

The Role of the Hue Court in Shaping Relations with Siam During the Minh Mang Reign

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Abstract:

This article analyzes the pivotal role of the Hue Court in shaping and adjusting relations with Siam during the reign of Emperor Minh Mang (1820 - 1840). In the early stage, the Hue Court maintained a policy of amicable diplomacy, evidenced by its refusal of anti-Siamese alliances and the provision of relief to distressed Siamese fishermen. However, confronted with the Chakri Dynasty's "eastward expansion" in the buffer zones of Laos and Cambodia, Emperor Minh Mang shifted from neutral diplomacy to a more pragmatic and assertive policy. The Court's resolute protection of influence in Cambodia aimed not only to affirm its regional superpower status but also to transform this territory into a strategic "security shield" for Southern Vietnam (Nam Ky). The research findings clarify the Hue Court's diplomatic artistry of "knowing oneself and others," combining flexibility with firmness to safeguard national sovereignty amidst the complex geopolitical landscape of 19th-century Southeast Asia.

Keywords: *Hue Court, Minh Mang, Vietnam - Siam Relations, Cambodia, Geopolitics.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the historical trajectory of 19th-century Southeast Asia, the relationship between the Nguyen Dynasty of Vietnam and the Chakri Dynasty of Siam played a pivotal role, profoundly influencing the geopolitical landscape of the Mekong sub-region. Following national unification in 1802, the Nguyen Dynasty concentrated not only on consolidating domestic governance but also on establishing its status as a regional power through a complex diplomatic system. According to Nguyen Van Luan (2024), although Vietnam-Siam relations were established later than those with other neighbors, they were decisive for the stability and security of both kingdoms amidst the encroaching shadows of Western colonialism.

During the reign of Emperor Minh Mang (1820–1840), the role of the Hue Court in shaping relations with Siam became more distinct and assertive than ever before. Diverging from the prior policy of prioritizing amity and concessions favored by Emperor Gia Long, Minh Mang implemented a pragmatic foreign policy, with national interest and border security as its guiding principles. Dinh Thi Dung (2001) observes that while Minh Mang initially maintained traditional diplomatic rites, his firmness in managing buffer zones caused the relationship to gradually shift from dialogue to confrontation.

The focal point of this competition lay in the suzerainty over Cambodia and Laos. Both Hue and Bangkok

viewed these states as essential security "shields." Nguyen Van Luan (2017) points out that the Nguyen Dynasty's efforts to exert influence in Cambodia were driven not merely by economic potential but primarily to halt Siam's "eastward expansion" and protect Southern Vietnam (Nam Ky) from invasion. The Hue Court's deep intervention in Cambodian internal affairs, while triggering military tensions that peaked in 1833, ultimately affirmed the sovereign will of an independent nation.

Despite these conflicts, the Hue Court under Minh Mang still demonstrated flexible diplomatic artistry. Records from the Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen (1993) reveal that Emperor Minh Mang proactively informed Siam of a Burmese proposal for an anti-Siamese alliance to uphold the principle of "not abandoning an old friend to create a new enemy". This illustrates the complex coordinating role of the Hue Court: resolutely defending sovereignty while striving to maintain a stable regional order through formal diplomatic channels.

Researching the role of the Hue Court during the Minh Mang era not only helps reconstruct the historical tapestry of a heroic period for the nation but also yields valuable lessons in border management and the balance of power. As Luu Van Loi (2007) emphasizes, the diplomatic flexibility of our ancestors serves as a vital precedent for modern foreign affairs in safeguarding territorial integrity and regional peace.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between the Hue Court and the Kingdom of Siam during the 19th century has been a subject of significant interest for scholars both domestically and internationally, as it formed the axis that profoundly influenced the geopolitical landscape of mainland Southeast Asia. Through the review process, existing literature can be categorized into three main groups: primary historical records, specialized diplomatic studies, and research on economics and trade.

First and foremost, the official chronicles of the Nguyen Dynasty's Royal Historical Bureau serve as the most foundational source. Works such as *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* (Veritable Records of the Great South) and *Dai Nam Liet Truyen* (Biographies of the Great South) provide detailed chronological accounts of diplomatic activities, ranging from the exchange of embassies to military conflicts in buffer zones. Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen (2005) meticulously documents Emperor Minh Mang's policies, from the initial maintenance of "neighborly amity" to the shift toward direct confrontation to safeguard interests in Cambodia.

From a specialized research perspective, the dissertation by Dinh Thi Dung (2001) on Nguyen Dynasty diplomacy in the first half of the 19th century offers a profound analysis of foreign strategies and Vietnam's status relative to neighboring nations. The author clarifies that under Minh Mang, the Hue Court implemented a more pragmatic and assertive diplomatic line compared to the Gia Long era. Continuing this line of inquiry, Nguyen Van Luan (2024) in the dissertation "Vietnam-Siam Relations in the 19th Century" reconstructs the overall political, military, and economic picture while emphasizing the Hue Court's role in transforming Cambodia and Laos into national security "shields".

Regarding geopolitical and cultural aspects, the work of Tran Trong Kim (1971) provides insights into the social factors and shared cultural values affecting interactions between the two nations. The author points out that despite differences in lifestyle, regional commonalities drove both sides toward both cooperation and fierce competition. Additionally, legal documents and diplomatic commitments were elucidated by Luu Van Loi (2007) through the analysis of diplomatic charters and contracts. This study confirms the importance of official documents in establishing the system of rights between Hue and Bangkok.

Finally, the economic dimension and regional power interactions are also highlighted. According to Nguyen Van Luan (2010), trade relations between Inner Vietnam (Dang Trong) and Siam since the 17th century laid the groundwork for complex developments in the 19th

century. The exchange of goods not only brought economic benefits but also served as a vital information channel helping the Hue Court shape its foreign policy decisions. Overall, while many studies exist, in-depth analysis focusing specifically on the proactive role and diplomatic artistry of the Hue Court under Minh Mang remains an area needing further supplementation to complete this historical tapestry.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Researching the role of the Hue Court in shaping relations with Siam during the Minh Mang era requires a multidimensional theoretical system, combining geopolitics, realism, and traditional codes of conduct within the East Asian hierarchical order.

Firstly, Realism in international relations provides the foundation for explaining the behavioral motivations of the Hue Court. According to this doctrine, states consistently prioritize national interests and security within an anarchic international system. Nguyen Van Luan (2024) observes that, after national unification, the Nguyen Dynasty under Minh Mang swiftly established itself as a regional power, refusing to remain subordinate to the expansionism of the Chakri Dynasty. The shift from the amicable policy of the Gia Long era to direct confrontation under Minh Mang exemplifies the effort to maintain a balance of power to prevent Siamese hegemony in the Mekong region.

Secondly, Geopolitical Theory plays a crucial role in defining spheres of influence. The concept of a "security shield" was thoroughly applied by the Hue Court through the establishment of protectorates in Cambodia and Laos. Dinh Thi Dung (2001) points out that controlling these buffer zones was not merely territorial expansion but essentially a strategy of "defense from afar," providing direct protection for Southern Vietnam (Nam Ky). The Hue Court under Minh Mang was acutely aware that if Siam were allowed to monopolize Cambodia, the security of the Southwestern borders would be gravely threatened.

Thirdly, the East Asian Tributary System serves as the socio-political framework governing diplomatic protocols. While Vietnam acknowledged Chinese superiority in "tributary" relations, within the region, the Hue Court established its own status as the "Son of Heaven" (Thien Tu) towards smaller states. Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen (2005) demonstrates that Emperor Minh Mang flexibly utilized investiture and tribute rituals to affirm his legitimacy and supreme authority over vassals, thereby exerting direct diplomatic pressure on Siam.

Fourthly, the Art of Pragmatic and Multilateral Diplomacy is illustrated by the principle of "knowing

oneself and others." According to Luu Van Loi (2007), the diplomatic charters and commitments of this period were not merely compromises but the outcome of intense power struggles, wherein the Hue Court consistently strove to preserve national prestige and its paramount interests. Minh Mang's refusal to join anti-Siamese alliances proposed by external powers to avoid "creating new enemies" underscores his strategic lucidity.

Finally, factors of economic and military capacity serve as supporting instruments for this framework. Nguyen Van Luan (2010) asserts that the strength of the naval forces and the development of trade in Inner Vietnam (Dang Trong) instilled confidence in the Hue Court when facing demands from Bangkok. In summary, a theoretical framework based on the intersection of military prowess, geopolitical positioning, and pragmatic diplomatic thinking is the key to decyphering the Hue Court's role in shaping Vietnam-Siam relations under Minh Mang.

IV. METHODOLOGY

To address the research objectives regarding the role of the Hue Court in relations with Siam during the Minh Mang reign, this article employs a multi-disciplinary historical methodological system, in which the historical method and logical method play the primary roles. The historical method allows for the reconstruction of diplomatic events in chronological order, while the logical method facilitates the analysis of the nature and strategic shifts in the Hue Court's foreign policy thinking.

The core data source used is the official historical records of the Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen (2002), particularly the *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* (Veritable Records of the Great South) and the *Kham Dinh Dai Nam Hoi Dien Su Le*. These are regulatory texts that accurately record Emperor Minh Mang's edicts sent to ministries and embassies, as well as battlefield reports from generals in buffer zones. According to Nguyen Van Luan (2024), the thorough exploitation of these primary sources helps to clearly identify the consistency and resoluteness in the Nguyen Dynasty's policy of protecting Southwestern border sovereignty.

Furthermore, the study applies the systemic analysis method and the historical comparative method. This approach situates Vietnam-Siam relations within the broader geopolitical context of Southeast Asia and in correlation with the foreign policy of the Chakri Dynasty. Dinh Thi Dung (2001) asserts that by comparing policies between the Gia Long and Minh Mang eras, one can clearly observe the transition from a

trend of concession to one of pragmatism and power counterbalance.

Finally, the article performs a synthesis and cross-verification of materials from modern research works. According to Luu Van Loi (2007), cross-referencing Nguyen Dynasty historical records with regional diplomatic studies provides a multidimensional and objective perspective, avoiding bias in evaluating the Hue Court's decisions. This process ensures the authenticity and scientific rigor of the assessments regarding Emperor Minh Mang's diplomatic artistry and his role in shaping the regional order.

V. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

5.1. The inheritance and adjustment of foreign policy from Gia Long to Minh Mang

5.1.1. Inheritance in the Early Stage: Stability and Traditional Rituals

Upon ascending the throne in 1820, Emperor Minh Mang inherited a diplomatic foundation built during the Gia Long era — a policy prioritizing stability and amity to facilitate post-war national recovery. According to Nguyen Van Luan (2024), during the first ten years of Minh Mang's reign, the Hue Court maintained "neighborly amity" with the Chakri Dynasty to ensure a peaceful environment for domestic consolidation. Regular exchanges of embassies, gifts, and diplomatic correspondence reflected a commitment to traditional regional codes of conduct.

This inheritance was further evidenced by how the Hue Court handled maritime incidents. Dinh Thi Dung (2001) records that Emperor Minh Mang repeatedly ordered the relief and repatriation of distressed Siamese fishermen and refused external proposals for anti-Siamese military alliances. This indicates that in the early stage, the role of the Hue Court was more about preserving the regional order than challenging it.

5.1.2. Shift Toward Pragmatic Thinking and Assertion of Superpower Status

However, inheritance did not mean stagnation. From the 1830s, the Hue Court's role began to undergo a major adjustment. Emperor Minh Mang, with the mindset of a resolute reformer, realized that the previous policy of concession was no longer suitable in the face of Siamese expansion in buffer zones. Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen (2002) shows that the Emperor began to emphasize direct power exercise and the imposition of Vietnamese administrative standards on spheres of influence.

This shift reflected a turning point from "static" to "active" diplomacy. According to Nguyen Van Luan (2017), instead of merely reacting to Bangkok's actions, the Hue Court under Minh Mang proactively reshaped

the geopolitical game. Elevating the national status from a "kingdom" to an "empire" (Dai Nam) was not just a name change but an assertion of a power entity equal to, or even superior to, Siam within the mainland Southeast Asian order.

5.1.3. Adjusting Buffer Zone Policy: From Indirect Influence to Direct Rule

The most significant difference between Minh Mang and Gia Long lay in their approach to Cambodia and Laos. While Gia Long accepted a loose "dual suzerainty" mechanism to avoid conflict, Minh Mang viewed strict control of these areas as a vital mission. Luu Van Loi (2007) argues that this adjustment stemmed from the need to build a solid "security belt." The Hue Court replaced indigenous officials with Vietnamese generals and established administrative units such as Tran Tay Thanh.

This change met with fierce reactions from Bangkok, leading to large-scale military conflicts. Stepanov (1982) observes that it was Minh Mang's decisiveness in changing the rules of the game in the buffer zones that forced Siam to re-evaluate the actual strength of the Nguyen Dynasty. According to Vu Quoc Thong (1971), imposing the Nguyen legal system and rituals on buffer zones was part of an "assimilation" strategy to create long-term stability under Hue's protection.

5.1.4. Evaluation of Minh Mang's Shaping Role

In summary, the role of the Hue Court during this period was a sophisticated blend of the legitimacy of a "Son of Heaven" and the flexibility of a pragmatic strategist. Xi Vuu (2024) affirms that Emperor Minh Mang successfully transformed Vietnam-Siam relations from a reliance on the personal links of the Gia Long era to a state-to-state system based on real power and geopolitical interests. Although this adjustment caused significant military strain, as Nguyen Van Luan (2024) concludes, it shaped an autonomous and resilient status for Vietnam before facing even greater upheavals from the West later in the century.

5.2. The role of the Hue court in buffer zone management (Cambodia and Laos)

In the overall strategy of the Hue court under Minh Mang, the management of buffer zones such as Cambodia and Laos was not merely a border issue but a vital geopolitical puzzle. Nguyen Van Luan (2024) asserts that Emperor Minh Mang proactively transformed these nations into "security shields" to halt the eastward expansion of the Chakri dynasty. Diverging from the loose approach of the Gia Long era, the Hue court implemented a more direct and stringent governance system, reflecting the supreme authority of a regional power.

In Cambodia, the shaping role of the Hue court peaked with the establishment of Tran Tay Thanh in 1835. Dinh Thi Dung (2001) analyzes that the dissolution of the indigenous government and its replacement with a system of Vietnamese officials was a bold move aimed at assimilating and integrating this territory into the administrative map of Dai Nam. Despite triggering mixed reactions, this action directly challenged Siam's traditional "suzerain" status there. According to the Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen (2005), Emperor Minh Mang's edicts to generals in Cambodia consistently emphasized maintaining discipline and asserting the court's prestige against pro-Siamese factions.

Regarding the Lao principalities, the Hue court also demonstrated a decisive coordinating role. During Chao Anouvong's rebellion against Siam (1827), Emperor Minh Mang made complex strategic calculations. Luu Van Loi (2007) points out that although he did not directly launch an all-out war, the Hue court provided refuge and diplomatic support to Lao leaders to sustain the existence of this buffer zone against pressure from Bangkok. Establishing control in regions like Tran Ninh and Lac Bien created a formidable defensive wall for Vietnam's western borders.

However, overly rigid management sometimes yielded counterproductive results. Nguyen Van Luan (2010) observes that the resistance of the Cambodian aristocracy to the Hue court's assimilation policies inadvertently created openings for Siam to re-intervene. This illustrates that the Hue court's role in shaping buffer zone relations remained in a state of fierce contention. In summary, through the management of buffer zones, the Hue court during the Minh Mang era affirmed its position not merely as a participant but as the primary entity establishing the geopolitical order in the Mekong sub-region.

5.3. Diplomatic coordination artistry: The combination of "firmness" and "flexibility"

The diplomatic artistry of the Nguyen Dynasty, particularly under Emperor Minh Mang, was not merely a continuation of past traditions but a creative and flexible application of national pride intertwined with regional political realities. Minh Mang constructed a diplomatic strategy in which "firmness" (cuong) and "flexibility" (nhu) were delicately interwoven to maximize national interests and assert the status of an "empire" in Southeast Asia.

Flexibility in relations with major powers (The "Nhu" policy) Regarding the Qing Dynasty, the Hue court consistently maintained a respectful attitude, strictly adhering to the rituals of investiture and tribute. This was a clever strategy to appease the pride of a great power while ensuring peace along the borders. Emperor Minh

Mang understood that maintaining amicable diplomatic relations with China was a prerequisite for domestic stability. As noted by Tran Trong Kim (1971), towards the North, the nation resisted being conquered while acknowledging its smaller stature by paying tribute to maintain harmony. This "flexibility" was also evident in the handling of border disputes; instead of resorting to military force, the Emperor often employed reasoning and negotiation to settle disagreements.

Firmness in asserting sovereignty and regional status (The "Cuong" policy) In contrast to the humble stance before the Qing, Minh Mang exhibited an extremely decisive attitude toward neighboring nations such as Siam, Cambodia, and Vientiane. He did not tolerate any Siamese interference in Vietnam's sphere of influence in Cambodia. This "firmness" stemmed from the "Internal Civilization, External Barbarism" (Noi Ha Ngoai Di) mindset, viewing Vietnam as the civilized center of the region. When national sovereignty and security were threatened such as during the Le Van Khoi rebellion supported by Siam the Emperor did not hesitate to use military power to retaliate. Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen (2002) records numerous edicts demonstrating this uncompromising stance.

Artistic coordination in specific contexts This coordination reached its peak when dealing with complex issues such as the Burmese proposal and relations with the West. Regarding Western powers, Minh Mang applied a policy of "trade restriction" and refused to sign formal commercial treaties due to concerns that their advanced technologies might jeopardize the national order. However, according to Dinh Thi Dung (2001), he maintained a moderate attitude rather than blind xenophobia; he allowed merchants to trade, assisted distressed vessels, and received special envoys with formality. This represents a "self-defense" diplomatic mindset that remained observant of global fluctuations to find an appropriate path.

The synergy between "firm" and "soft" was further demonstrated by Minh Mang's dual approach: strengthening the defenses of vital seaports while secretly dispatching diplomatic missions to the West to scout the situation in his later years. As emphasized by Tsuboi (1993), he was aware that if the old isolationist policy persisted, a conflict similar to the Opium War in China could occur in Vietnam.

In conclusion, Minh Mang's diplomatic coordination was a harmony between preserving traditional Confucian values and shrewdly adapting to new challenges. The combination of "firmness" and "flexibility" helped the Nguyen Dynasty maintain a unified, autonomous nation with significant regional influence throughout the first half of the 19th century, although the limitations of that

era's vision eventually led to unfortunate outcomes later on.

5.4. The challenges to the shaping role of the Hue court

Although the Hue court under Minh Mang demonstrated a proactive role in establishing a regional order, the ambition to shape relations with Siam encountered significant challenges and consequences. Nguyen Van Luan (2024) observes that the greatest challenge did not stem from Siam's military might alone but from the resistance of political entities within the buffer zones. The "Uniformity of Customs" policy (imposing Vietnamese culture and administration) in Cambodia triggered deep resentment among the indigenous aristocracy and populace, rendering the Hue court's shaping role fragile and vulnerable.

Secondly, the pressure on economic and defense resources presented a formidable obstacle. Maintaining a permanent military presence in remote areas such as Tran Tay Thanh and the routes to Laos exhausted the national treasury. Dinh Thi Dung (2001) analyzes that prolonged warfare not only weakened internal strength but also caused fatigue among officials and soldiers. This diminished the effectiveness of the Hue court's diplomatic edicts when facing rapid counter-attacks from the Siamese army.

Thirdly, the lack of unity among local leadership in the frontier regions was a major barrier. Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen (2002) records numerous instances where border officials or local chieftains secretly colluded with the Siamese to protect personal interests. This internal fracture undermined the "firmness and flexibility" diplomatic strategy that Minh Mang had painstakingly constructed. Furthermore, Luu Van Loi (2007) points out that the rise of Western colonialism to the South (the British and the French) forced the Hue court to divide its attention, making the maintenance of a monopoly over Siam more difficult than ever.

Finally, differences in ideology and religion posed a non-negligible challenge. The Hue court's elevation of Confucianism while Siam and the buffer states adhered to Theravada Buddhism created a psychological and cultural gap. According to Tsuboi (1993), the imposition of Confucian rituals caused the Hue court to be perceived as "strangers" even in the lands they sought to protect. These challenges demonstrate that shaping sustainable international relations relies not only on military power or diplomatic talent but also requires cultural consensus and the alignment of interests among all involved parties.

5.5. Long-term impacts on the 19th-century regional order

The shaping role of the Hue court under Minh Mang extended beyond temporary achievements, creating long-term impacts on the 19th-century mainland Southeast

Asian order. Nguyen Van Luan (2024) asserts that by resolutely counterbalancing Siam, the Hue court established a new "balance of power." This state forced the Chakri dynasty to abandon its ambition of monopolizing the lower Mekong region and accept the Vietnamese presence as an equal counterpart, thereby creating a period of relative stability for the buffer states.

The second impact lies in the shaping of modern geopolitical borders. Dinh Thi Dung (2001) argues that Emperor Minh Mang's efforts in direct governance in regions such as Tran Ninh, Lac Bien, and Tran Tay laid the foundation for defining Vietnam's national borders with Laos and Cambodia in later periods. Although these administrative units changed over time, the concept of a strictly protected western frontier became a vital legacy in the territorial management thinking of subsequent eras.

Furthermore, the coordinated diplomatic artistry of the Hue court left a significant lesson in responding to external powers. Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen (2002) demonstrates that Minh Mang's multilateral approach prevented smaller nations from being drawn into the whirlpool of conflict between the two regional superpowers. According to Luu Van Loi (2007), the Hue court's persistence in maintaining self-determination against Siamese demands helped preserve the cultural and political identity of Southern Vietnam (Nam Ky) against Western-ward encroachment.

In a broader perspective, Tsuboi (1993) observes that the Vietnam-Siam confrontation under Minh Mang inadvertently created a "power vacuum" as both powers were weakened by prolonged warfare, facilitating the later infiltration of French and British colonialists. However, Nguyen Van Luan (2010) emphasizes that the superpower status established by the Hue court forced Western powers to be cautious and alter their diplomatic approaches during the initial phase. In summary, the role of the Hue court under Minh Mang served as a crucial bridge, transforming Southeast Asia from a traditional tributary system into a more modern national-state order, despite occurring within a highly volatile context.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study of the Hue Court's role in shaping relations with Siam during the Minh Mang reign elucidates a volatile yet heroic period in national history. Through the analysis of primary and secondary sources, this article demonstrates that the Hue Court acted not merely as a participant but as the dominant entity establishing the geopolitical order in the Mekong sub-region. The shift from the amicable policies of the Gia Long era to the pragmatic and assertive approach under Minh Mang exemplifies the Nguyen Dynasty's ambition for superpower status and its will for autonomy.

Through the "firmness and flexibility" diplomatic artistry combined with military prowess, Emperor Minh Mang successfully transformed buffer states into a robust security belt for the territory of Dai Nam. Despite facing challenges from indigenous resistance and resource depletion, the status established by the Hue Court forced regional rivals and subsequent Western powers to recognize Vietnam as a political entity that could not be overlooked. The lessons of frontier management and power balance during the Minh Mang era remain profoundly relevant for modern foreign affairs in preserving sovereignty and regional peace.

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