


Tributary Relations of Vietnam and Japan with China during the Feudal Period: Some Reference Points



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[*Abstract*]

Under feudalism, besides imploring investiture, tribute is said to be one of the two most typical activities at the core of diplomatic relations between China and the region, in particular, Vietnam and Japan. By using the comparative method and interdisciplinary approach, the author shows that there are many differences between Vietnam and Japan with regards to tribute activity with China during the feudal period. For example, the start and end of China's tributary activities with Vietnam and Japan are not the same. The period of Japanese tributary activity was much more loosened than Vietnam. Vietnamese tributary relation was political, while Japan placed economic benefits as the main priority. In particular, the author also proved that although Japan and China had differences in behavior and level of dependence on the tributary activity of Vietnam, both Vietnam and Japan maintained independence and autonomy. Based on the historical, cultural, and geographical characteristics, as well as the position and force correlation of each country in relation to China, this article also explains the causes of these similarities and differences.

Keywords: China, Diplomacy, Japan, Tribute, Vietnam

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I . Introduction

In the early modern period, the history of international relations of East Asia (Vietnam, China, Korea, and Japan) focused on relations with the West. Two thousand years before European powers arrived in the continent in mid-19th century, East Asian international relations revolved around China. China was the center, with a network of surrounding countries arranged with different levels of authority. Surrounding countries became a "subordinate," or were independent and autonomous but maintained tributary relations with the neighboring country, China. Under the feudalism, besides imploring investiture, the tribute can be said to be one of the two most typical activities at the core of diplomatic relations between China and regional countries, in particular, Vietnam and Japan. In this tributary activity, two methods were used by China simultaneously, namely "giving favor" and "intimidation." These methods were used to force neighboring countries to accept the authority and superiority of the "Heavenly Dynasty," and then "voluntarily" submit to the "tribute system." Besides some similarities due to the nature and characteristics of the aforementioned tributary activity, there are many differences between Vietnam and Japan in relation to tribute-giving to China during the feudal period. What are these similarities and differences? What constitutes these? What is the nature of tributary activities to China from Vietnam and Japan during that time? These are the questions this article will answer.

II . Basis of Tributary Activities to China from Vietnam and Japan in Feudalism

In China, diplomacy was formed very early on and emerged from the Chinese ideology about the cosmos, country, and man. Due to favorable natural conditions a long time ago, China developed with a relatively strong agricultural background. With potential advantages for a big populous nation, early China reached a relatively higher economic level. Social, as well as ethnic groups, formed. From the start, in the minds of the ruling elite of the

agricultural communities in the midland plains and lowlands of Yellow River, a very clear concept of racial discrimination and inequality emerged. Moreover, due to its large size and central location, China has more borders with many countries than any other country in the world (China has contiguous borders with 14 countries). Accordingly, in ancient times, "China was the center" of the Asian region, at least geographically. In addition, the absence of a countervailing civilization is one of important factors that led to the formation of the unique thinking of China's position in the world.

Under the Shang dynasty (mentioned in "prophecies on tortoiseshell"), we have seen the potential of two theories: *Fate* and *God*. It can be said that the thought of *fate* was added to the principle "*loyalty to the king*," which was an important basis in mythologizing/legalizing the state. When *Fate* turned into a popular belief, it contributed significantly to the legitimation of authority to the state. *Fate* even became a kind of "baptismal holy water" for the state in many different cases. Entering the Zhou dynasty, Chinese nobility developed their theories into a system. The Kings of Zhou started to be called "Heavenly Princes" (sons of the heaven) who had the power and were legitimate representatives of the forces implicitly seen as decisive to worldly life. The Sons of Heaven were supreme rulers with divine power (Fairbank 1987: 10). People were forced to worship them, believing their role to "educate the earth on behalf of heaven". The non-Xia people were considered uncivilised and of a lower class than the Han. The Chinese named them Nanman, Dongyi, Xirong, Beidi, the four barbarians in the four directions (Keay 2009: 66). These states formed a concentric hierarchy system governed by the Sons of Heaven (Wang 2013: 211-212).

From then on, the totalitarian conception of absolutely taking over all peoples and land under heavens into the hands of a supreme king emerged (the Son of Heaven):

All the lands under the heaven belong to the king
All people under the heaven are slaves of the king. (Ta 1995: 53)

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It is the absolute power of the leader ("Heavenly Prince") that turned community awareness into totalitarian awareness with heavily theocratic color that the king is lord of all. It is also the psychological basis for Chinese chauvinism and ethnic discrimination. This gave birth to the theory which says "inside are the Xia, outside are the Yi." The book *Stories of ancient China* mentioned: "*Brilliant beautiful outfits called Hua, big countries called Xia.*" Therefore, the "Hua" can be seen as the essence of the universe and "Xia" is the outgrowth, which can be combined into the so-called "Huaxia". Huaxia is in the middle or the center (in such a way that "Heavenly Dynasty" China is in the middle and holds the master position), while being surrounded by Eastern, Northern, Southern, and Western Barbarians. In this concept, the Chinese ruling class at that time assumed their role as bestowing "splendor and virtue" to all four directions surrounding China. China also believed they needed to "use Xia to change Barbarians" (which means using Huaxia culture to civilize Barbarians).

In order to civilise Barbarians, China used violence to force brutal exploitation. This involved both engaging in war and asking for peace. Normally, when China fell into a weak situation, they prepared forces and waited for their time. On the other hand, they sought to ingratiate themselves with opponents in various forms (such as "Conciliation," paying tribute to Zhaojun of the Hu dynasty). When China became stronger, they became conquerors and merged smaller nations into the Chinese empire, which they then exploited and even sought to "assimilate" them into China. When they were not strong enough, the Chinese forced opponents to owe allegiance to them. In this third case, tribute was one of two powerful tools (besides imploring investiture) to maintain diplomatic relations between China and its servants. This is clearly proven in the diplomatic relations of Vietnam, China, and Japan during the feudal period.

In fact, it was not until the feudal period that the tribute came up in the Shang Dynasty and Zhou Dynasty in China. The Emperor, the national leader, granted land to descendants and mandarins to set up a network of vassal states to obey the orders from the Emperor. In particular, on a certain periodic basis, vassal countries

were required to pay tribute to the Emperor. Later, the Chinese adopted the system of grants and tributaries in relation to neighboring countries and used it as a way to civilize "barbarian" people. From then on, China established an international order in East Asia, where China was at the center. This order was maintained until China was subjected to attacks from the West in the mid-19th century.

According to J. K. Fairbank and S.Y. Teng in "Rethinking the 'Tribute System': Broadening the Conceptual Horizon of Historical East Asian Politics," tributary institution is "the medium for Chinese international relations and diplomacy" and "a scheme of everything, the mechanism by which barbarous non-Chinese regions were given their place in Chinese political map, and therefore it's ethical" (Fairbank and Teng 1941: 137, 139). In that environment, the Emperor "civilized" barbarians in the name of ethics, to maintain a stable, social order. Although Chinese researchers said that the so-called tribute relation (tribute system) came from Western scholars, it was already a normal diplomatic form that existed since ancient times in China (Fang 2009: 597-626). One undeniable thing is the existence of an upper-lower system in which China played a central role and surrounding countries (which China viewed as barbarians) were ranked in the different orders. Researching tributary activities to China from Vietnam and Japan will help us understand this better.

III. Tributary Activities to China from Vietnam and Japan in Feudal Period - Similarities and Differences

As with other relationships in China's "tribute system," the tributary activities to China by Vietnam and Japan in the feudal period were always based on two essential conditions. First, China had enough political credit and economic conditions to maintain an operation of this order. Second, countries in these regions voluntarily participated in the Chinese tribute system because of political or economic interests. In other words, this tributary activity existed only when both parties (countries giving tribute and countries receiving tribute)

gained benefits (Kim 1979: 24). In "On the Ch'ing tributary system," authors J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng stated that "this balance of interests would allow mutual satisfaction and the system would continue to function.... the tributary system was a framework within which all sorts of interests, personal and imperial, economic and social, found their expression" (Fairbank and Teng 1941: 140-141). If either party noticed that the relationship was no longer consistent with the national interest, they might voluntarily terminate (as in the case of Japan in the tributary relationship with China). As for the "suzerain-vassal" relationship, as in China-Vietnam in feudalism, the principle maintained is that the benefits that the suzerain receives in the long term must be greater than that total benefits that they offered. So when the suzerain-vassal relationship required the suzerain to give more, that relationship may not be maintained. Thus the termination of the Vietnam-China tributary relationship in the second half of the 19th century. The tribute activities to China are an interest exchange between two parties. A disproportionate degree of interest balancing between the parties depends on potential power and the position of countries paying tribute compared to the countries receiving tribute.

Under feudalism, due to specific historical circumstances, the timeline of China tributary activities to Vietnam and Japan are not the same. In Vietnam, in fact, Dinh Dynasty and Pre Le Dynasty, Ly Dynasty, and Vietnamese missions were sent to the Song Dynasty, not to conduct the tribute, but to present missions. They also brought presents to make friends, to communicate, and to say thank. Until the 13th century under the Tran Dynasty, in 1258, Tran Thai Tong sent ambassadors to Mongolia. Le Phu Tran was appointed Chief Ambassador, and Chu Bac Lam Deputy Ambassador. The routine occurred once every 3 years. During this time, the tributary regime to China officially started (Phan 2007: 570-608). However, because of various reasons (both Vietnam and China), the tribute did not always follow the rules. In general, this activity occurred steadily through the dynasties of Vietnam and ended only after the last tribute in 1880, led by the Chief Ambassador Nguyen Thuat and Deputy Ambassador Tran Khanh Tien, Nguyen Hoan (Ton 2005: 81-82). When Qing's representative Li Hung-Chang

signed the Treaty of "Peace, Friendship and Trade" in Tianjin (commonly known as the Treaty of Tianjin France-China 1885) on September 6, 1885 with French representatives, Paternotte acknowledged the dominance of France in Vietnam and pledged not to do anything detrimental to the pacification, respecting the present and the future of treaties, conventions and agreements signed and might be signed between France and Vietnam (Article 2 of the Treaty of Tianjin in 1885) (Documents diplomatiques 1885: 260-261). The upper state-vassal relation between Vietnam-China was seen as closed and tributary activity also permanently terminated.

Meanwhile, in Japan, the tributary relationship to China was established at the beginning of the first millennium. This was recorded in Chinese history books, such as *Song Dynasty history*, *Japanese stories*, which stated that "Japan began the tribute from the Later Han, through the Wei, Jin, Song, Sui dynasties. Tang dynasty in the years of Vinh Huy, Hien Khanh, Truong An, Khai Nguyen, Thien Bao, Thuong Nguyen, Trinh Uyen, Nguyen Hoa, Khai Thanh, Japan sent ambassadors for tribute" (Duong 2006: 60). In *Hou Hanshu*, in *Eastern Barbarians stories*, in the second year of Kien Vu Trung Nguyen, Japan went to give tribute and Quang Vu granted seals (Duong 2006: 61). Thus, from the 1st century AD, China and Japan established tribute relationships and Japan became a member of China's "tribute system" (Hua Di order). Experiencing repeated interruption, the tribute was maintained until the mid-16th century. Then, in the spring of 1548, according to schedule, the Ming dynasty allowed the Sakugen Shuryo mission to obtain tribute (Truong 1974). This is considered to be the last mission of Japan going to the Ming dynasty for tribute. After the Qing Dynasty replaced the Ming Dynasty, tributary activity between the two parties did not continue anymore because of various reasons.

One of the most important characteristics of the tributary activity between China and other countries in the region at that time is regularity and compulsoriness. In fact, in China's diplomatic relations with Vietnam and Japan in the monarchy, besides tribute activity, present-giving activities were also found to occur, especially in Vietnam. However, gifts were given during each visit with no fixed terms, and were usually given and received when both parties

wanted to communicate, for instance, victory (Ta 1995: 71). In this case, tribute was a tax, which means countries giving tribute must give precious items to the "upper country," as per the stipulated compulsory agreement between the two parties. Accordingly, there are many fairly specific documented rules and regulations on periodical tribute, lists of tributes, and the number of people that went for tribute and imperial rituals. The details are explained in the next paragraphs.

To regulate tributary activities from other countries during the Ming dynasty, the Chinese court established *Thibacty* (Chu and Trung 1996: 163) to receive tribute missions. For Huadi and the Confucian concept, only kings were eligible for tribute, otherwise missions were not received. To prevent counterfeit messengers from coming for tribute, in 1383, Hongwu ordered the Ministry of Rites to distribute "Certificates" to other countries and set the rule that ambassadors coming for tribute must have a matching "Certificate" (Ly 2007: 8).

As for the periodical tribute, China mandated Vietnam to give tribute every 3 years, as per King Tran Thai Tong's advice. In the Nguyen Dynasty, Gia Long obtained tribute once every 2 years. Minh Menh then changed it to once every 4 years. In the 20th year of Minh Menh, King Qing said, "Our country, under the rules of tribute once every 2 years, sending ambassadors every 4 years, then 2 times could be merged into one, changing tribute to once every 4 years" (Internal Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty 1993: 311). In fact, because of various reasons (both from Vietnam and China), the tribute did not always comply with the rules.

Meanwhile, for Japan, in 1404, through the "Yongle Treaty," the Ming Dynasty specified that Japan come for tribute once every 10 years (Ton 2006: 312). Obviously, compared to Vietnam and many other countries, such as Korea, which provides tribute once a year, the kingdom of Ryukyu (Okinawa now) which gives once every two years, Siam (Thailand) which does every four years, and Sulu (Southern Philippines) which gives every 5 years, the periodic tribute of Japan was much more relaxed. This is because Japan often sent tributary missions with too many

people and China encountered financial difficulties from substantial costs incurred to welcome and reward Japanese missions. On the other hand, Japan was not a vassal and tributary activities were not associated with imploring investiture. Therefore, Japan's tribute was not as regular or continuous as Vietnam and Korea.

Besides regulating the number of tributes at a given time, China also agreed with other countries on the number of people and boats sent for tribute, as an increase in number of people going for tribute proved costly and required much effort and cost for the Chinese court.

Under the dynasties in Vietnam, the responsibility for assigning people to go for tribute, offerings, or requesting investiture belongs to the Ministry of Rites. However, the courts also added officials from other ministries and units to the missions to execute other tasks, such as the procurement of goods. Therefore, besides 1 Chief Ambassador and 2 Deputy Ambassadors, the missions also included fellow travellers and an entourage to carry palanquin or tribute offerings and goods. For example, under the Gia Long dynasty, the tribute missions included 1 Chief Ambassador, 2 Deputy Ambassadors, 8 fellow travellers, and 9 entourages (Internal Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty 1993: 305). Under Minh Menh, the number of people increased to 3 Ambassadors, 3 clerks, 9 fellow travellers, and 15 entourages (Internal Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty, 1993, p. 308). In this situation, in 1825, the Qing Dynasty fixed each mission to consist of 20 people, including 3 Ambassadors, 8 fellow travellers, and 9 entourages (Internal Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty 1993: 308).

These strict regulations were also issued to the Japanese mission. The number of members in the Japanese mission to China sometimes included up to a thousand people. The total food supply for them was over 1,000 dans (Moc 1980: 585.). For this reason, in 1404, through the "Yongle treaty," the Ming dynasty fixed the number of Japanese boats going for the tribute mission to two, with a maximum number of 200 people (Ton 2006: 321). Until 1426, when the number of people and boats coming for tribute exceeded the provisions, China applied

detailed regulations. The tributary boats were to number no more than 3, the number of people coming for tribute was to be no more than 300, and the number of swords was not to exceed 3000. Actually, these regulations were not often strictly abided by Japan (Ton 2006: 321). Nine years later, in the Yongle treaty, which the Japanese mission signed with the Ming dynasty to replace the Yongle treaty, the regulations did not change. Japan came to China for tribute every ten years, tributary boats were no more than 3, the number of people coming for tribute were no more than 300, and the number of swords were no more than 3000 (Ton 2006: 319-320). In subsequent years, the Ming dynasty reiterated the rules to Japan many times. For example, in 1450, the Ming dynasty reminded Japan again that, "*Japanese tributary boats, 70 sailors per boat, crew in total are 210 people, 2 deputy ambassadors, 5 land officials and 6 residents, 7 accompanied monks, number of accompanied traders are no more than 60 people*" (Truong 1974: 8356). Especially, after the Ningbo event, in 1539, the Ming Dynasty limited the number of people and boats of Japanese missions coming for tribute. It was stated then that "the tribute term is once every 10 years, no more than 100 people, number of tributary boats are no more than 3, violated ones must be returned" (Truong 1974: 8357).

Obviously, although the Japanese periodic tribute was 3 times as long as the Vietnamese one (Japan was once every 10 years, while Vietnam was once every 3 years), sometimes the number of envoys and entourages in the Japanese mission was ten times as many as the Vietnamese one. In Japanese missions, a large number of traders also attended. This somewhat showed "favoritism" from the Chinese court in relation with the neighboring country. Japan, on the other hand, also reflected the differences in the tributary objectives. Moreover, as Japanese missions regularly violated the tributary principles, China was somewhat more wary and cautious about Japan than Vietnam. Therefore, orders, directives of limited time, number of people, and number of boats for Japanese missions were regularly issued again by Chinese court.

For Vietnam and countries in the vassal system, China

prescribed specific categories and details of tributary offerings. This also shows the difference in tribute relations of China-Japan, which emphasizes responsibility, indeed a big duty that the "vassal" such as Vietnam must implement in every tribute to the "Heavenly Dynasty." For example, in 1803, the Qing dynasty issued a list of tributary offerings, consisting of 2 pieces of ivory; 2 rhinoceri; peeled silk, original silk, fabrics, 100 sheets of each; 300 ounces of incense; 600 ounces of agarwood, cardamom and betel nut of 45 kilos each. For celebration, the offerings were 2 pairs of ivory; 4 rhinoceri; peeled silk, original silk, and fabric, 100 sheets of each (Internal Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty 1993: 311). Until the 20th year of Minh Menh, offerings were reduced by 1 pair of ivory; 2 rhinoceri; peeled silk, original silk, fabrics, 100 sheets of each type; 300 ounces of incense, 600 ounces of agarwood, cardamom, and betel nut 45 kilos of each (Philippe 1979: 311-312). In addition to the items above, in many cases, the dynasty also required some other tributes, such as gold and silver, sandalwood tree sap, agarwood sap, aromatic woods, black sandalwood, paper fans, and local silks (Tran 2007: 304). Obviously, the gross value of each tribute above was not small.

It can be said that under feudalism, tribute activities to China from Vietnam and Japan and many other countries in the region were instituted seriously, from the term and list of tribute items to the number of people that participated in the tribute mission. All were formalized and legalized to form an important basis to distinguish it from offering activity that was common in relations between China and other countries in the region at that time.

As a periodic and compulsory activity based on the ability to promote the mutual interests of two sides, the tributary relations between China-Vietnam and China-Japan show that each relationship pursues different goals. The China-Vietnam tributary relation was political, while the China-Japan tributary relations economic benefits.

At that time, like other "subordinate" relationships with Korea and Ryukyu under feudalism, China also appreciated relations with Vietnam. Vietnam was considered as an indispensable link to the "vassal" network set up and maintained in the region

which keeps China at the center. Moreover, the tributary activity or imploring investiture was a method for "binding" neighboring nations and creating a gravitational attraction for surrounding countries where China was the center. A nearby stable external environment was always the necessary condition to ensure stability and prosperity in the central axis. J. K. Fairbank affirmed that "China's peripheral order is closely related to domestic order, whereby this order cannot last long without that order" (Fairbank 1968: 3). China may not survive alone and needed the recognition of Man Di lands to assert its power and position, and ensure stability within. Moreover, China itself also obtained significant economic benefits from the tributary activity of the vassals and met their economic and cultural needs through the exchanges.

Meanwhile, although Vietnam was always trying to assert its independence in relation to China, the Vietnamese feudal state, through the dynasties, always needed to maintain "Vassal" or "upper country" relations with China through tributary activities and imploring investiture. The reasons are as follows.

Firstly, by tributary activity, Vietnam confirmed its desire to maintain a harmonious relationship with the northern giant, to ensure national security, independence, and sovereignty.

Secondly, tribute is also a way to ensure the value of crowned kings, which the emperor of the "Heavenly Dynasty" granted to the Vietnamese kings. This guarantee is essential to the legitimacy and independence of feudal dynasties. It is also the basis to confirm its position in relation with surrounding countries.

Thirdly, this is also a method of economic and cultural exchange. In the *Compendium of institutions and administrative cases of Dai Nam* compiled by the Internal Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty, the items offered as tribute in the 19th century by Vietnamese ambassadors were recorded in this manner:

Silver ingots and silver rings, plus 1,140 taels (missions used: 100 ingots of 10 taels, 14 ingots of 2 taels, 52 ingots of 1 tael, 100 ingots of 5 coins. 1000 silver rings; Each one weighs 1 coin. With missions

that came to congratulate: 30 ingots of 1 tael, 140 ingots of 5 coins as well as above). Our white pure silk: 120 sheets, 220 peeled silk sheets (With missions that came to congratulate, only used 100 peeled silk sheets, 200 pure silk sheets), 100 sheets of traditional fabric, 50 kilos of cinnamon, 20 ivory cups, 300 ivory hand fans, 200 elephant tail feathers (30 are gold encrusted; others are silver encrusted), 150 Tortoise-shell sticks (75 medium and 75 small ones), 150 candle boxes. Things were carried out by Lang Son provincial authorities: 24 pure silk sheets, 20 kilos of cinnamon, 40 Tortoise-shell candle boxes, 8 taels of aromatic candles, 80 ivory hand fans, 40 silver encrusted elephant tail feathers, 20 taels of giangngan, 10 packs (A pack is 24 taels) of platinum. Lang Son authorities gave gifts to Qing officials, used: every dozen of buffalos, goats, pigs, 10 rice buckets, and 20 kilos of wine. As for the objects from the three provinces sent to the border gate to wait: 50 colored silk sheets, 10 white pure silk sheets, 40 ivory hand fans, 20 Tortoise-shell candle boxes, 30 elephant tail feathers (15 are gold encrusted; 15 are silver encrusted) a kilo of cinnamon bark (Comment: Under Gia Long time, for each mission, items carried are reduced: 100 colored silk sheets, 100 gold encrusted elephant tail feathers, 100 fans, 50 candle boxes, and in the 9th year of Minh Menh, they offered more things. As usual, they used ivory fans, Tortoise-shell fans straight ivory; by the 12th year of Minh Menh, all kinds of fans were made, all of them were made of straight ivory, fan fabrics were peeled fabric (Internal Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty 1993: 312-313).

These figures show that offerings made by Vietnam during tribute activities between the two countries were not just ritualistic objects but objects with real economic value. The Chinese government "maintains an ancient tribute for economic exploitation from small states near China. In order to maintain sovereignty peacefully, Vietnam was forced to pay tribute to China" (Ta 1995: 81). The Vietnamese never wanted to lose in political relations. Economic loss is the price to pay for independence, freedom, maintaining the relationship between the two countries.

In response, China always had gifts to offer Vietnamese envoys coming to pay tribute. For example, in 1804, the Qing King gave gifts to envoys, including 16 pieces of precious fabric, eight sheets of brocade, and 54 pieces of silk (Internal Affairs of Nguyen Dynasty

2002: 581).

There were fewer gifts offered by China than were received during the Vietnamese missions. The tributes and gifts between Vietnam and China were an exchange of goods due to the natural needs of economic development, but this exchange was unequal due to the political relationship between the two countries.

Besides the offerings that were given during tribute, Vietnamese ambassadors brought many additional items to trade for profit. China recognized the economic benefits of exchanges and trade made during tribute trips from vassal countries. Therefore, specialized departments were established to inspect, transport, and carry out the additional items brought by envoys. In *Histoire des Relations de la Chine avec l'Annam – Vietnam du XVI^e au XIX^e siècle*, G. Deve'ria lists the kinds of goods that Vietnamese envoys usually carried to China for sale, such as:

natural gold (生金); silver (銀); copper (銅); cinnabar (丹砂); pearl (珠); tortoise shell (玳瑁); coral (珊瑚); incense (沉香); Suhe oil (蘇合油); jade (翡翠); white pheasant (白雉); white deer (白鹿); rhinoceros (犀); elephant (象); female rhinoceros horns used as drinking cups (兕); mountain goats (羚羊); gorilla (猩猩); tropical monkeys (狒狒); mouse catching monkeys (蒙貴); python (蝮蛇); mango (葦羅果); jack fruit (波羅密); dried betel nut (檳榔); pepper (胡椒); Keteleeriadavidiana (蘇木); ebony (烏木); salt (鹽); paint (漆) (Devéria 1880: 87-88).

In order to increase their profit from these goods, the Chinese often pressured Vietnamese ambassadors to sell at the lowest prices. Therefore, the profits made during Vietnamese tributary missions continued to increase.

Besides the political targets and interests, the bilateral relations between Vietnam and China brought economic benefits to both sides. However, the economic benefits are dominated by interests of a political nature. This seems to be a common feature in tributary activities from countries under the "vassal" system of the "Heavenly Dynasty" of China at that time. Korea, the oldest country in the tributary system, is also a good example.

The Korean feudal state noticed that the tributary system was not only compatible with Confucianism [Korean called it *mohwasasang* (i.e. Chinese simulation thought)], but was also the most optimal way to ensure the legitimacy of state power. For Korean "elites," "living outside the influence of Chinese culture...was just like to live like barbarians" (Kim 2008: 38-39). Until the early 1880's, not only Confucians, but also most of Koreans, did not consider their country independent from China (Kim 2008: 35-56). Accordingly, the tributary activity took place for a long time as a "duty" and "responsibility" that "vassal" countries must execute if they wanted to maintain a relationship with the "Heavenly Dynasty."

If Vietnam and China were trying to maintain tribute relations with each other for the "common" political and economic benefits stated above, the interpretation of tributary activities between China and Japan is different. Whereas China maintained tributary activity to focus on primary political objectives, such as the prevention of piracy, ensuring security in the frontier, and satisfying vassals coming for tribute, Japan used tributes as an economic opportunity and was able to offset domestic financial shortages and increase income.

For a long time, piracy became an obsession with the Chinese state and people. This risk became particularly serious in the middle and end of the Ming dynasty. In the *Hongwu record*, the word "Wokou" (Wokou) was first mentioned, referring to the groups of armed pirates and traders from Japan around the Korean peninsula and Chinese coast (Hach 2007: 231). Some areas of inland China were attacked by pirates (Ly 1990: 91). To resolve this issue, the Chinese court enforced tough military measures, as well as used flexible diplomatic measures, such as the granting of the title the "King of Japan," and maintaining tributary and trade operations with the neighboring country. These diplomatic measures may have been expensive for China, but Japan was made to eradicate piracy, which if done alone may have cost greater. In fact, under the Ming dynasty, China personally appointed missions to Japan many times to restore bilateral relations (Moc 1980: 535). In 1369, the messenger of the Ming dynasty, Duong Tai, came to Japan and delivered

Emperor Hongwu's letter to Prince Kanenaga. The letter urged Japan to send a messenger to China to pay tribute, discussed the looting carried out by pirates, and required Japan to take preventive measures (Dien 1987: 32). Pirate activity increased in the wide coastal strip of Shandong to Wenzhou, Taizhou, Mingzhou, and even the coastal districts of Fujian. In 1370, despite the failure of envoys led by Duong Tai, the Ming dynasty continued to send messengers led by the mandarin of Taizhou (Shandong) Trieu Trat to Japan to request trade and tribute relations (Ton 2006: 300-301). Moreover, the Chinese emperors never wanted to lose their central position in the tribute system. They wanted to be recognized by countries in the region like Japan to legitimize their domination and to prevent all subversion from within and without. The existence of this tributary system had in fact contributed significantly to the shaping of East Asia. This is characterized by an international, Chinese-centric order from the Ming dynasty, whose scope extended from Xakhalin Islands, Japan, Ryukyu, Luzon (Philippines), and some other Southeast Asian countries, to the countries around the Indian Ocean, including the vast region of Northeast Asia and northern China (Tin 1982: 12). Even when the Ming dynasty established "Thibacty" for managing tribute, "its primary purpose was not in the economic sense, such as taxation, but politically, it demonstrated the virtue to (the) outside (world)"(Chu & Trung 1996: 163). Thereby, we can see the political objectives set by China in the tribute system, despite its economic benefits.

Meanwhile, Japan's purpose for participating in the tribute system was for trade and exchange, to address Japan's financial shortage. Japan could not steer clear from China's economic system and the East Asian trading network. Japan once tried to break away from the tributary system as Yoshimochi (Yoshimitsu's successor) considered it a "national humiliation." Economic hardships however caused him to surrender the Chinese Offensive. In 1428, after Yoshimochi's death, Ashikaga Yoshikazu took over as general and attempted to restore the tribute between the two countries (Moc 1980: 535). A Japanese scholar, Usui Nobuyoshi, once wrote in a book on Ashikaga Yoshimitsu: "*In the flourishing era of Yoshimitsu, the most important financial income was*

trading with Ming Dynasty" (Ly 2007: 12). According to estimates, each boat that came to China for tribute, after deducting expenses, had a profit of approximately ten thousand Guan (Dien 1987: 52). This explains why the number of members in the tribute missions that Japan sent to China always increased and consisted of traders who invested in tributary boats (Moc 1980: 554). Like Japan, other countries not in the Chinese "vassal system," like Russia, eventually acceded in paying tribute to China with complex rituals, especially when the Ming Dynasty mandated that only tribute countries had the right to trade in Chinese territory (Mancal 1963: 21).

Japan also gained political benefits in its tribute relationship with China. During the reign of Prince Kanenaga in 1371, messengers were sent to connect with China (Ton 2006: 301), for economic gain and to establish relations with the Ming dynasty in order to consolidate power against the onset of North Korea in Japan. When General Ashikaga Yoshimitsu solved the problem of defending the North and the South for the fundamental unification of Japan, he continued to actively participate in the tributary system of the Ming Dynasty. This was mainly to improve Japanese economy at that time, as well as maintain political stability and maintain international stature. However, as its main purpose is on fiscal improvement, once Japan no longer needed the commercial tribute with China to offset the domestic economic shortage, the tributary activity between the two countries ceased.

The difference in such goals of tribute was accompanied by differences in subjects directing tributary activity of Vietnam-Japan at that time. If, throughout the feudal history of Vietnam, the diplomatic corps for tributary activity to China were appointed by the court (headed by the king), then in Japan, the tribute boats were not always dispatched by the Sultan; sometimes, these boats were appointed by the Shogunate or the daimyo for business purposes. For instance, during the period from 1432 to 1547, 11 Japanese diplomatic corps went to China with a total of 50 boats. There was only 1 boat dispatched by the court, and the rest were 7 boats of the Shogunate and up to 42 boats of the

daimyo (Moc 1980: 521). Moreover, since the Ming Dynasty strictly limited commercial tributary activity of Japan, the time between tributes was too long. It was not able to satisfy the business requirements of Japan. Therefore, to get the right to send boats to China for the tribute, the daimyo competed fiercely and even killed each other. "War for tribute" (Ton 2006: 326) originated from this. This never occurred in any tributary activities between Vietnam and China during the feudal period.

Moreover, the position and strength correlation of Vietnam and Japan with China were not the same (Vietnam was under the "tributary system" applying for investiture from China, while Japan was out of that system). This made the attitude and style reflecting the sense of independence and self-command of the two countries in tributary activity to China also different.

For the Vietnam feudal dynasty, China was the only civilized country worth being adopted. Chinese culture was considered as the "peak model," and was also the largest country that often threatened Vietnam's independence. Thus, it chose the flexible and modest diplomatic method of imploring investiture and tribute to maintain independence and freedom. On the other hand, Japan was different. Separated from China by waters, Japan "had little political relations with the continent" (Warren 2000: 118). Although Japan admitted that China had a brilliant civilization that they wanted to adopt, the Japanese people did not allow China to become a "cultural pattern." Therefore, unlike Vietnam, Japan did not organize civil service examinations, did not build a state system, and did not use eunuchs like China. Japanese Confucian scholars (represented by the schools of thought of "Kokugaku," "Rangaku," "Mito," and "Zhu" (Harootunian 1988: 212)) dared to point out the unnatural theories of Chinese Confucianism or the extremeness of "mandate of heaven" doctrine. Specifically, on the basis of inheriting "Huadi thought," Japan launched the "Holy national thought," with a distinct Japanese inflection. Accordingly, the Japanese territory and all things were thought to be born and protected by gods. From the Heian period (794-1185) to the early Kamakura period (1185 - 1333), especially after winning in two aggressive wars against the

Yuan Dynasty, this "Holy national thought" was developed further. "Japan was a Holy nation, so it was not subject to attack by other countries and the royal genealogy extended seamlessly" (Tran 2005: 92); and "Japan was the most precious nation in the world. It can be said to be a new idea to assume that there was no noble nation like Japan. This concept was the basis to form the independent culture of contemporary Japan" (Tran 2005: 93). These significantly shaped the attitude and the way Japan implemented tributary activity with China.

While Vietnam always tried to keep peace with China, by avoiding wars and conflicts, Vietnam reacted firmly when China launched unreasonable and perverse actions that threatened independence and sovereignty. Japan maintained an almost "equal" position since it carried out tributary activities with China. Sometimes, it even dared to challenge Huadi thought. For example, in 608, the credential submitted to the Sui Dynasty Emperor by Japanese envoy strongly asserted that "the Celestial Emperor where the sunrises sent a letter to the Celestial Emperor where the sunsets" (Brown 1993: 183), with the implication of publicly putting the Emperor and the Mikado at an equal position. Another instance, in the early 15th century, after Yoshimitsu's (the only one getting conferment from the Chinese court) death in 1408, his successor, Yoshimochi, pleaded that he was being punished by gods in order to excuse his responsibility for pirates' looting activities, which terminated tributary relationships during the Ming Dynasty. This was considered a "national humiliation" by Yoshimochi. Until the 16th century, under the Hideyoshi period, Japan posed disobedience with the intent of attacking Korea, a vassal state of China. From there, they aimed to conquer China to assert its "central" role in the region. The Korean War (1592-1597) is considered the first direct encounter of two powerful countries in Asia, as they scrambled for a leadership role in the Asian region. In the 17th century, the Qing Dynasty moved to include Japan into the "tributary system" by removing previous Ming Dynasty trade prohibitions and using Korea as an intermediary to resume tributary trade relations (in 1685 and 1703); however, those Japan refused these policies as it

maintained that *"Qing government was unworthy to be tributed by Japan because of its background is from Barbarian"* (Manh 2008: 13). Obviously, on the basis of holy national thought and under the influence of Chinese Huadi thought, Japan challenged the "order" established by China. China never succeeded in resuming tributary relations with Japan. The visit of the diplomatic corps led by SakugenShuryo to the Ming Dynasty is considered the last tribute Japan paid to China. Out of its own initiative, Japan bolted out of the tributary activity, especially as its economic interests were already being satisfied by business engaged in the coastal areas of Southeast.

Meanwhile, tributary relations between Vietnam and China was under pressure because of a third force, France. Facing the risk of invasion from France, sovereignty and territorial integrity were threatened and the Qing Dynasty, in the late 19th century, gradually compromised with France on the issue of Vietnam. In June 9, 1885, France and the Qing Dynasty jointly signed the Treaty of Tianjin, where China abandoned its lordship of Vietnam, and recognized the dominance of France in the land. It also pledged not to do anything detrimental to the work of pacification conducted by France in this region (Article 2 of the Treaty) (Documents diplomatiques 1885: 260-261). The "rooftop-vassal country" relations thus ended.

The Chinese tributary system finally collapsed during the China-Japan War of 1894-1895.

IV. Conclusion

Reviewing the tributary activities of Vietnam and Japan with China during the feudal period differed in many levels. As a small "vassal," Vietnam always tried to be soft and skillful in imploring investiture and tributary activity. It also implemented these to avoid wars and conflicts and maintain independence and freedom. Meanwhile, although belonging to the Chinese "tributary system" from early AD centuries to the early 16th century, Japan was never under the "vassal system." The tributary

activity of Japan was more complex and underwent many changes. With the idea of "holy national thought," Japan never considered China as the "Celestial Empire," and Chinese civilization not a "cultural peak" or "cultural pattern." While it is influenced by Chinese thought, Japan always wanted to assert itself and eventually yielded a central role in East Asia. This was demonstrated vividly and clearly since the Hideyoshi period in the 16th century. This attitude led Japan to challenge China's Huadi, to put itself on equal footing with China in the global order (especially under the Ming and Qing dynasties).

Although the behaviour and level of mutual dependence in tributary activity by Vietnam and Japan had such differences, both maintained independence and autonomy. However, Japan actively terminated the tributary activity with China when its economic needs were already satisfied. The Japanese repeatedly refused to resume tributary activity from the Qing Dynasty. Meanwhile, the Vietnam feudal court repeatedly rejected the brazen claims of the Chinese "Celestial Empire" and was ready to aggressively respond to invasions from the north. Nguyen maintained the vassal system in Southeast Asia, and Vietnam considered itself as the "China in the South," making it the southern world's center as almost an equal to its northern neighbors.

These relationships existed for a long time in history. Although strife with differences, the relations always yielded benefits for both the giver and receiver. In the end, we may conclude that the Chinese tributary system was used for mutual political and economic benefits. On the one hand, however, smaller countries were challenged to maintain independence. Vietnam and Japan faced great challenges then and now, and from the rise and revival of China in recent times makes this discussion very relevant.

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