

## THE BEGINNING OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AMERICA AND VIETNAM: HISTORICAL LESSONS

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America is a powerful nation whose potentials and international influence are so great that every country, in its policy making process, has to take America and its relationship with America as a factor into consideration. Under the current rapid and highly intensive but extremely complex internationalization and globalization, there exists an idea that there is a danger of identifying Globalization with Americanization. This poses a serious problem to us – scholars in East Asia, a region with different cultural traditions from others – to think over and exchange ideas to find out the best solutions that can both cope with the common trend and bring into play the advantages of the traditional cultural values. Looking back over the first contacts between America and Vietnam is not only meaningful to historians but also useful to the current as well as the future knowledge. In this article, an attempt is made to look objectively at the nature of the first contacts between Vietnam and America so as to draw some historical lessons. Hopefully, what will be discussed below will, more or less, assist our thoughts in the current complex changing world.

### 1. The First Contacts between Vietnam and America

According to the extant documents in America, in July 1787, Thomas Jefferson, then representative of the United States of America in France wrote a letter to his

native country, in which he expressed a special concern about the information given by Pierre Poivre about agriculture in the South of Vietnam. He asked a son of Nguyen Anh (who later became King Gia Long), Prince Canh, who was in France then to get him some Vietnamese rice seeds [6]. This can be regarded as the earliest information about the concern about Vietnam of the Americans.

In 1801 Thomas Jefferson was elected the third president of the United States of America. It has remained a wonder why a year after Jefferson was in power, a commercial ship named *Frame* captained by Jeremiah Brigg was sent to Vietnam to collect information and study sugar and coffee supplying sources for the American market.

The *Frame* landed Da Nang port on May 21<sup>st</sup> 1803. Here Captain Brigg met two warships of the Nguyen dynasty's navy conducted by the French. They advised Brigg to go to Hue to have a formal interview with King Gia Long. However, the American captain then was arranged to meet with the representative of the Nguyen dynasty, a few clergymen, and French navy's officers who were under King Gia Long. After obtaining some information, the *Frame* left Vietnam for Manila on June 10<sup>th</sup> 1803. It was the first American ship to arrive in Vietnam [4, p.3]. This event is mentioned in the Vietnamese historical documents. [1, V.3, pp134, 193].

It was not until 16 years later that the second American ship arrived in Vietnam.

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It was the *Franklin* conducted by Captain John White. The Ship arrived in Vung Tau port on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1819. J. White had a meeting with local officials and they promised to issue him permits to enter Saigon. Yet the captain waited without replies. A local official said that foreign ships needed permission from the dynasty to enter Saigon. Thus, J. White made a decision to go to Hue to have a direct formal talk with the King. Unfortunately, King Gia Long was then on holiday in the northern part of Vietnam (Bac Ha) so J. White's plan was not successful. The captain decided to leave for Manila with the hope to find an interpreter then returned to Vietnam.

After the arrival of the *Franklin*, there were three more American ships (the *Marmion*, the *Aurora* and the *Beverly*) to call at Vung Tau and Da Nang ports, yet none of them managed to achieve their trade aims. These ships one after another left for Manila and met J. White there. After an interpreter was found, L. White asked Captain John Brown to together steer the *Marmion* back to Vietnam. The two American ships arrived in Vung Tau port on September 25<sup>th</sup> 1819. This time J. White was given permits to enter Saigon. After collecting some goods, most of which were sugar and raw silk, the two ships left Saigon port on January 30<sup>th</sup> 1820. J. White arrived in Salem on August 30<sup>th</sup> 1820, after a twenty-month voyage.

J. White wrote a book entitled *A Voyage to Cochin China* published in Boston in 1823. The book had a great influence on the attitudes of Americans, particularly those of the American businessmen towards Vietnam. Apart from the vivid and detailed descriptions which are of documental value about various aspects of life, which helped readers have

part of the picture of Vietnam and its people in early 19<sup>th</sup> century, J. White provided some comments that discouraged Americans who had intentions to seek for business opportunities in this distant land.

J. White appraised: "*During the time I was in this country, all that I learnt about it were villainy and turpitude. They completely lacked honesty so they often tried to play tricks on us and were experts on finding tricks to hide their responsibilities. They can easily get all these with our open attitude and serious way of doing business. All serious business affairs were, in the end, trifling things. There was not any insurance to every affair, except for documentary contracts, which were hardly ever had. They dared to use any tricks to swindle businessmen who get them annoyed for money. Apart from these, the authorities' greediness, shiftiness, cruelty, and anti-commercial character should drive this land to be the least attractive place, even for the most adventurous businessmen...*" [3].

Afterwards, a French who read the book suggested that J. White judged the local people with the view of a Rigid Puritan and never asked himself how he had behaved to them.

## **2. Diplomatic Efforts to Set up Trade Relation**

It is likely that in the early days the concern of the Americans about Vietnam was greater than that of Nguyen dynasty about them. Under the Gia Long regime (1802-1820), the dynasty had many relations with the West, especially with France so the presence of the American ships had not drawn attention so far. Moreover, the lack of local customs made the Americans suspect of the local people and authorities.

Although Brigg and J. White's mission in investigating the possibilities of establishing trade relations with Vietnam might be considered a failure, the US representative agency in Batavia had a different view. In 1826, the American Envoy John Shillaber sent a letter to the native country to recommend greater expansion of the activities of trade ships in Atlantic countries, which included Cochin China (the South of Vietnam). J. White sent a number of letters persuading the then American President to delegate him powers in negotiating trade agreements. The efforts made by the Envoy were successful after Andrew Jackson was elected president of the United States in 1829. A delegation led by Edmund Roberts, which was directly sent by the President, brought the trade agreement across the Indian Ocean to Vietnam to sign with the Nguyen dynasty. The warship Peacock carried the delegation to Vung Lam (a place in Phu Yen) at the beginning of January 1832. Representatives of the local authorities went up to the ship and asked carefully about the Americans' intention. After a ten-day's waiting, on January 17<sup>th</sup>, the dynasty sent two mandarins and an escort there to negotiate with Edmund Roberts, yet after many days of discussion it was still impossible for both sides to sign the agreement. Edmund Roberts assumed that the Nguyen dynasty was fully responsible for the failure. According to him, the diplomatic procedures were far too complicated. Besides, senior officials of the dynasty did not have clear ideas and usually evaded direct questions from the American partner. The Vietnamese officials then were too hesitant and cautious and always showed their suspicion. The major reason for the disagreement of the Nguyen dynasty was, at last, the documentary problems. They said that the words in the

proposal did not comply with the essential formulas of veneration towards the King of Vietnam. They even questioned the partner and after being explained that the US President was the one who was elected by the people, they concluded that the American President was not on the same rank or hierarchy with the Vietnamese King [2]...

History has shown us that the two mandarins sent by the Nguyen dynasty to negotiate with Edmund Roberts were Nguyen Tri Phuong and Ly Van Phuc. After listening to the proposal and the credential from the US President, they considered it inappropriate then, and without submitting to the King, they replied that the Vietnamese King would not prohibit the trading activities unless these obeyed the defined law of the country. So the American ships had to anchor at Tra Son bay (Da Nang) and were not allowed to build houses on land. Edmund's delegation left Vietnam after receiving the note [1, volume 11, p. 231].

According to the letter of Joseph Baslestier, the American Envoy to Singapore to Forsyth, the secretary at the President's office provided different information. According to the news source which Joseph Baslestier considered reliable, the reason for the American failure in signing the trade agreement with Vietnam was that the letter was sent to the King too late. After receiving the letter, King Minh Mang invited the delegation and the crew of the Peacock to Hue but by the time the letter arrived at the port, Edmund Roberts' ship had already left.

Perhaps Joseph Baslestier thought his assessment was right so as soon as he was appointed the Envoy to Singapore, he tried to persuade the President to continue the

negotiation to sign the trade agreement with Vietnam. Edmund Roberts again was assigned with the mission. Edmund Roberts's delegation arrived in Tra Son bay on May 15<sup>th</sup> 1836. Again trouble happened. Soon after arriving in Vietnam, Edmund Roberts was seriously ill so when the representative of the Nguyen dynasty arrived he was not able to receive them. The Nguyen dynasty's officials considered it an offense. On the other hand, the American delegation asked the partner to reply to President Andrew Jackson within three days but the Hue dynasty could not manage it as good interpreters were away on business.

The result of the second negotiation was the same as the first one. The trade agreement remained unsigned.

### **3. The *Constitution Destroyer* Event**

While the American Envoy to Singapore Joseph Baslestier was finding solutions to the problems of signing the trade agreement with the Nguyen dynasty, a regretful event happened which strongly affected the relation between the two countries. The American *Constitution Destroyer* steered by John Percival stopped by Da Nang bay to buy food and drinking water on May 14<sup>th</sup> 1845 when they met local guards who were tracing for a French priest. John Percival promulgated to attack the guards to rescue the priest. The mandarins assigned by the dynasty to solve the case were detained as hostages [4, p.47]. According to historical documents, the event happened in 1844 and the two mandarins were diplomats Nguyen Long and Viceroy Nguyen Dang Giai [1, volume 25, p. 282]. After that, the relation between the Nguyen dynasty and America became intensive. President Zachary Taylor immediately sent Baslestier as special Envoy to deal with the case and to

promote negotiation for signing the trade agreement. Baslestier's delegation arrived in Da Nang on March 13<sup>th</sup> 1850. The person in charged of receiving the delegation was Quang Nam's provincial mandarin. According to Baslestier's report, the Vietnamese mandarin refused to receive the American President's letter as the President allowed his navy to kill Vietnamese people right in Vietnamese land. Baslestier warned the mandarin that his refusal to receive the letter would be an offence to the US President, yet he kept his attitude unchanged. The talk lasted for three hours. Baslestier waited for three more days to see if his partner would show any commotion, but nothing happened. The American delegation left Da Nang for Thailand on March 16<sup>th</sup> [5]. Vietnamese historical documents describe the visit by Baslestier's delegation as a kind of expressing apology for what the American warship had done five years before. Since this event, there had been almost no official American delegations to Vietnam.

### **4. Bui Vien's Visit to America**

In 1858, French navy opened fire to attack Da Nang port, marking the beginning of the French conquest of Vietnam by force. The Nguyen dynasty did not manage to fight against the invader. Many major areas were occupied by the French. Many solutions were suggested to save the situation, one of which was to seek assistance from powerful nations. The US, with its anti-colonialism policy, was considered to be a nation that could help Vietnam then. The Nguyen dynasty sent Bui Vien to the US in 1873 to ask for help. Bui Vien first went to the US consulate in Hong Kong and there he was welcomed by the representative of the US. Making use of this advantage, Bui Vien went straight to Yokohama then to America. Thanks to many friends' help, he was able to meet

President Simpson Grant. The President supported Vietnam's fight against colonialism, yet he could not promise anything as Bui Vien did not bring with him an official credential then. Bui Vien decided to return to Vietnam to ask for the credential, but then we knew the US government had changed their view. Close relationship with the French would bring more benefits to the US, which meant that they could not assist Vietnam to fight against French colonialism.

### 5. Historical Lessons

It can be inferred from the above-mentioned events that the relationship between the US and Vietnam had a positive beginning, starting with Thomas Jefferson's interest in Vietnam, the land that before that had been almost unknown to the American. The US government then, being attracted by the trade potential in Cochin China and through the activities of the US's embassy in Singapore, had active steps in establishing trade relation with Vietnam.

However, the differences in culture and customs were a big barrier preventing the relationship with the US and Vietnam from developing. Despite the fact that the US had made considerable efforts in establishing the relationship, it lacked understanding and patience which were of

necessity in negotiating with the Nguyen dynasty. The event of the *Destroyer Constitution* attacking the Nguyen dynasty's guards and detaining the governors as hostages made the dynasty's trust in the Americans, which was very little, become even less.

On the part of the Nguyen dynasty, the understanding about the US was almost nothing until the French attacked Da Nang (1858). The Kings often considered themselves civilized people and the American savage ones. They even did not show interest in their proposals. The mandarins often thought of the Americans as "cunning, machiavellian" so their reaction was very cautious.

Under difficulties because of continuous losses in fighting against the French colonialism, the Nguyen dynasty gradually took on more practical views, they even wanted to seek assistance from the US, but the possibility of establishing a friendly relation between the two countries had already gone.

The biggest historical lesson which can be drawn from the first contacts between Vietnam and the US is to give first priority to mutual understanding and to patiently find solutions to the disagreements and misunderstandings. Until this day, this historical lesson still remains valid.

### REFERENCES

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