
7. Phan Huy Chu, “Hai trình chi luoc”. A Record of author’s experience to Batavia and Singapore, where the local ritual and culture were recorded in details.

8. Cao Bá Quát, “Cao Bá Quát thi tập” and “Vọng dương tập”. Cao Bá Quát was famous for his poems. There were over hundreds of poems written down in his journey to the Southern SEA area in his “Cao Bá Quát thi tập”. On the other hand, “Vọng dương tập” consisted of 50 poems while some among these poems were overlapped with poems in “Cao Bá Quát thi tập”.

The ambassadors seemed to enjoy sharing their experiences in a poetry way. Besides the books listed above, *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* (Chronicle of Greater Vietnam) and travel notes such as “*Tây hành kiến văn kỷ lược*” were not frequently seen. Due to the limitation such as sickness or valuable gift, poem was considered as a traditional habit practiced by these ambassadors to improve their relationship with their friends in the foreign land. Since the Vietnamese was highly influence by the Chinese and hence the type of rhymes used in poems were similar, yet unique. The article will not discuss the poems in details, because what is more important is the understanding about the stories behind the presence of the Vietnamese ambassadors.

### **Examples about the Singaporean and Malaysian culture by the ambassadors from Nguyen Dynasty**

“*Hai trình chi luo*” by Phan Huy Chu, “*Dương Mộng Tập*” by He Zong-Quan, and “*Chu Thần Thi Tập*” by Cao Bá Quát are more significant and therefore analyzed in details.

#### 1. “*Hai trình chi luo*” by Phan Huy Chu

Phan Huy Chu (1782-1840) was a famous scholar and administrator in Nguyen dynasty. In year 1831, Phan and a group of officials was appointed by the emperor Minh Mạng to purchase books and paintings in order to better understand the Qing dynasty. They failed to accomplish the command and overspent on personal items. Phan, as the second leader of that trip was cashiered together with the ambassador. In the following year, the convicted Phan was given a chance to lead a group of officials to Batavia (Jakarta), and hence the “*Hai Trình Chi Luo*” was written during his journey to Jakarta and Singapore. The content was very valuable as it described the changes done by western colonization in both places.

According to his book, Batavia and Singapore were originally belonged to Javanese. The local governments were not pleased with the colonization system yet nothing could be done. The Singapore in his writing was a busy harbor managed by the British. His description about the Westerners (British and Dutch) had clearly indicated that he discriminated the westerners and felt closer to the locals who looked more familiar to the Vietnamese. Besides the unusual outfit, ambassadors seemed to think that the Westerners were more impolite and scary looking. However, he did not deny the fact that Singapore was well developed compare to Batavia.

The dietary habit of Westerners was also well described. Phan realized that the westerners enjoyed gathering, did not use chopstick, preferred sugary foods, cold foods, and meats. Meanwhile the locals enjoyed eating pinang (areca nuts), and consumed more oat than rice. It was likely due to the inhibition of rice export by the Minh Mang dynasty. As expected, the trading ships traveled to Singapore sometimes committed to rice smuggling. Therefore, the ambassador was also responsible to examine the trading ship and reduce rice smuggling.

Phan recorded that Singapore was more developed compared to Batavia, as evidenced by larger numbers of trading ships, population, and houses. On the other hand, the houses of the Dutch were also beautifully designed, but they do not have book collection. Indeed, opium houses, and opera houses were often seen in where the Chinese resided. Phan believed that this was the down side of Western colonization although he agreed to the manner simplicity practiced by the Westerners.

## 2. Dương Mộng Tập” by He Zong-Quan

According to “Quốc-Sử Di-Biên”, He Zong Quan married to a daughter from a wealthy family. His first wife was very jealous and had offended some officials due to this matter. He was then removed from his position by the government and was appointed to travel oversea. He enjoyed reading Buddhism books and Chinese classical books, and hence he described his journey as a dream happened on the ocean. Therefore a lot of the terms used in his “Dương Mộng Tập” were related to ocean.

It is easy to observed an unhappy He in his “Dương Mộng Tập”. Writing poems seemed to be his best way expressing his sadness. He was not familiar with sailing, and hence he wondered if he could survive through the journey. Moreover, he was

homesick and anxious about the geographical difficulty in the new places. All these negative feelings were reflected in his poems.

He was not interested in the development of Singapore and Malaysia or the influence by the Western colonization. His observation was quite similar compared to Phan. Both of them believed the locals were not happy with the Westerners, yet they could not do more to overturn the situation.

In summary, He's "Đương Mộng Tập" was a good reference for the Vietnamese poets about the experiences on the sea. However, this book was only a book where the author expressed his feeling, it does not contain any politic, diplomatic or economic information.

### 3. "Chu Thần Thi Tập" by Cao Bá Quát

Cao is a famous poet and Confucianist from the Nguyen dynasty. When he worked as one of the primary examiners in the Thua Thien Examination Compound, he realized the use of some words in the answer sheet of the examinees, which had been prohibited from using by the folks. To protect the examinees from troubles, he changed the words in the answer sheet. Unfortunately, his kind action was disclosed and he was put into jailed for 3 years. After released from the jail, he was appointed to a trip as expiation. During his journey, he recognized the weakness of his mother country after seeing the competition among the western countries in SEA region. He believed the Confucianism was out of date and hence lost the confidence in his mother country.

The trip down to Southern SEA region was an opportunity for Cao. Since he is a poet, he managed to know more friends through his poems. For example, there were five or six poems (out of ten) was about a Chinese man, Huang Lian Fang, who is a businessman stayed in Singapore. Making friends in Singapore or Jakarta had been beneficial as the cheerful Cao got to understand the local culture, the power of Western colonization, and the trading system.

Cao preferred travel to observing the Westerners. Compare to the other ambassadors, Cao was more rational and optimistic. To compare to the previous two samples, which had described the westerner negatively, Cao's writing was quite different, as he

is better in sensing the abnormality of a situation, such as the western political power, and the difference between the two different cultures.

As we can see, the main reasons of their trip were not recorded in their writing. Nonetheless, we can figure out by studying the books or poems writing by those ambassadors. In addition, religious activities were not mention in the work either. It is probably because the emperor did not allow the Christianity.

### **The Singaporean/Malayan Chinese scholar and their visit to Vietnam**

Chen Shen-Tang, a Singaporean/Malayan scholar and his work, “The journey to Vietnam”. A journey to Vietnam was first released in June 24th 1888, based on the observations and record during Chen’s first visit to Vietnam. Chen was a frequent traveler and his work was considered precious and invaluable. Chen started his first journey from Singapore to Vietnam by steamship on April 19th 1888 (Chinese calendar: 9th of the third month), and arrived in Saigon 3 days later. He spent two hours on the immigration and baggage checking upon arrival but it was not completed the same day. He spent another 3 hours at the baggage checkpoint the next day and finally completed the arrival process. He expressed his disappointment in his book regarding this matter. He then visited to the biggest Chinese residential area and observed the local Chinese culture and marketing system.

It was the time where pandemic was occurring, the French government therefore allowed the use of firecrackers and cultural praying. This regulation created a scene similar to Chinese New Year celebration. Chen mentioned that the easiest way to differentiate the Vietnamese and Chinese was to look at their appearance. The Vietnamese (both male and female) were not half bold like the Chinese; they wore long dresses, walked with bare feet, and involved in agriculture work. The Chinese, on the other hand, had monopolized the business market. Among them, 70% were the Cantonese and 30% were the Hokkiens. The French stayed in Saigon and rarely presented at the business places. Chen also discovered around 20-30 Singaporean and Malayan Chinese resided in Saigon, as well as a rice factory, which belonged to the biggest rice supplier in Singapore – Zhen Cheng Corporation. There was also a street named as “Fujian street” not too far away from the Chinatown. This was where the Singaporean/Malayan Chinese stayed. Chen had described his half a month stay in Vietnam in details, included his experiences to the theater, local currency, funeral,



transportation, marketing and trading system. He also compared the pros and cons of British and French colonization. He concluded that British did a better job in ruling and educating the locals while the French was stricter and less forgiving.

In 1893, Chen visited to Vietnam for the second time. After this particular trip, he wrote a book named “ re-visit to Vietnam” to criticize the French government who had treated the locals badly. He expressed his disappointment regarding the Chinese in Vietnam because they didn’t lend a helping hand to the poor. He was also surprised with the excellent work done by the French in making the road, which is contradict to the strict and inhuman rules by the French. Chen’s third visit to Vietnam was a favor requested by his brother in laws, Hong Zhao Yuan. In his third visit, he stayed in Vietnam for five years while managing Hong’s properties.

Besides Chen, there was also another Singaporean Chinese Li Qing Hui (1830-1896) who had published his travel notes “ Journey to the East”. He was the son in laws of famous Chinese businessman, Chen Jin Sheng. Indeed, both families were considered famous in Singapore and Malaysia due to their leadership in business. Li traveled to Shanghai in 1888 and visited to Saigon for a short period.

“Wang An Nan Riji: A visit of a Hokkien literatus to Saison” in 1890 was an article written by Claudine Salmon and Tạ Trọng Hiệp. The author of Wang An Nan Riji, Tan Siu Eng, was originated from Xiamen Gulang Yu and resided in Batavia. Tan visited to Indochina in 1890 to assist the Dutch Sinologist Willem Pieter Groenevelt who investigated the opium monopolization. The article compared the French colonial system to the British colonial system in Singapore. Unlike “The journey to Vietnam” by Chen Shen-Tang, it is a hand written copy that was not publishes until 1987, where it appeared in the collection in Han-Nôm Library at Leiden University.

## **Conclusion**

The Western colonists wrote the works mentioned above during the ruling of SEA. Several reasons why the people had traveled abroad include searching for a better living, official reasons and/or ambassadorial visits. They had recorded down their observations and views throughout the journeys. The work by Singaporean scholars about their journey to Vietnam had a time distance of almost half a century compares

to the work written by the Vietnamese ambassadors who traveled around SEA. However, majority of the work by Singaporean scholars were due to personal interest and were not requested by the government. Hence, their work focused more on their leisure time, description about the geography, the local flora and fauna, local culture, and historical monuments; especially the living of Chinese in the French colonized Indochina. Navigation in the past was technically limited; Vietnam was therefore restricted to have dealings with other SEA countries. Their voyage cross the South China Sea started because of the interest of local rulers about the regulation of other westerner colonist in each SEA country. This has also explained why the work written by Vietnamese ambassadors had a focus on politic, economy and society development. Although difficulties were here, the work mentioned above in this article is still some helpful information to give the reader a big picture about the shaping of SEA countries.

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