

# Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng (1820-1841)

Central Policies and  
Local Response

*Choi Byung Wook*



CORNELL

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# INTRODUCTION

This book aims to explain a series of significant political events that took place in southern Vietnam<sup>1</sup> during the first half of the nineteenth century. From this region, armies marched north to unify Vietnam and produced the Nguyễn dynasty (1802-1945). In 1833, however, a revolt of southerners (popularly called the Lê Văn Khôi revolt) broke out, declaring independent rule for southern Vietnam and lasting two years before being crushed. Ethnic conflicts followed the revolt, further devastating southern Vietnam. Later, in 1859, the French landed in this region, and the southerners' anti-French movement started, fueled by strong loyalist sentiments toward the Huế court.

The political events mentioned above reveal striking inconsistencies in the attitudes of southern Vietnamese towards the central government. In 1802, southerners were heroes of the new dynasty that achieved the amalgamation of the three regions of present-day Vietnam<sup>2</sup> for the first time; but thirty years later, an anti-government revolt erupted, and ended with the central government tightening its grip on the region. It was a dramatic change in status for the southern Vietnamese, who shifted from being winners to losers in three short decades. Southerners not only lost the initiative in central politics, but were also reduced to being virtually colonized by the Huế court in the middle of the 1830s. By the 1850s, however, we find southerners fighting the French invasion and declaring strong loyalty to the Nguyễn king, even though they believed the court had sold out southern Vietnam and abandoned its people. This was another shift for the southern Vietnamese, who transformed themselves from losers to advocates of the central government.

This fluctuation of southern reaction to the central government during this half century was the starting point of my interest in southern Vietnam. While reading the huge volumes of the Huế court chronicle, the *Đại Nam Thực Lục* (Veritable records of Đại Nam), I found that the Nguyễn dynasty rulers were seriously concerned about controlling southern Vietnam during the first half of the nineteenth century. I then began to pay particular attention to the central government's actions in southern Vietnam. During the reign of Minh Mạng (1820-1841), descriptions of the central government's work in southern Vietnam became increasingly frequent, just at the time that tension between Huế and southern Vietnam reached its peak. I wondered if Minh Mạng's actions might have caused the subsequent political vacillations in southern Vietnam.

For an examination of Minh Mạng's policies, we have Alexander Woodside's outstanding 1971 book, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of*

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<sup>1</sup> In this book, "southern Vietnam" indicates the geographically open region encompassing the lower Mekong delta. This area was called Gia Định or, later, during the first half of the nineteenth century, Nam Kỳ.

<sup>2</sup> North (Miền Bắc), central region (Miền Trung), and south (Miền Nam).

*Nguyễn and Ch'ing Civil Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*.<sup>3</sup> In this book, Woodside shows the extent to which Chinese elements were imported into Vietnamese administrative and educational units, and how far Sinicization progressed during the first half of the nineteenth century in general and during Minh Mạng's reign in particular: "Vietnamese rulers struggled to ensure that their governments attained a correspondence to the governments of China. The closer their approximation, they believed, the greater would be their effectiveness."<sup>4</sup> With the help of Woodside's Sinicization paradigm, we can gain an insight into the Nguyễn dynasty's institutional outlook. But Woodside's influential concept has also sometimes prevented historians from perceiving the serious efforts of the Huế court to manage its recently unified territory.

Two other scholars have considered the history of early nineteenth-century Vietnam from a different perspective, one that considers the influence of southern regionalism and the deep roots of the new dynasty in former Đàng Trong.<sup>5</sup> In 1990, Philippe Langlet published his important study, *L'Ancienne historiographie d'état au Vietnam*,<sup>6</sup> tracing the influence of the southern past and dynastic ancestral worship on the nineteenth-century Nguyễn ideology of political legitimacy, beginning with the reign of Nguyễn Hoàng, founder of the Nguyễn state, onwards. Nola Cooke has published several articles, arguing from biographical sources that the Nguyễn political elite was strongly influenced by regionalism. In one article, titled "Southern Regionalism and the Composition of the Nguyễn Ruling Elite," she demonstrates "pro-southern (Đàng Trong) bias" among the highest Nguyễn dynasty elites.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars commonly bisect Vietnam, dividing it into south and north (Đàng Trong/Đàng Ngoài), a useful practice insofar as it helps one avoid generalizations about the culturally diverse country of Vietnam and its history. Nevertheless, this bisection does not seem adequate when we are trying to understand regional Vietnamese politics during the first half of the nineteenth century. Regarding this period, a model that shows the trisection of Vietnamese territory (into north, center, and south) is both appropriate and useful. Southern Vietnam, or Gia Định, was one part of the trisection of nineteenth-century Vietnam, and it still exists today under the names of Miền Nam (southern part) or Đồng Bằng Sông Cửu Long (Mekong delta).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Nguyễn and Ch'ing Civil Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> Vietnamese used the term Đàng Trong for all of the region south of the Gianh River in present Quảng Bình province. The Gianh River formed a natural border, dividing the region of the Nguyễn family (sixteenth through eighteenth centuries) from that of the Trịnh family in northern Vietnam; the Trịnh territory was called Đàng Ngoài.

<sup>6</sup> Philippe Langlet, *L'Ancienne historiographie d'état au Vietnam* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême Orient, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Nola Cooke, "Southern Regionalism and the Composition of the Nguyen Ruling Elite," *Asian Studies Review* 23,2 (1999): 205-231.

<sup>8</sup> In his excellent analysis of Vietnamese regional differences, Keith Taylor displays six parts of Vietnam—Đồng Kinh, Thanh Hóa-Nghệ An, Thuận Quảng, Bình Định, and Nam Bộ—in historic context. See Keith W. Taylor, "Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57,4 (1998). "Nam Bộ" (southern part) is the widely accepted term to indicate the area of Gia Định, while Bắc Bộ and Trung Bộ are used for

Another work of interest, relevant to this period, is Nguyễn Thị Thanh's dissertation, "The French Conquest of Cochinchina, 1858-1862."<sup>9</sup> Though the thesis is mainly focused on the 1850s-60s, the author also allocates a large part of her analysis to examining the first half of the nineteenth century as background for later events. However, she does not seem to stray from the common view of twentieth-century revolutionary groups, which labeled the regime as one characterized by reactionary feudalism. Nguyễn Thị Thanh concludes that "the Nguyễn court's political and economic policies made the history of the mid-nineteenth century Vietnam a tragedy."<sup>10</sup> In her discussion of the anti-French movement, she points out that "idealistic intellectuals" led resistance movements, peasants came together to create fighting forces, and "private landlords" financed the resistance in southern Vietnam from 1861 to 1862.<sup>11</sup> There has been a popular, but rather romantic and simplified notion that the Cochinchinese armed opposition to the French was essentially "the reaction of peasants against a foreign presence;"<sup>12</sup> when compared with this notion, certainly Nguyễn Thị Thanh's argument is more comprehensive. Because of her perspective on the Nguyễn court, however, she contends that intellectuals, peasants, and landlords participated in the anti-French movement only to protect their own interests within southern Vietnam. But I believe that we will find other significant reasons for their engagement if we more seriously examine the Nguyễn court's policies in southern Vietnam during the first half of the nineteenth century.

In Vietnam, an extensive number of works on this southern area have been produced since the beginning of the 1990s. Southern scholars have examined issues regarding Gia Định based on their own view of tradition, observation of historical remains, and discovery of local documents. Among them, Sơn Nam is the most energetic, producing books and articles on the Gia Định people. In particular, his book entitled *Đất Gia Định Xưa* (Land of Gia Định in the past)<sup>13</sup> is filled with vivid descriptions of Gia Định life. However, as in Sơn Nam's other works, the author's fixation on the day-to-day lives of Gia Định people places limits on his argument. He is not much concerned with political changes caused by the central government's policies, the reactions of Gia Định people to those policies, and consequent social changes as they related to each stage of the political developments before and after the 1830s, for example.

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northern part and central part, respectively, in the trisection concept. Pierre Brocheux falsely informs us that "In Vietnamese, the French renamed the region [southern Vietnam] Nam Ky." Pierre Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy, and Revolution, 1860-1960* (Wisconsin: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1995), p. 223. But the "Nam Ky" (Nam Kỳ) was an earlier term. It was the Nguyễn court that renamed this region Nam Kỳ after the 1830s administrative reform.

<sup>9</sup> Nguyễn Thị Thanh, "The French Conquest of Cochinchina, 1858-1862" (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422.

<sup>12</sup> Milton E. Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859-1905)* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1997), p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> *Đất Gia Định Xưa* (Land of Gia Định in the past) (Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1993).

My book examines a very specific form of southern regionalism—the regionalism of Gia Định and Nam Kỳ—and the particular sorts of policies employed by the central government to break down that regional identity and turn it into loyalty towards the dynasty by fully integrating the area into the Nguyễn kingdom.

The first chapter of this book discusses several elements of southern Vietnamese tradition that stemmed from the Gia Định regime of the eighteenth century, based in southern Vietnam. In chapters two and three, I discuss the Gia Định local government (1808-1832), called in Vietnamese Gia Định Thành Tổng Trấn, and examine the central government's conflict with this local regime and the southerners' reaction to the central government. In chapters four through six, I discuss three important policies of Minh Mạng implemented after abolition of the Gia Định local government: *giáo hóa*, or the "cultivation" of southern people; the "Vietnamization" of other ethnic groups, including Chinese; and a new land measurement policy that resulted in an official recognition of private land ownership and land accumulation in southern Vietnam.

Examining these issues achieves three goals. First, we will find the reasons behind many of the political events in southern Vietnam at the time. Second, we can appreciate what the nineteenth-century dynasty achieved in their efforts to pull a peripheral area under central government control before 1859, after which it increasingly appeared as an unsuccessful regime because of its loss of sovereignty to the French. Finally, I hope to provide readers with a way of understanding Vietnam as a nation with specific historical roots, roots that held it together as a geographical and political entity, going back to the early nineteenth century. The Nguyễn dynasty was the first and last unitary state model for post-colonial Vietnam, as it ruled three regions simultaneously. My discussion of the nineteenth-century polity may provide clues to understanding aspects of contemporary Vietnam that involve center versus local interactions and tensions.

My main primary sources can be divided into three categories: documents compiled by the central court; individual observations of southern Vietnam during the first half of the nineteenth century by either foreigners or Vietnamese from other regions; and the southerners' own records, such as family histories, land trade bills, tenant contracts, and wills. I aim to draw a picture of southern Vietnam using these sources, written by a range of people, from court officials to remote southern villagers. Let me introduce some of these sources according to the above three categories.

*Đại Nam Thực Lục* is a basic source for my research. This official chronicle was compiled by court officials during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It contains substantial evidence related to my concerns. *Đại Nam Thực Lục* consists of *Tiền Biên* (earlier period, 1558-1777, 12 volumes), and *Chính Biên* (main period, 1778-1888, 441 volumes). The latter is further subdivided into five periods, each associated with the reign of a king: Nguyễn Phúc Ánh<sup>14</sup> (1762-1820), later known as

<sup>14</sup>Inconsistency in writing Vietnamese names that have variations between south (Đàng Trong) and north (Đàng Ngoài) is unavoidable. Basically, I will follow current standard pronunciation. Therefore, I will choose Phúc, Nhân, Nhật, Sinh, Bảo, instead of Phước, Nhơn, Nhứt, Sanh, Bửu, for southern names in cases where names with these characters are found in documents written in Chinese. But I will also allow for popular usage. Today, northerners write the imperial title of the second Nguyễn emperor as Minh Mệnh. But I choose Minh Mạng,

Gia Long (1802-1820, 60 volumes); Minh Mạng (1820-1841, 220 volumes); Thiệu Trị (1841-1847, 72 volumes); Tự Đức (1848-1883, 70 volumes); Dục Đức-Hàm Nghi (1883-1885, 8 volumes); and Đồng Khánh (1885-1888, 11 volumes). The documentation regarding Minh Mạng, especially, is the most detailed and solid, and provides us with much evidence on social and economic matters, as well as the state's ideas and activities. One of the original copies of the *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, along with attached biographies of Nguyễn Vietnam's illustrious figures, collected in *Liệt Truyện*,<sup>15</sup> were brought to Japan in 1933 by a Japanese scholar, Matsumoto Nobuhiro, and were recompiled beginning in 1961 at Keio University. I am using a recompiled edition.

Many parts of the *Đại Nam Thực Lục* were based on *Châu Bản Triều Nguyễn* (Vermilion Records of the Nguyen Dynasty), which thus figures as a basic complementary source for my study.<sup>16</sup> Central government edicts, reports from local governments, and the suggestions of officials were collected here. As the *Châu Bản* are currently being held in Hanoi under the very strict control of the Vietnamese authorities, their full extent is not yet known. Unfortunately, I have not been allowed access to these archival documents. However, in 1996 some of the *Châu Bản* were rediscovered on microfilm in several libraries in the United States; they had been originally given as a gift by the Ngô Đình Diệm government to the Kennedy Administration. This microfilm copy of *Châu Bản* covers some periods of Gia Long and Minh Mạng, to 1837. In many cases, however, the microfilm is very difficult to read because the characters are too blurred and small. Because of this, I decided to concentrate on those sections most relevant to my research, that is, sections concerning the years 1836 and 1837, following the end of the southerners' revolt. The reports posted by Minh Mạng's officials from each province of southern Vietnam are more numerous and detailed than the earlier reports that reached the capital when southern Vietnam was ruled by Gia Định local leaders, who had decided many matters by themselves.

In the second category, individual records and reminiscences, my sources include Nguyễn Thu's *Hoàn Vũ Kỹ Văn* (Compendium on the [Vietnamese] world),<sup>17</sup> Doãn Uẩn's *Doãn Tướng Công Hoạn Tích* (Minister Doan's chronicle of office),<sup>18</sup> the collection of Phan Thanh Giản's works, *Lương Khê Văn Thảo* (Prose of Luong Khe in

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because he was more popularly known as Minh Mạng, not only in Vietnam but also overseas. If I can only find names from more recent texts, I will respect the names by which they are called. For example, Trần Thị Sanh was a woman who lived in Gò Công near Saigon during the nineteenth century, but I only encountered her name in twentieth-century writings. I can assume the letter "Sanh" is from the Chinese letter "Sinh," according to contemporary standard pronunciation. In this case, I will not change her name to "Trần Thị Sinh."

<sup>15</sup>The *Liệt Truyện* consist of *Tiền Biên* (1558-1777, 6 vols.) and also *Chính Biên* (1778-1888, 79 vols.). The first part (33 vols.) of *Chính Biên* describes figures who worked with Gia Long and died before Minh Mạng's enthronement in 1820, and the second part (46 vols.) includes the biographies of figures from the Minh Mạng reign.

<sup>16</sup>*Châu Bản Triều Nguyễn* (Vermilion Records of the Nguyen dynasty) (ANU Library, microfilm reels 60-64 [1836-1837]).

<sup>17</sup>Nguyễn Thu, *Hoàn Vũ Kỹ Văn* (Compendium on the [Vietnamese] world) (n.d. Hanoi: Viện Hán Nôm A 585).

<sup>18</sup>Doãn Uẩn, *Doãn Tướng Công Hoạn Tích* (or *Tuy Tĩnh Tử Tạp Ngôn*) (Minister Doan's chronicle of office, or Tuy Tinh Tu's miscellaneous notes) (1842. Hanoi: Viện Hán Nôm A 2177).

manuscript form), and *Luong Khê Thi Thảo* (Poetry of Luong Khe in manuscript form),<sup>19</sup> Trần Tân Gia's *Bà Tâm Huyền Kính Lục* (An account of compassionate hearts and hanging mirrors),<sup>20</sup> and Trương Quốc Dụng's *Thoái Thực Ký Văn* (After-dinner recollections).<sup>21</sup> Most of them relate the authors' experiences and observations in southern Vietnam. I read these documents in the Hán Nôm Institute in Hanoi. Added to these are the observations of foreigners such as: *Hải Nam Tạp Trứ* (Various records of the land beyond the southern ocean) written by a Chinese scholar, Ts'ai T'ing Lan, who lived in Vietnam in 1835;<sup>22</sup> the published letters of French missionaries; the observations of the American John White, who visited Vietnam in 1819-1820;<sup>23</sup> and the descriptions of John Crawfurd and George Finlayson during their stays in 1822.<sup>24</sup> Taken together, these various accounts help us better to understand Vietnam during the 1820s-30s.

I would also like to introduce a local document from southern Vietnam, *Trương Gia Từ Đường Thế Phả Toàn Tập* (Complete collection of the genealogy of the Trương family's ancestry) (*Trương Gia Thế Phả*, hereafter).<sup>25</sup> I read it in the Hán Nôm Institute in 1997. This collection contains extraordinarily substantial descriptions about a southern family based in a village near Saigon.<sup>26</sup> Compiled in 1886, it deals with seven generations, covering about two centuries, from the eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century. It describes each person in a way that illuminates southern society during this time: listing each person's occupation, marriage, details on his or her spouse, where each person lived, dates of birth and death (including children), the reason for death, and the place he/she was buried.

Six land trade bills (of 1830-1846), two wills (of 1818, 1857), and one landlord-tenant contract (of 1859) are attached as appendices to this book. These were written by ordinary village people, without the intervention of government officials, and therefore they significantly advance our understanding of southerners' actual practices relating to land ownership, land accumulation, customs of land clearance and trade, and property distribution, as well as the list of possessions, tax, tenant's rent, and so forth.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Phan Thanh Giản, *Luong Khê Thi Thảo* (Poetry of Luong Khe in manuscript form) (1876. Hanoi: Viện Hán Nôm VHv 151), and *Luong Khê Văn Thảo* (Prose of Luong Khe in manuscript form) (1876. Hanoi: Viện Hán Nôm A 2125).

<sup>20</sup>Trần Tân Gia, *Bà Tâm Huyền Kính Lục* (An account of compassionate hearts and hanging mirrors) (1897. Hanoi: Viện Hán Nôm A 2027).

<sup>21</sup>Trương Quốc Dụng, *Thoái Thực Ký Văn* (or *Công Ha Ký Văn*) (After-dinner recollections, or recollections beyond the office) (n.d. Hanoi: Viện Hán Nôm A 1499).

<sup>22</sup>Ts'ai T'ing Lan, *Hải Nam Tạp Trứ* (Various records of the land beyond the southern ocean) (1836. Hanoi: Viện Hán Nôm HVv 80).

<sup>23</sup> John White, *A Voyage to Cochinchina* (1824. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1972).

<sup>24</sup> John Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochinchina* (1828. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987) and George Finlayson, *The Mission to Siam and Hue, the Capital of Cochinchina, in the Years 1821-22* (1826. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>25</sup> *Trương Gia Từ Đường Thế Phả Toàn Tập* (Complete collection of the genealogy of the Trương family ancestry) (1886. Hanoi: Viện Hán Nôm A 3186).

<sup>26</sup> One member of this family was Trương Minh Giảng (1792-1841), the famous Nguyễn official who was in charge of governing Cambodia at the end of Minh Mạng's reign.

<sup>27</sup> I received copies of these documents from a southern scholar, Trương Ngọc Tường, during my fieldwork in 1997.

Additionally, I refer to a series of recent southern monographs, from *Bạc Liêu Xưa và Nay* (Bac Lieu, past and present), published in 1966, to *Gia Định Xưa và Nay* (Gia Dinh, past and present) appearing in 1973, all produced under the author's name of Huỳnh Minh.<sup>28</sup> Considering the vast size and numbers of these monographs, I think they were not written by this one author, but are the result of the collective work of anonymous southern scholars during that period. In my opinion, the content of these monographs is quite solid and reliable. Regarding the content of these books, I am especially interested in the legends, stories, and memories that were collected from southerners during the 1960-1970s. I believe this evidence can also be used to understand southern society of the previous century, as long as each work's content is confirmed by careful examination of the historical context.

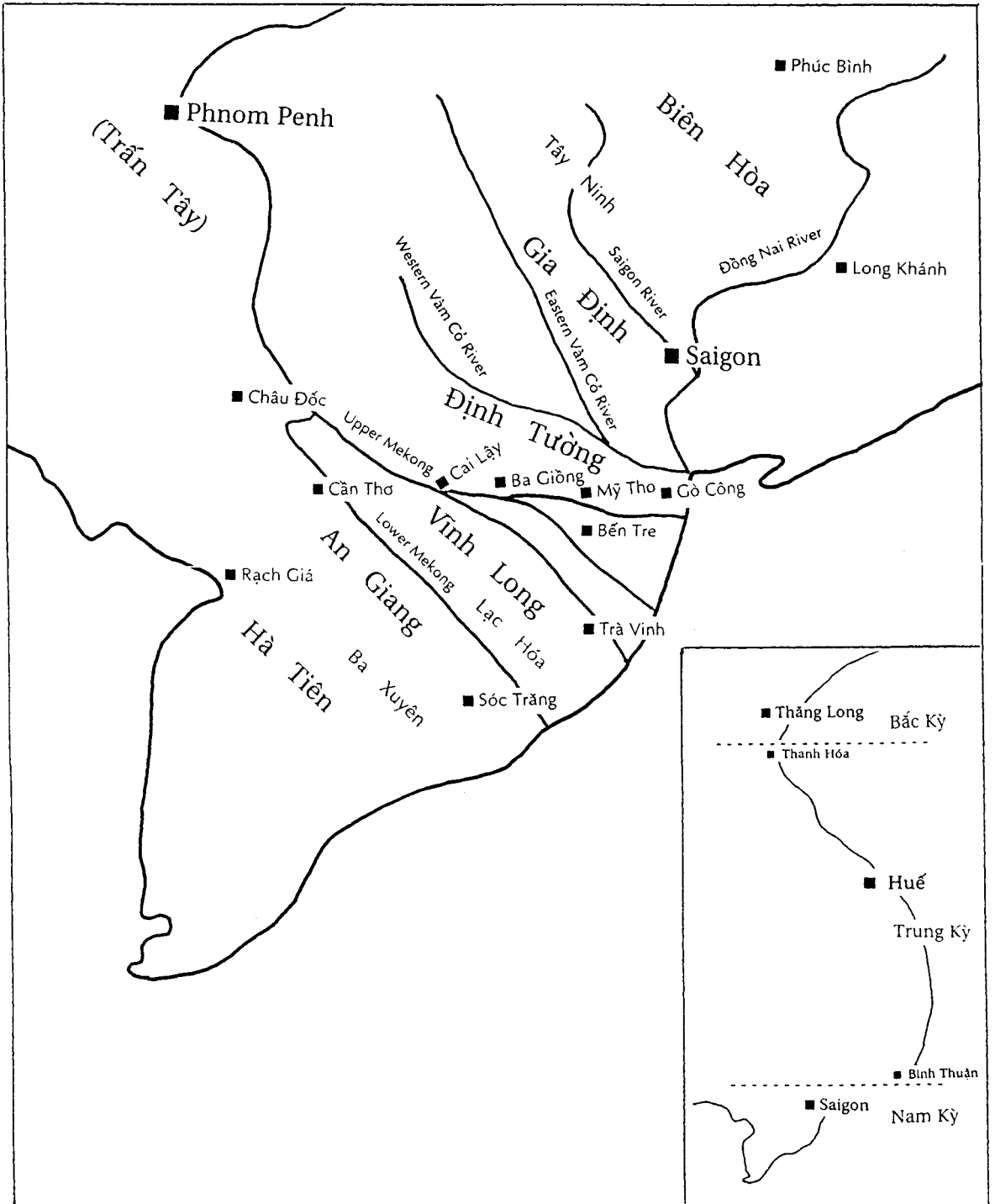
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<sup>28</sup>Huỳnh Minh, *Địa Linh Nhơn Kiệt, Tỉnh Kiến Hòa (Bến Tre)* (Land and people, Kien Hoa Province [Ben Tre]) (Saigon, 1965); *Bạc Liêu Xưa và Nay* (Bac Lieu, past and present) (Saigon, 1966); *Cần Thơ Xưa và Nay* (Can Tho, past and present) (Saigon, 1966); *Vĩnh Long Xưa và Nay* (Vinh Long, past and present) (Saigon, 1967); *Gò Công Xưa và Nay* (Go Cong, past and present) (Saigon, 1969); *Định Tường Xưa và Nay* (Dinh Tuong, past and present) (Saigon, 1969); *Sa Đéc Xưa và Nay* (Sa Dec, past and present) (Saigon, 1971); *Tây Ninh Xưa và Nay* (Tay Ninh, past and present) (Saigon, 1972); and *Gia Định Xưa và Nay* (Gia Dinh, past and present) (Saigon, 1973).

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PART I

LOCAL AUTHORITY AND ITS DEMISE



Southern Vietnam: 1840

## CHAPTER ONE

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# THE HERITAGE OF THE GIA ĐỊNH REGIME (1788-1802)

The purpose of this chapter is to consider several aspects of Gia Định prior to the nineteenth century, aspects which are directly related to my argument on nineteenth-century southern Vietnam. To achieve this goal, I will focus on a political organization, namely, the Gia Định regime formed by the initiative of the Gia Định people.

At this stage, this regime has not attracted any serious attention from researchers. This is because it has usually been located in Vietnamese history either at the end of the Nguyễn state (sixteenth through eighteenth centuries), or at the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasty.<sup>1</sup> However, the Gia Định regime obviously had its own features based on Gia Định culture, and understanding the regime will provide us with a clue to understanding nineteenth-century southern Vietnam.

This chapter begins with an overview of the Gia Định regime, which appeared toward the end of the eighteenth century, then focuses on two elements of that regime: relationships among its members and its ethnic diversity. These were the most significant characteristic elements of the regime, and it was these aspects that enabled this local regime to take over the entire territory of Vietnam. At the same time, however, internal relationships and ethnic diversity would also later become the main elements that caused serious friction between Gia Định and the central government during the first half of the nineteenth century.

### 1. THE FORMATION OF GIA ĐỊNH

#### *Gia Định and Its People*

The name of Gia Định<sup>2</sup> first occurred in the history of southern Vietnam in 1698. In that year, a *phủ*, or prefecture, called Gia Định was established to rule the

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<sup>1</sup> Cao Tự Thanh suggests the years of 1778-1802 should be considered as a separate period. See Cao Tự Thanh, *Nho Giáo ở Gia Định* (Confucianism in Gia Định) (Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1998), p. 48. But this period is only linked with the appearance of Nguyễn Phúc Ánh as the leader of the Nguyễn state army. He also occasionally uses the term “chính quyền Gia Định,” or Gia Định regime, in his discussion of this period, but his usage of this term is meant only to indicate broadly Nguyễn Phúc Ánh’s group.

<sup>2</sup> The origin of the name Gia Định has not been fully discovered. It is a combination of the Chinese characters “Gia” and “Định.” “Gia” means pretty or happy, while “Định” means to decide or to pacify. In northern Vietnam, before 1820, one district, one *tổng*, and one *xã*, were all called Gia Định, with the same Chinese characters. See, Dương Thị The et al., *Tên Làng Xã Việt Nam Đầu Thế Kỷ 19— thuộc các tỉnh từ Nghệ Tĩnh trở ra* (Names of Vietnamese villages in the

southern peripheral part of Nguyễn state around present-day Biên Hòa and Saigon. It was from this year, too, that the Nguyễn state mobilized peasants to build villages and organized the tax system of southern Vietnam.<sup>3</sup>

However, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that Gia Định began to represent the area that corresponds to present southern Vietnam, from Biên Hòa to Hà Tiên. The civil war between the Tây Sơn army and Nguyễn Phúc Ánh's force contributed to this development. In 1771, the Tây Sơn rebellion broke out at Bình Định, a part of the Nguyễn state. This rebellion resulted in a new and different political division of Vietnam. Until that time, for about two centuries, Vietnam had been divided into two parts, separated by the Gianh River in the present Quảng Bình province. Based in a traditional political center, Thăng Long, the Trịnh family had ruled northern Vietnam; territory to the south of the river had been ruled by the Nguyễn family. As the Tây Sơn rebellion grew, the Nguyễn territory was increasingly disrupted by internal turmoil and the Nguyễn king fled to Gia Định. Taking advantage of this, in 1775 the Trịnh army occupied Phú Xuân, the capital of the Nguyễn family state. In 1777, the Nguyễn state ended when its last king was captured and killed by the Tây Sơn army at Gia Định. A decade

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beginning of the nineteenth century—places belonging to each province from Nghe An and Ha Tinh northward) (Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1981), p. 278. Because the name of the Gia Định district caused it to be confused with Gia Định Thành, in 1820 the central government changed the name of the Gia Định district to the Gia Bình district. See Phan Thúc Trực, *Quốc Sử Di Biên* (A transmitted compilation of the state history, hereafter QSDB) (n. d. Hong Kong: New Asia Research Institute, 1965), p. 108. But there is no evidence that the Nguyễn state borrowed the name Gia Định from the north, if this name existed at that time, when it named southern Vietnam Gia Định in 1698.

In my opinion, the phrase “Gia Định” in the south not only had the Chinese meanings mentioned above, but also reflected the local word for this region, as did the word “Saigon.” “Saigon” represents the influence of the Khmer language. See Trần Văn Giàu et al., *Địa Chí Văn Hóa Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh* (Cultural gazetteer of Ho Chi Minh City), vol. 1 (Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1987), pp. 215-224. On the other hand, “Gia Định” also seems to be related to the Malay language, a real possibility if we remember that this region was crowded with Malay language speakers during the seventeenth century. See Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí* (Gia Định gazetteer) (hereafter GDTTC) (n.d. Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient microfilm A. 1561), 4:3. Besides, ethnic minorities belonging to the Malay language family existed in this region before Vietnamese came here. In southern pronunciation, *Gia* is close to *Ya*. In Malay, a word pronounced *ya* (or *ayer*) has the meaning of water, stream, or river. Bình Nguyên Lộc, “Việc mãi nô dưới vòm trời Đông Phố và chủ Đất thật của vùng Đông Nai” (Being slaves a long time under the sky of Dong Pho and the real owners of Dong Nai region), *Tập Sản Sử Địa* 19 and 20 (1970): 254. The Vietnamese may have borrowed the Malay pronunciation, or the Malay term, to invent a Chinese name, “Gia Định,” to indicate their new land, many parts of which were filled with water. There is another possibility. Professor Anthony Johns suggests we consider the Malay words *dingin* or *hering*, which mean “cool or cold,” and “clean or clear,” respectively, as they have a pronunciation close to *Định* (from a discussion at the ANU in February 1999). If we remember the rivers in this region such as the Đồng Nai River, the Saigon River, and the Western and Eastern Vàm Cỏ Rivers, which are obviously clearer than the Mekong River, we cannot rule out the possibility that the Vietnamese name, “Gia Định,” had to do with the relatively clear (and therefore cool looking) rivers in this region. Or, if we combine these theories, we might suggest that that the name “Gia Định” came from a local name “*Ya* (or *Ayer*) *Dingin* (or *Hering*)” with the meaning of “clear (clean, cool, or cold) water (streams, or rivers).”

<sup>3</sup> *Đại Nam Thực Lục Tiền-Biên* (Primary compilation of the Veritable Records of Imperial Vietnam, premier period) (hereafter TB) (1844. Tokyo: Keio Institute of Linguistic Studies, 1961), 7: 14.

later, in 1786, in northern Vietnam, the Tây Sơn also removed the Trịnh family from power. Shortly after, the Tây Sơn general, Nguyễn Huệ, overthrew the Lê dynasty (fifteenth through eighteenth centuries) that had nominally existed under the regentship of the Trịnh family since the sixteenth century. Ch'ing China intervened in this internal disorder in 1788, but Tây Sơn forces succeeded in repulsing the Ch'ing troops from northern Vietnam in 1789. With this victory over the Chinese troops, the Tây Sơn were able to claim exclusive rule not only in the former territory of the Nguyễn family, but also in the territory of the Trịnh family.

But, at the same time, a solid faction led by Nguyễn Phúc Ánh (1762-1820), a prince of the Nguyễn state, later to become king Gia Long (1802-1820), appeared in Gia Định. With the emergence of this faction, Vietnam was divided again: the Tây Sơn held the northern and central regions of Vietnam; and Nguyễn Phúc Ánh controlled territory in Gia Định. This territorial division marked the emergence of Gia Định as a politically independent unit.<sup>4</sup>

### *Gia Định, the Territory of a Regime*

In 1788, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh finally settled in the region around Saigon, after a series of failed attempts to make a bridgehead on southern Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> From this year, Gia Định was regarded as one unit that had resisted inclusion into Tây Sơn territory, and it was from this time that names such as "Gia Định people," "Gia Định soldiers," "Gia Định land," and so forth, began to appear in the history of Vietnam. Nguyễn Phúc Ánh's party changed itself from a mobile military group to a regime with a solid power base in Saigon. One of the significant political actions taken by the regime was the mobilization of civil officials. Disciples of a prominent Gia Định scholar, Võ Trường Toản, participated in Nguyễn Phúc Ánh's party and contributed to the establishment of a new regime.<sup>6</sup> In 1788, the king created Công Đồng Thử, the Council of High Officials, consisting of civil and military subjects.<sup>7</sup> A six-ministry system was formed by this regime.<sup>8</sup> Local

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<sup>4</sup> In relation to this point, Keith Taylor correctly argues that "Nguyễn Phúc Ánh was the first person to organize Nam Bộ as a region capable of participating successfully in war and politics among Vietnamese speakers." And southern Vietnam was "another Vietnamese speaking surface that began to compete for ascendancy with all the other places inhabited by speakers of the Vietnamese language." Keith Taylor, "Surface Orientations in Vietnam," pp. 966-67.

<sup>5</sup> The Nguyễn dynasty court chronicle claims Nguyễn Phúc Ánh became the Nguyễn state leader in 1778, and took the throne at Saigon in 1780. By 1781, however, he was only a nominal leader under the real power holder, Đỗ Thanh Nhân. Next year, Saigon was occupied by the Tây Sơn. Nguyễn Phúc Ánh was chased by the Tây Sơn army and had no stable power base until 1784, when he left southern Vietnam to take refuge in Bangkok. He came back to Gia Định in that same year with Siamese soldiers, but he was forced to retreat to Bangkok again after his forces, along with the Siamese soldiers, were defeated by the Tây Sơn army. He stayed at Bangkok for three years, until 1788.

<sup>6</sup> *Đại Nam Thực Lục Chính-Biên Đệ Nhất Ký* (Primary compilation of the Veritable Records of the first reign of Imperial Vietnam) (hereafter *DNTL1*) (1848. Tokyo: The Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, Keio University, 1968), 3:20a. They included Lê Quang Định, Phạm Đăng Hưng, Trịnh Hoài Đức, Ngô Tông Châu, and Ngô Nhân Tĩnh.

<sup>7</sup> *DNTL1*, 3:16a. Công Đồng Thử existed during Gia Long's reign (1802-1820) and played almost the same role as Cơ Mật Viện would play later. See *Mục Lục Châu Bản Triều Nguyễn* (Vermilion Record abstracts of the Nguyen Dynasty), vol. 1 (Hue: Hue University, 1960), p. XXXIII.

officials were appointed from 1788,<sup>9</sup> and the head of each commune, or *xã*, was appointed by the regime in the next year.<sup>10</sup> The tax system was organized to insure stable revenue under the command of the civil officials.<sup>11</sup> From 1788, regulations held that half the male population of Gia Định was to be mobilized as soldiers.<sup>12</sup> *Đồn điền*, or military plantations, were formed in 1790 to muster and train not only Vietnamese, but also Chinese settlers and Khmer people.<sup>13</sup> The Gia Định citadel was constructed as a royal residence in the form of Eight Trigrams in 1789; the “royal palace was located in the middle of this citadel”; and the area around this citadel was called “the capital of Gia Định (*Kinh Gia Định*).”<sup>14</sup>

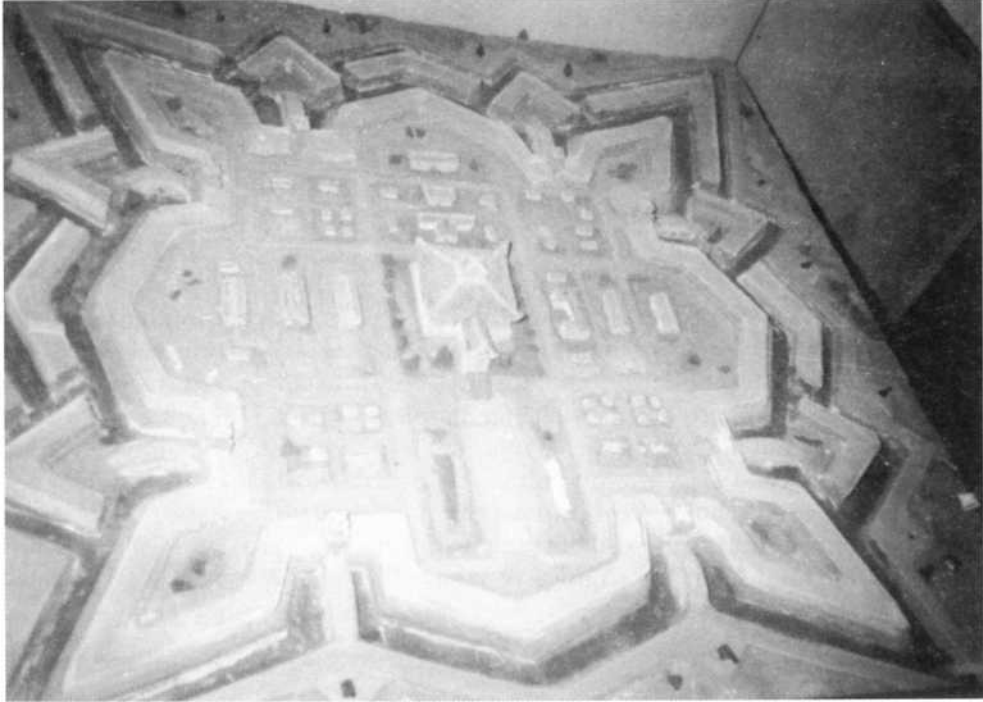


Plate 1. Miniature of the Gia Định citadel in the Saigon National Museum .This very important and valuable miniature shows part of the real structure of the citadel. Credit: the author, 1994.

In fact, during this period Nguyễn Phúc Ánh’s defined territory was not restricted to Biên Hòa and the region to its southwest. It included Bình Thuận, Khánh Hòa, and Phú Yên regions to the north, but all of these were more loosely

<sup>8</sup> *Đại Nam Chính-Biên Liệt Truyện Sơ Tập* (First collection of the primary compilation of biographies of Imperial Vietnam) (hereafter *LTST*) (1889. Tokyo: Keio Institute of Linguistic Studies, 1962), 11:4b.

<sup>9</sup> *DNTLL*, 3:15b.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:34b.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:21b.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:6a; 5:15a.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:31a-32a.

bound to the central government for one reason or another. The Bình Thuận region was mainly inhabited by the Cham minority at that time, and the other two regions had value only in terms of military operations. Gia Định soldiers hardly had a chance to contact people occupying land beyond the region of Biên Hòa because many of their military operations were not carried out on land, but on the sea. The core region of Nguyễn Phúc Ánh's territory was therefore limited to southern Vietnam. Though Gia Định soldiers occasionally encroached on the regions of Khánh Hòa and Phú Yên, the permanent base of Nguyễn Phúc Ánh's power was concentrated in the region from Biên Hòa to the west.

Nguyễn Phúc Ánh had good reason to restrict his territory to the region of Gia Định: he wished to keep control of its rice. Before he got an opportunity to strike a decisive blow at the Tây Sơn, he never extended his territory beyond Gia Định. Although it was a fertile land, the rice production of Gia Định was not always sufficient to enable Nguyễn Phúc Ánh to feed the population northeast of Biên Hòa. When a suggestion to occupy the region of Bình Thuận was raised in 1792, it was immediately vetoed by Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, for reasons that had to do with the rice supply. According to him, "military operations should be based on the provisions which are located on the enemy side. Now northwards from Bình Thuận the region suffers from annual famines. What will be the benefit in taking it?"<sup>15</sup>

In addition, Gia Định was directly connected with Cambodia and Siam, from which it obtained continuous support as long as diplomatic relations were well maintained. Furthermore, the sea-route around Gia Định provided access to the regions around the Straits of Malacca, where Western military materials were purchased. From 1788, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh started to send missions to this region.<sup>16</sup>

The people of Gia Định were identified as southerners by the Tây Sơn force, too. The southern part of Vietnam was also known as Đồng Nai. A nineteenth-century geographic description reveals the root of the name Đồng Nai: "When Vietnamese reached this region, only herds of deer had lived here before. Thus this land was called Đồng Nai, or the plain [Đồng] of deer [Nai]."<sup>17</sup> Before the name "Gia Định" became popular, the name of Đồng Nai seems to have normally been used in Vietnam and overseas as well<sup>18</sup> to indicate the whole southern area. Gia Định soldiers were usually called Đồng Nai soldiers by Tây Sơn soldiers.<sup>19</sup>

Whether called by the name of Đồng Nai or Gia Định, southern Vietnam from Biên Hòa to Hà Tiên<sup>20</sup> began to be recognized and identified as one polity from the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 6:8b.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 3:17b.

<sup>17</sup> Nguyễn Thu, *Hoàn Vũ Ký Văn* (Compendium on the [Vietnamese] world) (n. d. Hanoi: Viện Hán Nôm A 585) vol. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Southern Vietnam was identified as the land of Đồng Nai by the Chinese court as well. See *Ch'ing Shih Kao Hsiao Chu* (Outline history of the Ch'ing, with annotations) (Taipei: Kuo Shih Kuan, 1990), p. 12103. This identification was adopted by another neighbouring country. To Korean officials during the middle of the nineteenth century, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh was known as "the prince of Dong Nai, or Nong Nai principality" before he beat the Tây Sơn army. Ch'oe Sang Su, *Han'gukkoa Weolnamgoaeui Kwan'gye* (Relations between Korea and Vietnam (Seoul: Hanweolhyeophoe, 1966), p. 150

<sup>19</sup> DNTL1 10:37.

<sup>20</sup> From 1707, Hà Tiên became a part of the Nguyễn state due to the submission of Mạc Cửu. But it was treated as a semi-autonomous region ruled by Chinese rulers, the Mạc family. During