



**A History of Vietnam's Integration  
in Modern Times:  
The Case of Franco-Chinese Conflict over the  
Sino-Tonkinese Border (1885-1895)**



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[ *Abstract* ]

Investigating the clash among different forms of international relations has been a frequent issue in modern research and attracts interest in the fields of history and politics. In the nineteenth-century, Asia witnessed a fierce struggle between traditional relations in Asia that existed during the feudal period, that of "The Heavenly Dynasty, China and its vassal states"; and a the new form of relations introduced by the West, that of relations between "colonial powers and colonized countries." As a result, the formation of "colonial societies" in Asia with very specific features was established. However, as stated by Vu (2015), for many reasons, which include the lack of material resources, the politically sensitive nature of the object, and the focus on gains and losses in previous studies, there were little studies on the process of demarcating the Tonkinese border between Franco and Chinese in Vietnam, especially from a globalization perspective. This study thus aims at examining the issue of the demarcation of the Tonkinese Border between Franco and Chinese (1885-1895), in view of globalization, as a case study for the transition process of

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the modern history of Vietnamese society.

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## I . Introduction

The nineteenth century saw relatively large fluctuations and was considered the "*hinge century*" of Asian societies. This is a period of "*globalization*," with Western colonialism's implementation of policies of colonial expansion into Asia (Thomas 2005). That globalization wave not only made Asian conservative countries confront big questions related to their national destiny such as "*war or peace?*" and "*remaining conservative or going towards a reform*," but also brought a clash between an old Chinese-led Asian order and a new Western-led world order. Colonialism, with its superior power at the time, and with its rapid scale adjustment and influence expansion, enveloped Asian conservative societies into a wave of change, forcibly, in different levels, types, and times (Hobsbawm 1994).

In the same study, Hobsbawm (1994) also concluded that Western powers, which lead that globalization wave, with the ultimate aim of imposing Western civilization into Asia, did not succeed easily, contrary to the aspirations of many colonialists at the time, as they faced a traditional order, an Asian civilization established and led by China since ancient times, a world order led by China.

Historical facts show that in Asian feudal countries, a world order existed for thousands of years, governed by China's tributary system from the ancient times until the nineteenth century, when the West came into the picture. This order has a fundamental unique character: a hierarchy of relations between the "heavenly dynasty state, China, and its vassal states," a state-to-state relationship of "super-ordination and subordination, and tributary system" (Yoshiharu 1987). Yuen (2013) noted that China utilized the order to implement a hegemonic and peaceful policy among its

neighbors. With a more specifically, Zhang & Barry (2017: 7) mentioned that China used the tributary system as a way to stabilize the border areas.

From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, China lost its neighboring vassals after being replaced by the West. Falling into deep crisis, the Chinese Government was forced to sign "unequal" treaties (Yves 1982: 9), officially recognizing the presence of Western powers in its former vassal states. This also means that China was forced to give up its supremacy, leading to its collapse (Yuen 2013). Most Asian countries formally integrated into the Western "globalization," with its feudal structure gradually gearing towards modernization. This was also challenged, as Jacques (2013: 147) noted: "Western domination forced Asian peoples at the same time to resist, but to adapt to the new ideas as well...and that gave them a new vitality."

Jacques Attali's judgment is considered relatively accurate in the case of Vietnam as well. As a country in China's tributary orbit and as a one colonized by France in 1858, Vietnam inevitably lost its independence after 30 years of resistance. On June 6, 1884, the Vietnam Central Government in Hue signed the Patenôtre Treaty, which officially recognizing French domination (Ministère français des Affaires Etrangères n.4). However, it was not until the French and the Chinese signed the Treaty of Tianjin in 1885 that China officially relinquished its rights over Vietnam (Journal Officiel français 1886). Charles Fourniau, a French historian and an expert on the Vietnam-China border issue, argued that "the French conquest and especially its end in Tonkin has made Vietnam officially escape completely from the trajectory of the Chinese order."

However, looking closer at the process of demarcating the Tonkin border between the French and the Qing Dynasty of China, this view may not very convincing. Particularly, in Paragraph 3 of the Treaty of Tianjin, provisions have been set on how the French and the Chinese will conduct the delimitation and landmarking of the Tonkin border and that these would be completed within 6 months (Journal Officiel français 1886). The process actually had for

10 years (1885-1895), and was rife with many conflicts and disagreements. One of the biggest difficulties is the Chinese claim of a large and important part of the Tonkinese border, hinged on Vietnam's being a past vassal of China (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères 1886). It had not been easy for China to give up its "naturally superior" position in the face of the new order (Quach 1991: 360).

The Vietnam-China border has been established since the 10th century, right after Vietnam (the ancient Vietnam, known as Dai Co Viet, not the modern-time Vietnam) gained its independence (Dao 1964: 187). However, for Asian countries at that time, the concept of "*borderline*" or "*zone of influence*" is attached to the division of social space with people rather than that of natural lands (Georges 1980: 11). Under the influence of the China-led order, the delimited borders were that of "the heavenly dynasty and its vassals," instead of borders among independent states and sovereignties in Western standards. The process of Western colonization brought to Asia a new concept of "*borderline*" which emphasizes its legality with clear and detailed delimitation, both on paper and in the field (Yves 1982: 9).

According to Prêtcôte (1977: 60), the delimitation of Tonkinese border between France and China was applied according to the "Western standards" combined with "historical *borderline*" evidence to produce a new *borderline* called "*colonial borderline*." The Tonkinese border is also considered to be "one of the best colonial *borderlines* in Southeast Asia." However, the process and the results of border delimitation have been mentioned in a variety of commentaries.

Fourniau, in "La frontière sino-vietnamienne et le face à face franco-chinois à l'époque de la conquête du Tonkin" mentioned the attempts and the ensuing conflicts between the French and the Chinese in the process of delimitation. Looking closer at China's territorial claims based on commercial interests with France, Fourniau (1989) also commented that France used the Tonkin territory to bargain its interests. Therefore, France accepted to finally cut a part of Tonkinese territory to the Qing Dynasty in the process

of border delimitation.

On the other hand, Patrice (1995: 93) opined that that France only used Vietnam as a stepping stone to the most important goal of political and economic interests in China. Therefore, France only wants to quickly stabilize the border to achieve its main goal.

Besides, according to Vu (2015), there was little research on the process of demarcating the Tonkinese border between the French and Chinese in Vietnam. The issue has always been considered sensitive. The lack of archives in Vietnam also makes it difficult for Vietnamese researchers to access historical documents. Some rare Vietnamese studies mostly focused on emphasizing the "gains-losses" of the territorial border demarcation process, and on the "disadvantage" for the Vietnamese side due to its lack of knowledge in border-related studies.

Additionally, there is no research on the process and results of the Tonkinese border delimitation between the French and Chinese in view of globalization until now. Therefore, the aim of this study is to focus on clarifying the disagreements, conflicts, and interests of the French and the Chinese in the process of demarcating the border and analyzing the root causes from the "globalization" perspective. This will establish a more comprehensive and objective understanding of the process of setting the Vietnam-China border. The study also intends to give a new perspective through a specific case of Tonkinese border delimitation, where globalization in the modern era brought about clashes between the two civilizations. The clash is transformed the traditionally conservative nations to become modern.

## **II. The concept of “national power” and “border” in the modern era**

### **2.1. The concept of “national power” and “border” in the modern era of France**

The seventeenth century brought in a turning point in world history with regards to both the thinking on and reality of “national power.”

The world order and the nation's standing were determined by naval warfare. Consecutively, the sea empires such as the Netherlands, Spain, Britain, and France rose and fell by turns. By the nineteenth century, the British navy ruled the seas and gave credence to the argument that superiority comes only with the domination of the waters. Looking at the rise of great sea powers, one can easily find that commercial ambitions were the strongest driving force for sea power enhancement and warfare (Mahan 1987: 8).

History proves that at this time, seizing and defending commercial interests in correlation with actual power were consistent policies for colonial powers. Accordingly, throughout the Tonkinese border delimitation process between the French and Qing Dynasty of China, commercial interests were the central focus, a target sought after by both parties. Border delimitation thus became a particular and vivid object for commercial bargaining (Ministère français des Affaires Étrangères 1887).

A closer examination of the history of the two powerful empires in the nineteenth century, namely Britain and France, may reveal how the differences between their concepts of "national power" shaped their national development strategy. Mahan (1987: 8) pointed out that British and Dutch ships at the time sailed off with the belief that there was no other choice, as staying in their depleted lands meant starvation.

This, however, was not the case of France. With the covering of seas along with a relatively long land border, France naturally gains the geographical advantages and thus, did not need to have the needs of the Dutch and British. For a long time, France had not been able to make up its mind whether to pursue "sea power" or continue with its "land power." From the latter half of the seventeenth century, the French government had chosen land territorial expansion as its national strategy (Paul, Leroy-Beaulieu 1882). This decision was proven as costly and was later seen as a policy failure for France, which had to spend excessively on maintaining a land border patrol force while missing the opportunity to be a world leading sea power. As a result, by early eighteenth century, France was overtaken by Britain and the Netherlands on

the water front. Despite France had re-gained some superiority by the end of the nineteenth century at sea, it then has never ever been able to become a true great sea power (Mahan 1987: 8).

France's choice of national strategy determined the characteristics of its colonial policies. In the nineteenth century, when France set foot in Asia, the most lucrative areas for maritime trade had already fallen into Britain (Tocqueville 2002). Land territorial control, therefore, became the only benefit France was able to seize and maintain. As a result, trade and territorial conflicts between France and other colonial powers and colonized nations in Asian were intense. This was further highlighted by the delimitation process of the Tonkinese border between the French and the Chinese.

Apart from "national power," other factors also played a role in shaping France's colonial policies. Particularly, France chose to build its supremacy and power in the colonies and compete with Britain by relying on "religious supremacy." As an influential power with a tradition of "assimilation," France values the colonial policy of spreading religion by way of missionary work. As said, where for other powers, their flag is trading; for us, it is the rood (Chesnay 1923).

"National characteristic" was an influential factor in France's ability to establish new colonies. Under the strong influence of the medieval European nobles who often look down upon "trade and commerce," modern French society considered the practice of trading and particularly maritime trade, inappropriate for highly social classes (Lucien-Anatole 1864). France, therefore, had a traditional tendency to identifying more advantages on land than on sea, and thus placed more emphasis on seizing its land. Another characteristic of the French is their distaste for venturing outside of their country. "French people are well known to be critical of colonial civilization," said the Governor General Paul Doumer in his memoir (Paul 1930: 39). Doumer (1930: 39) also pointed out that it was unusual for intelligent and experienced French traders to travel by themselves to the colonies do business or invest in there with large sums of capital. Meanwhile, in France, there was no shortage of people who were really keen in becoming colonial administrators.

This put a great strain on France's budget and created a significant impact on the political and administrative organization in the French colonies. It is the colonists' disposition, rather than the government's interest or lack thereof, that would fundamentally shape the development of the colonies. In reality, policies implemented in the colonies might detract significantly from what its "colonial nation" advocates. Accordingly, one can see that extractive policies were more prevalent in French colonies than constructive or mercantilist ones. Under these policies, France would prioritise natural resource interests or control over territories with extractable resource as well as land trade routes (Leon 2018). This will become more evident upon examination of the Tonkinese border conflict between France and China.

## **2.2. The concept of "national power" and "border" in modern China**

With a frontier that borders 14 countries, China has been actively pursuing territorial expansion in Asia, similar to the campaigns of France in Europe. Many scholars pegged the start of China's territorial expansion at its conquest of the southern lands around the fourth century BCE (Poulpiquet 1998: 16-17). China's southern territories were conquered as a result of colonization. In other words, China had become a colonizer in Asia from early on, almost at the same time as the Roman Empire (Ministère français de la Défense 1949: 45). In order to preserve the spoils of its conquests, China had also had a very early conception of "borderline," with the Great Wall built in the third century BCE along its north and northeast border; it is considered its first official borderline (Duroselle 1990: 230). However, this attempt to safeguard China's northern border against the ancient tribes in the North also demonstrates China's idea about territorial expansion: "*a closed border*" in the north and "*an open border*" to the south (Poulpiquet 1998: 16-17). Vietnam, with its geography, is part of China's national expansion strategy since ancient times (Ministère français de la Défense 1949: 45). For China's, Vietnam is always its vassal state and therefore, a clear borderline does not exist between them (Ministère français des Affaires Etrangères 1886).

The last decade of the nineteenth century marked the decline



of Chinese feudalism with the wave of Western colonization. In turn, big cities, as well coastal and geostrategic locations of China was forced to open their doors to colonial nations for trade. Concessions to the British, French, Russian, and German powers also took place in Chinese territory (Nguyen 2012). China had to accept unequal treaties with Western countries to avoid the risk of becoming a real colony. With the signing of these treaties, the "superior-vassal" relationship that existed for thousands of years collapsed (Yoshiharu 1987). Therefore, for China at that time, the re-demarcation of the border with neighboring countries was a top concern, as it guarantees territorial sovereignty in the face of the Western wave.

As such, it is clear that French and Chinese both shared similar ideas about "national power" and "territorial border." Both focused on "land power" and strived to expand their control of land territories. It is thus not difficult to account for the fact that the demarcation process had undergone in such a prolonged and intense manner.

### **III. The Case of Franco-Chinese Conflict over the Sino-Tonkinese Border (1885-1895)**

As neighbours in Asia, Vietnam and China share a common border that runs more than 1,400 km along the Northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam and the Southeast region of China. Established in the 10th century after Vietnam gained its independence from the Chinese domination, the borderline was also delineated many times through the feudalist Chinese and Vietnamese dynasties. However, this delineations were only done in some areas (Dao 1964). That was the reason why the process of demarcation between the French and Chinese was carried out on the basis of the "historical borderline" and Western standards (Deveria 1989: 6).

#### **3.1. The Treaty of Tianjin in 1885 and the demarcation of Tonkinese border between the French and Chinese**

On June 6, 1884, the Vietnam Central Government in Hue signed the Paternôtre Treaty with France, officially recognising France's rule in Vietnam. In reality, however, France faced several difficulties in

enforcing its rule in Tonkin due to the complex situation at the time, including the presence of a large number of Chinese troops in many crucial areas along the border and the inability of the Hue Government to be on top of it, which caused insecurity and disruption in the border. The border had almost been rendered useless with people from both sides casually crossing the territories (Ministère français de la Défense 1949: 31). At the time, according to Ministère français de la Défense (1949: 31), France was anxious in establishing a swift rule over Vietnam, but faced vehement protest from the Qing Dynasty of China due to the claim that Vietnam had always been one of China's vassal states and that France had no right to establish rule over Vietnam without its consent. The situation immediately changed after the Treaty of Tianjin was signed in 1885, which gave the Qing no choice but to withdraw its military force and acknowledge France's protectorship of Tonkin (Journal Officiel français 1886).

China's defeat in the Sino-French War in 1885, along with its agreement to the Treaty of Tianjin, put it in a difficult situation. In order to preserve its sovereignty, China had to enter into a series of unequal treaties with Western powers and suffered massive losses in terms of territories and economic interests. As such, its greatest concern during this period was to retain sovereignty and protect economic interests by all means. France's presence in Vietnam caused much concern for China, especially given the instability at the Sino-Vietnamese border. China also wanted to quickly re-establish a definite Sino-Vietnamese border with France so as to preclude any of France's ambition for its southern territories (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères 1886).

France was able to exact this change of attitude from China because, in reality, it considers Vietnam as a crucial territory in expanding its political and economic influence into China. As such, France also wanted to quickly redefine the Sino-Vietnamese border in order to force China to formally renounce its influence over Vietnam, and put pressure on it in the Sino-French trade negotiations (Patrice 1995: 93).

The similar concerns of both side led to the signing of the

Treaty of Tianjin, which in Article 3 states that:

After an interval of six months from the signature of the present treaty, commissioners designated by the High Contracting Parties will go to delineate the frontier between China and Tonkin. They will place, wherever there is need, boundary markers designed to clearly delineate the line of demarcation. In the case where there is a disagreement on the placement of any marker or on any rectification of detail in the actual frontier of Tonkin which it may be necessary to make in the common interest of both parties, they shall refer it to their respective governments.... (Traité de Tianjin 1886).

This article, along with others in the Treaty, signified China's official renouncement of domination towards Vietnam and recognition of French rule in Vietnam. The Treaty of Tianjin also marked the beginning of the demarcation process of the Sino-Vietnamese border between France and Qing Dynasty of China. However, instead of 6 months as the Treaty stipulated, the actual process lasted more than 2 years (1885-1887) and the placement of markers expanded to 10 years (1895) due to fundamental disagreements between both parties.

### **3.2. Disagreements arising from the demarcation process**

The demarcation of Sino-Vietnamese border between the French and Chinese was indeed a "battle" where both sides tried to maximize gains. At the onset, both sides expressed deeply conflicting views. The situation was further complicated by disagreements from within the parties themselves (Fourniau 1989: 90).

For France, General De Courcy, the Commander of France's Expeditionary Force in Indochina, suggested a "limited" occupation strategy in Tonkin, which meant leaving certain areas under Chinese bandit control to avoid unnecessary confrontation (Ministère français des Affaires Etrangères 1886).

Meanwhile, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs preferred to quickly seize the entirety of Tonkin in order to enforce a comprehensive and stable rule there, as well as to gain diplomatic strength for trade negotiations with China. It therefore asked the

French army in Vietnam for more support and to quickly complete the demarcation process. This proposition was rejected by General De Courcy, however, which consequently delayed the process (Ministère français des Affaires Etrangères 1886).

For China, the process created disagreements between the Chinese Central Government represented by the Expectant Grand Ministers (Zongli Yamen Dachen, essentially Chief of the Qing's Foreign Affairs Office) Li Hongzhang, and the local border administration. In reality, the weakened Chinese government was no longer able to influence the local administrations, particularly those of Liangguang (Guangdong and Guangxi). Li Hongzhang himself wanted to quickly finish border negotiations so that he could move on to trade negotiations, but the local administration did not share his interest. They protested against the Qing government's willingness to compromise and were resolute in their anti-Western position. The border demarcation process between France and Qing China thus was prolonged, especially in the Guangdong border area (Ministère français des Affaires Etrangères 1886).

Apart from internal disagreements, the most challenging obstacle during negotiations was the intense conflict between the French and Chinese governments. As previously mentioned, both the French and Chinese were oriented towards "land power." Thus, both strived to gain maximum territorial interest, with particular focus on areas rich in natural resources and commercial potentials. Both pursued beneficial "rectification of detail." (Centre des archives d'Outre-mer 1886).

As a result, both the French and Chinese disagreed on the interpretation of Article 3 of the Treaty of Tianjin on the delineation of specific parts of the border during the demarcation process. In reality, Article 3 did indeed mention the possibility of the "rectification of detail in the actual frontier of Tonkin" as part of the process.

In China's view, according to Fourniau (1989: 90), this interpretation meant that France would accept a significant rectification of the Tonkinese border as a compensation for China's renouncement and recognition of France's rule in Vietnam. China's

representative Li Hongzhang explicitly expressed this view during a meeting with the French Naval Commander in the Far East, Admiral Henri Rieunier: "It was because of my role that France gained significantly in Vietnam...which also put me under a lot of trouble. I believe, therefore, rectifying the Tonkin border towards China's benefit is a necessary compensation that France should undertake" (Centre des archives d'Outre-mer 1886).

To make a point, Li Hongzhang referred to the Chinese situation. As France extended its colonization to Tonkin, the Qing was facing various challenges and instability internally and externally, with the situations brewing with Korea and Japan, the Sino-French war, and British invasion of Burma. This required China to address, at the same time, multiple issues that were more important than their interests in Tonkin. As such, from China's point of view, it is wiser to avoid clashing with France with regards to Tonkin (Zong Fa Yuenan Jiao she dang 1995). Recognizing France's rule over Vietnam, for China, was a great sacrifice, a favor that must be returned by way of the demarcation process (Ministère français des Affaires Etrangères 1886).

Moreover, regional situations also compelled China to make sure of reaping the benefits of the demarcation talks with France. Following its invasion of Burma, Britain also became interested in renegotiating the frontier between its new colony and China. This put pressure on the Qing to gain concessions from France, as if France were to gain too much from the negotiations at the expense of China. However, it could set a precedent for subsequent talks on the Sino-Burmese border, causing China to suffer from a double loss of interest at the hands of both France and Britain. Had this become a reality, China would have been placed into an even more difficult situation (Centre des archives d'Outre-mer 1886).

This reality placed China in a dilemma. On the one hand, the instabilities in Korea forced the Qing to quickly finish up the border issue to its south so that it can focus on difficulties in the north. On the other hand, its emphasis on "national power" and the issue of the Burmese border with Britain did not allow the Chinese government to forgo any of its territorial interests in Tonkin to

France. In such context, Li Hongzhang decided to proceed with the second option, which caused the demarcation process to go on much longer than expected (Centre des archives d'Outre-mer 1886).

China's insistence on gaining territorial benefits was explicitly demonstrated in the Chinese delegation's position. The Chinese side insisted on using the term "rectification of detail" of the border as mentioned in Article 3 of the Treaty of Tianjin in order to demand a larger concession of the Tonkinese border from France:

The rectification of detail of the actual border cannot be interpreted as some minor adjustment such as a small hill or a plot of land to this side or the other side. It must be understood as a significant move of the borderline toward the other side of Tonkin. On the other hand, there should be no change of the borderline on both sides but rather, should be only on the Vietnamese side as Article 3 only mentioned "the actual frontier of Tonkin" and contains no reference to the current frontier of China (Ministère français des Affaires Etrangères 1886).

Moreover, China insisted that they had shown goodwill towards France by agreeing to enter into the Treaty of Tianjin and officially recognizing France's rule over Vietnam. Therefore, any change of border on China's part was unacceptable.

France's position on this matter was completely opposite. In legal terms, they argued, Vietnam had always been an independent state, and as a result, Tonkin had never ever been under the control of China. Thus, claiming that China "gave" Tonkin to France in exchange for concessions in the demarcation of the Sino-Vietnamese border was invalid. On the other hand, with regards to the interpretation of the term "rectification of detail" in Article 3 of the Treaty of Tianjin, France argued that historical and geographic evidence, as well as France's interests in the future, needed to be taken into account. Therefore, France completely rejected China's proposition that the border should be moved only towards Tonkin (Ministère français des Affaires Etrangères 1886).

Contrary to China's interpretation, France also insisted that the term "rectification of detail" in Article 3 must be understood as

meaning “minor change” of the borderline and that the Article was not mandatory as well. The term of the article rather will depend on negotiations between both parties based on common interests (Ministère français des Affaires Etrangères 1886).

France's commercial interests in China were had been consistently brought up during the talks in order to force it into making concessions. During the negotiation on the delineation of the border between Guangxi (China) and the provinces of Lang Son and Cao Bang (Vietnam), China's representative L. L. Wang insisted that “if France accepts to move the borderline towards the other side of Tonkin, China will grant France optimal commercial rights in this area” (Ministère français des Affaires Etrangères 1886).

While commercial interests in China were considerably significant for France, the strategic position and security implications of the Tonkinese border also carried certain weight in its colonial policy. As a result, France was split into two factions with differing viewpoints.

In reality, the Sino-French border negotiations were held simultaneously with their trade talks in Beijing. In Beijing, France's trade representative Corgodant wanted to quickly finish the border negotiation with Li Hongzhang, even if it required partially satisfying some of China's territorial demands so as they can move on to sign the trade agreements (Ministère français des Affaires Etrangères 1886). For France's delegation on the Tonkinese border issue, however, things were not that simple. This was reflected in the report of M. Chaffray, the chief negotiator. When faced with the demand to quickly finalize the negotiation, M. Chaffray wrote: “If China's territorial demand in Guangxi is to be met, it would also mean the same for the borderlines in Guangdong and Yunnan” (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères 1886).

This disagreement had on multiple occasions led to tensions during the negotiation process, which brought both at the brink of war. The climax of such situations occurred in January 1887, when both parties were discussing the delineation of Mong Cai-Guangdong border. China's territorial demands, as well as a sudden attack on the French delegation in the border area, caused both governments

to mobilize troops to this area. China was determined not to give in and claimed that it “would rather go to war than to withdraw its demands (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères 1887)”.

In these situations, the Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (1887) showcased the full extent of its capacity for smart and flexible diplomacy. In reality, France did not want a war to break out because of a border dispute as they needed to finalize trade agreements with China more than anything. However, they also could not simply comply with China’s demands. Thus, France adopted a “double move.” On the one hand, they mobilized their forces to the disputed border areas and sternly proclaimed that “the army of France is always ready to face the enemies.” On the other hand, the Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (1887) did not allow the French forces to engage or enter into any confrontation with the Chinese troops. It pushed the negotiations in Beijing with the hope that both sides will make some compromise.

Disputes were settled by diplomatic means, and the demarcation of the Tonkinese border between the French and Chinese reached its conclusion. On February 27, 1887, Constans and Li Hongzhang reached an agreement on a settlement for the demarcation process, where both sides would finish negotiating the areas with insignificant dispute as soon as possible and leave the areas with unnegotiable disputes to government-level talks at Beijing (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères 1887). On June 26, 1887, the Franco-Chinese Convention on the Delineation of the Border between China and Tonkin was signed in Beijing. This was supplemented by the Gérard Convention signed on June 20, 1895, which added some sections on border demarcation and delineation of markers. The Tonkinese borderline was then officially established.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

As such, the demarcation of the Tonkinese border was a typical case during the “hinging century” of Asian countries in modern times. The tensions, conflicts, and extended duration of the negotiation process showcase how the Tonkinese border was not only a national



borderline issue but also a battle of wits and power between the French and Chinese. It was also one of the most evident manifestation of the Asian states' "resist and adapt" strategy in the face of Western colonization.

This study approached the Tonkinese boundary delimitation issue with respect to globalization. It comprehensively mapped out the common contexts and trend of the world at the time, the influence of the wave of "globalization" coming from the West, and how it dismantled the Asian feudal tributary order with China at its center. The West overwhelmed Asia and China lost its vassal states. In the case of Vietnam, the Franco-Chinese Treaty of Tianjin signed in 1885 marked the collapse of the "superior-vassal" relationship and the permanent termination of the tributary system that once governed the relationship between China and Vietnam since the tenth century (Fourniau 1989: 6).

It was however not easy for France to assert its domination. The study showed that tensions and disagreements between France and China, in the view of Tonkinese boundary delimitation, not only stemmed from conflicts of interest between the two countries, but also from the power competition and the changes of forms of international relations at the time. It was indeed a struggle between the traditional form of international relations in Asia, that of the "superior-vassal" relationship, and the new forms of international relations that Western powers established, the "colonialist powers-colonized countries" (Centre des archives d'Outre-mer Français 1894).

Therefore, the Tonkinese borderline had always been a controversial issue viewed from the perspective of commercial and territorial "gains and losses." China maintained that it had given up too much by signing the 1887 Convention with France, among "unequal treaties" that it was forced to sign with the West during this period. Members of the French delegation, meanwhile, argued that the French government had overemphasized commercial gains in China and disregarded Tonkin's interests (Ministère français des Affaires Étrangères 1887). This explains the reason why immediately after its birth in 1949, the People's Republic of China declared all

the previous treaties it signed with colonial powers were "unequal" and thus needed to be replaced by "equal treaties." In other words, China did not accept the geopolitical order established previously by Western powers and was determined to change it (Chen 1994: 893).

The investigation on the process of demarcation of the Tonkinese border, considered in the lens of globalization, shows how Vietnam integrated well into the "global" wave. Broadly speaking, approaching the colonization process in Asia under the lens of "globalization" is a research approach that needs to be further deepened and expanded as it will contribute to further clarify the process of transition of Asian feudal societies into modernity.

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