

Maritime Governance and Global Interaction: Tariff Policies, Port Administration, and Trade in Vietnam under the Nguyễn Dynasty during the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

This study examines the tariff policies, port control mechanisms, and external trade activities of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1884) in Vietnam, situating them within the broader context of nineteenth-century Southeast Asian maritime commerce. Drawing on royal edicts, archival records, and contemporary foreign accounts, the paper analyzes how the Nguyễn court established tariff regulations to manage both domestic and international trade, and how strategic ports such as Hội An, Đà Nẵng, and Gia Định were administered to secure state revenues and regulate foreign merchants. Particular attention is given to the dual objectives of these policies: ensuring state control over economic flows and protecting maritime sovereignty against smuggling and foreign encroachment. The findings reveal that while the Nguyễn rulers sought to integrate into regional and global trade networks, their cautious and restrictive measures reflected concerns over security and cultural integrity. This balancing act between openness and protectionism ultimately shaped Vietnam's maritime economic trajectory prior to French colonial intervention. The paper contributes to historical scholarship on maritime economic governance and provides insights into early models of port regulation and resource protection in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Nguyễn dynasty; Tariff policy; Port control; Maritime trade; Southeast Asia; Economic history; Vietnam

Introduction

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed profound transformations in maritime trade across East and Southeast Asia. The expansion of Western imperial powers, the growth of intra-Asian commerce, and the consolidation of regional states all reshaped the dynamics of coastal economies (Reid, 1993; Tagliacozzo, 2004). Within this broader

context, the Nguyễn dynasty of Vietnam (1802–1884) sought to restore centralized authority after centuries of internal division while simultaneously engaging with external commercial forces. Maritime trade, long a critical component of Vietnam's economic and diplomatic relations, became a contested arena where state priorities of revenue generation, security, and sovereignty intersected (Cooke & Li, 2004).

A central concern of the Nguyễn rulers was the establishment of a coherent system of tariff regulations and port administration. Through royal edicts and bureaucratic practices, the dynasty imposed taxes on both domestic and foreign merchants, aiming to control flows of goods while safeguarding fiscal resources (Li, 2006). Ports such as Hội An, Đà Nẵng, and Gia Định served not only as commercial gateways but also as sites of negotiation between local officials, foreign traders, and imperial authority (Nguyen, 2019). These measures reflected a cautious approach: while the court recognized the benefits of external trade, it also feared the destabilizing effects of foreign influence and illicit commerce (Woodside, 1971). Scholars have long examined the maritime policies of neighboring polities such as Siam, Qing China, and the Malay states, highlighting their varied strategies in dealing with Western merchants and piracy (Andaya, 1993; Wang, 2018). Yet, the Nguyễn dynasty's tariff and port control policies remain understudied in Anglophone scholarship. Existing research often portrays the dynasty as inward-looking or isolationist, but recent studies suggest a more nuanced picture of selective engagement, where protectionist measures coexisted with pragmatic accommodations (Nguyen, 2022; Li, 2010).

This paper argues that Nguyễn tariff policies and port regulations represented an early form of economic governance designed to balance integration into global maritime trade with the imperative of preserving state control. By analyzing royal decrees, administrative records, and foreign accounts, the study reconstructs the logic and practice of Nguyễn maritime regulation. In doing so, it contributes to the historiography of Vietnam's nineteenth-century economy and situates the dynasty's policies within the wider debates on state formation, commerce, and sovereignty in maritime Southeast Asia (Reid, 1993; Tagliacozzo, 2016).

Tariff Policies under the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–1884)

When the Nguyễn dynasty was founded in 1802 by Emperor Gia Long, one of the foremost challenges confronting the new regime was the restoration of fiscal and political stability after decades of warfare. Civil wars had devastated agricultural production, fractured regional trade networks, and weakened fiscal institutions. In this context, maritime trade, long an essential complement to Vietnam's agrarian economy, emerged as both an opportunity and a risk. The Nguyễn rulers recognized that ports could generate substantial revenue and integrate the country into regional and global networks, but they also understood that foreign contact carried dangers of political interference, smuggling, and cultural disruption. It was against this background that tariff policies were developed and became a central component of the dynasty's economic governance (Woodside, 1971, pp. 87–90).

Tariffs under the Nguyễn were more than financial instruments; they were an expression of sovereignty and statecraft. Throughout East and Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century, rulers grappled with similar dilemmas. In Qing China, the Canton System restricted foreign merchants to a single port and tightly regulated customs duties until it was dismantled by the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 (Wakeman, 1978). In Siam, King Rama III balanced royal monopolies with selective duties on Chinese and Western merchants (Reid, 1993). The Nguyễn rulers, facing parallel challenges, drew on these regional precedents while also crafting measures suited to Vietnam's own circumstances. The fiscal objectives of Nguyễn tariff policies were clear. Agriculture, especially land tax, remained the mainstay of the state budget, but customs revenues offered a crucial supplement. In particular, the court derived considerable income from the Chinese junk trade, which brought silk, ceramics, and tea while carrying rice and forest products out of Vietnam. Archival evidence shows that by the 1830s, customs income from Đà Nẵng alone accounted for a substantial proportion of non-agricultural revenue collected by the Ministry of Finance (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 1992, vol. 5, p. 317). To reinforce fiscal discipline, all foreign vessels were required to pay anchorage fees, declare cargoes, and submit to inspections. Duties were assessed on both imports and exports, typically ranging from 10

percent on staple goods such as rice to 30–40 percent on luxury items including fine textiles, precious metals, and opium (Li, 2006, pp. 160–162).

The ideological underpinnings of tariff policy were equally significant. The Nguyễn court, steeped in Confucian statecraft, regarded commerce as a secondary pursuit compared to agriculture. While recognizing its utility, emperors such as Minh Mạng repeatedly warned against the moral dangers of foreign luxuries, which were said to encourage wastefulness and weaken social discipline. Tariffs thus functioned as moral correctives, discouraging elite indulgence by making foreign goods prohibitively expensive. The edicts recorded in the *Đại Nam thực lục* reveal a persistent emphasis on frugality and self-sufficiency, reflecting the Confucian conviction that the prosperity of the state should rest on agriculture and virtuous governance rather than excessive trade (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 1992, vol. 4, pp. 203–204).

Administrative mechanisms reinforced these objectives. Although the Ministry of Finance oversaw tariff policy at the central level, implementation relied heavily on provincial officials. Customs inspectors stationed at key ports such as Hội An, Đà Nẵng, and Gia Định were tasked with recording cargo manifests, inspecting holds, and collecting duties. Their work, however, was often plagued by corruption. Missionary reports and foreign merchant accounts complained of additional, unofficial fees demanded by mandarins, which frequently exceeded the official tariff rates (Brocheux & Hémery, 2009, p. 114). This duality between central regulations and local practices not only reflected the difficulties of bureaucratic control but also undermined the dynasty's legitimacy in the eyes of traders.

Tariffs also served as instruments of foreign policy and surveillance. By restricting foreign vessels to a limited number of ports, the Nguyễn dynasty sought to monitor external contacts closely. Gia Long permitted French ships to dock at Đà Nẵng in 1817 but imposed higher duties than those levied on Chinese junks, revealing a hierarchy of trust based on cultural proximity (Woodside, 1971). Under Minh Mạng, suspicion intensified in the wake of the Opium War. The emperor's 1833 decree required all foreign vessels to submit detailed cargo records and submit to inspections, warning that non-compliance would be

treated as piracy (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 1992, vol. 6, p. 88). This intertwining of customs enforcement and maritime security illustrates how tariffs symbolized sovereignty as much as they generated revenue.

The impact of tariff policy on domestic and regional trade was profound. For local Vietnamese merchants, lower duties facilitated inter-regional commerce and protected them from being displaced by foreigners. By contrast, foreign merchants faced steep levies, which both enriched the state and curtailed external dominance. Yet these policies also carried costs. Excessive duties encouraged smuggling, particularly along the central and southern coasts, where clandestine networks linked Vietnamese traders with Chinese and Malay smugglers. Contemporary reports in the *Đại Nam thực lục* mention frequent seizures of contraband opium and salt, indicating the persistence of illicit flows despite state surveillance (Nguyen, 2022).

Smuggling was not merely a matter of criminality but a response to structural incentives created by tariff policy. When official duties made legal trade unprofitable, merchants sought alternative routes. Local communities often colluded with smugglers, seeing in them opportunities to access goods otherwise unavailable or unaffordable. This dynamic reveals the unintended consequences of Nguyễn tariff policy: while designed to protect sovereignty and ensure fiscal control, it also fostered shadow economies that challenged state authority.

Resistance from foreign merchants further complicated implementation. Western traders complained that Nguyễn tariffs were arbitrary, burdensome, and administered with excessive bureaucracy. Some sought to bypass Vietnamese ports altogether, redirecting their ships to Singapore, Manila, or Hong Kong, where customs regimes were more predictable and less restrictive (Tagliacozzo, 2004). As a result, while the Nguyễn dynasty maintained a measure of control, it also risked marginalizing itself in emerging global trade circuits dominated by British free-trade ideology.

Comparatively, the Nguyễn approach was not unique but part of a broader Southeast Asian pattern. Siam imposed selective duties to protect its rice trade, while the Dutch in Java enforced monopolies through the Cultivation System (Elson, 1994). What

distinguished Vietnam, however, was the extent to which tariff policies were intertwined with Confucian ideology. Whereas Siam was more pragmatic in engaging with Western merchants, the Nguyễn court remained wary of cultural erosion and religious subversion. This difference helps explain why Vietnam, more than its neighbors, resisted commercial liberalization even as European powers pressed for access.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, pressures mounted that forced the Nguyễn dynasty to adapt. French incursions beginning in the 1850s, coupled with increasing British dominance in Asian waters, exposed the limitations of restrictive tariff policies. The Treaty of Saigon in 1862, which ceded parts of southern Vietnam to France, also imposed trade concessions that eroded imperial control over customs. Subsequent treaties in the 1870s and 1880s further curtailed tariff autonomy, opening ports to French merchants under fixed, low duties that undercut the dynasty's fiscal base (Brocheux & Hémery, 2009). What had once been a symbol of sovereignty became a stark reminder of colonial dependency.

Nevertheless, the legacy of Nguyễn tariff policy remains significant for historical scholarship. It illustrates how a traditional monarchy attempted to navigate the turbulent waters of nineteenth-century globalization. By blending fiscal imperatives, Confucian ideology, and sovereignty concerns, the Nguyễn rulers created a distinctive system of economic governance that sought to balance openness and protectionism. While ultimately overtaken by colonial forces, this system sheds light on the challenges faced by non-Western states in preserving autonomy in an era of expanding global trade.

The social and economic impacts of tariff policies under the Nguyễn dynasty extended far beyond the court and customs houses. Duties reshaped patterns of domestic commerce, altered incentives for local and foreign traders, and contributed to the formation of both legal and illicit markets. For Vietnamese merchants, the dual tariff regime proved advantageous in theory, as it offered them lower rates compared to foreign competitors. This was especially evident in rice exports from the Mekong Delta, which were taxed lightly when carried by local traders but heavily when shipped aboard Chinese junks or Western vessels. By favoring Vietnamese ships, the dynasty sought to cultivate a native

mercantile class capable of complementing the agrarian base of the economy (Li, 2010, pp. 234–236).

Yet in practice, the benefits were unevenly distributed. Only merchants with access to capital and connections could engage in long-distance trade. Wealthy families in Gia Định and Hội An exploited tariff privileges to consolidate control over rice and forest products, while smaller traders remained confined to local markets. This created growing social differentiation within Vietnamese society, with a nascent commercial elite emerging alongside traditional landowning classes (Cooke & Li, 2004, pp. 149–150). The Nguyễn state tolerated this development as long as it did not threaten agrarian stability, but the tension between protecting farmers and encouraging merchants persisted.

Foreign traders reacted ambivalently to Nguyễn tariffs. Chinese merchants, who had been present in Vietnam for centuries, adapted relatively easily. Many formed partnerships with local elites, sharing the burden of customs duties in exchange for privileged access to markets. Their cultural proximity and long-standing networks allowed them to navigate the tariff system more effectively than Westerners. European traders, by contrast, expressed frustration. Letters from British and French captains describe Nguyễn customs as “arbitrary and extortionate,” lamenting both the high duties and the bribes demanded by local officials (Missionary Archives, cited in Brocheux & Hémery, 2009, p. 114). Some simply diverted their ships to more hospitable ports such as Singapore, which by the 1830s had become a major free-trade hub under British control (Tagliacozzo, 2004). This diversion of trade underscored the costs of restrictive tariff policies, as Vietnam risked exclusion from emerging global circuits. The persistence of smuggling further complicated the picture. Tariff rates that were too high created powerful incentives for illegal trade. Along the central coast, small vessels known as ghe bầu transported contraband opium, salt, and luxury cloth under cover of night. Smuggling rings often involved collusion between local villagers and corrupt officials, who turned a blind eye in exchange for a share of profits. The Đại Nam thực lục records several imperial edicts condemning such practices and ordering harsher patrols, but enforcement remained inconsistent (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 1992, vol. 6, p. 412). The situation illustrates a paradox: while tariffs were

designed to protect sovereignty, they simultaneously undermined state authority by fueling shadow economies.

The state responded to smuggling with a mixture of repression and accommodation. Coastal patrols were intensified, and the Hoàng Sa and Bắc Hải fleets—originally tasked with resource collection and maritime defense—were occasionally mobilized to intercept illegal traders. At the same time, the court adjusted certain tariff rates downward to reduce the profitability of smuggling. For example, when illicit opium imports surged in the 1840s, Minh Mạng decreed a reduction in duties on some permitted goods to encourage legal trade, even while continuing to ban opium itself (Nguyen, 2019, pp. 65–67). This pragmatic approach reveals a degree of flexibility within an otherwise rigid system, though it was not enough to eliminate illicit flows entirely. International comparisons shed further light on the distinctiveness of Nguyễn tariff policies. In Qing China, the Canton System restricted foreign trade to Guangzhou, but customs revenues were essential for financing the imperial treasury. When the system collapsed after the Opium War, the Qing lost both revenue and regulatory control, creating vulnerabilities that Western powers exploited through unequal treaties (Wakeman, 1978). In Siam, duties were selectively applied but the monarchy proved more adaptable. By signing the Bowring Treaty with Britain in 1855, Siam accepted lower tariffs but retained political sovereignty, a compromise that allowed it to survive as an independent state (Reid, 1993). The Nguyễn dynasty, however, resisted such concessions until military defeat forced them into treaties that stripped away tariff autonomy. In this sense, Vietnam’s trajectory diverged sharply from Siam’s, demonstrating how ideological rigidity limited strategic flexibility.

The role of Confucian ideology in shaping this divergence cannot be overstated. Whereas Siamese rulers embraced pragmatic adjustments, the Nguyễn court remained committed to the notion that commerce must remain subordinate to moral governance. Emperor Tự Đức, ruling from 1847 to 1883, repeatedly framed tariff enforcement as a matter of “defending the state’s dignity against foreign arrogance” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 1992, vol. 7, p. 201). By equating duties with sovereignty, the court bound its

legitimacy to the maintenance of restrictive tariffs. This ideological stance made it difficult to negotiate with Western powers that promoted free trade as a universal principle.

The consequences became evident as French pressure intensified in the mid-nineteenth century. By imposing high duties and bureaucratic procedures, the Nguyễn court sought to defend autonomy, but these very measures were cited by France as justifications for intervention. French envoys complained that Vietnam's tariffs impeded "civilized commerce," framing their demands for lower duties as part of a mission to "open" Asia to free trade. After military confrontations, the Treaty of Saigon in 1862 and subsequent agreements in 1874 forced Vietnam to accept fixed, low tariffs favorable to French merchants (Brocheux & Hémery, 2009, pp. 118–120). In effect, tariff autonomy was transformed from a symbol of sovereignty into a casualty of colonial encroachment. Nevertheless, even in decline, Nguyễn tariff policies reflected a coherent vision of governance. They reveal how a traditional monarchy attempted to balance the imperatives of revenue, morality, and sovereignty in a rapidly changing world. By designing a dual system that favored local traders, the dynasty sought to foster domestic commerce. By imposing steep duties on foreigners, it sought to limit external dominance. By moralizing tariffs, it aimed to preserve cultural integrity. The effectiveness of these measures was mixed, but they demonstrate the persistence of a logic that placed state control above market integration.

From a broader perspective, Nguyễn tariff policy highlights the dilemmas of non-Western states in the nineteenth century. Unlike industrializing nations that embraced free trade, agrarian monarchies faced the dual challenge of defending fiscal bases and resisting foreign influence. Tariffs offered one of the few tools available for asserting autonomy. Yet the very rigidity that made them symbols of sovereignty also rendered them inflexible in the face of global transformation. Vietnam's eventual loss of tariff autonomy under French colonial rule thus encapsulates the broader tragedy of Asian monarchies caught between tradition and modernity.

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, Nguyễn tariff policies underwent significant transformation under the pressure of foreign intervention. The dynasty's initial

insistence on restrictive duties and close port surveillance had symbolized sovereignty, but as French incursions escalated, these very measures were dismantled through treaties that restructured Vietnam's place in global commerce. The Treaty of Saigon in 1862 marked a turning point: not only did it cede the provinces of Biên Hòa, Gia Định, and Định Tường to French control, but it also imposed commercial clauses that required the opening of ports and the acceptance of fixed tariff rates favorable to French merchants (Brocheux & Hémery, 2009, pp. 118–120). This loss of tariff autonomy represented more than an economic concession; it symbolized the erosion of the dynasty's sovereign authority over its maritime frontiers.

Subsequent treaties further codified this dependency. The 1874 treaty, signed after continued French pressure and military incursions, forced the Nguyễn court to grant French merchants the right to trade freely at designated ports with duties capped at levels lower than those imposed on Chinese and Vietnamese traders. In effect, the dual tariff system that had once protected local commerce was dismantled, replaced by a colonial framework privileging foreign interests. The fiscal consequences were severe. Revenues that had once flowed into the imperial treasury now leaked outward as French officials assumed control of customs houses in occupied territories. Vietnamese sources lamented that “the gates of commerce were no longer in the hands of the court, but under the shadow of foreign power” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 1992, vol. 8, p. 305). Despite these constraints, the Nguyễn court continued to resist where possible. Emperor Tự Đức attempted to maintain higher duties in regions not yet under French control, insisting that tariff autonomy was essential for preserving cultural integrity. Yet such measures were increasingly symbolic, as the encroachment of French gunboats and the spread of European influence in regional trade networks made enforcement ineffective. Merchants gravitated toward colonial-controlled ports, where duties were lower and procedures more predictable. The decline of imperial customs revenues mirrored the decline of imperial power itself, underscoring the intimate connection between tariffs and sovereignty.

The transformation of tariff policy in this period must be understood not merely as a story of colonial imposition but also as a reflection of structural constraints. The Nguyễn

dynasty faced the same dilemmas as many non-Western states: whether to cling to restrictive measures rooted in agrarian ideology or to adapt to the emerging global order of free trade championed by industrial powers. Siam, by signing the Bowring Treaty in 1855, managed to negotiate a balance that preserved political independence while accepting lower tariffs (Reid, 1993). Vietnam, by contrast, resisted until military defeat rendered concessions unavoidable. The different outcomes highlight the importance of strategic flexibility in navigating globalization, a lesson underscored by comparative historians (Andaya, 1993; Tagliacozzo, 2016). The legacy of Nguyễn tariff policy is complex. On the one hand, the dynasty's insistence on sovereignty and cultural integrity reflected a coherent vision of governance. Tariffs were designed not only to generate revenue but also to reinforce moral order and assert authority over foreigners. This vision aligned with Confucian principles that placed agriculture at the center of the economy and regarded commerce as potentially destabilizing. On the other hand, the rigidity of this approach left Vietnam vulnerable to external pressures. By equating tariff concessions with the erosion of sovereignty, the Nguyễn court limited its room for negotiation and inadvertently accelerated the imposition of colonial control.

Modern scholarship has debated whether the Nguyễn dynasty was isolationist or selectively engaged with the outside world. Earlier narratives, influenced by colonial historiography, often depicted the dynasty as inward-looking and hostile to trade. More recent studies, however, suggest a more nuanced picture. Nguyen Thi My Hanh (2019) argues that anti-piracy measures and customs enforcement demonstrated an active engagement with maritime trade, albeit on the dynasty's own terms. Nguyen Duy Phuong (2022) similarly highlights the pragmatic adjustments made in response to smuggling and foreign pressure, suggesting that the Nguyễn rulers were not blind to global change but constrained by ideological commitments and limited resources. This historiographical shift underscores the need to view tariff policies not as relics of isolationism but as instruments of statecraft shaped by competing priorities. The long-term implications of Nguyễn tariff policies extend beyond the nineteenth century. By embedding commerce within a framework of moral governance and sovereignty, the dynasty established a precedent for

viewing trade as inseparable from political authority. This perspective continued into the colonial era, where debates over tariff autonomy became central to nationalist movements. Vietnamese reformers in the early twentieth century frequently cited the loss of customs control as evidence of colonial subjugation, framing tariff independence as essential for national revival. In this sense, the Nguyễn legacy lived on in the economic visions of later generations (Marr, 1971).

From an analytical standpoint, the Nguyễn case contributes to broader discussions in global history about the relationship between tariffs, sovereignty, and globalization. Tariffs in nineteenth-century Vietnam were not simply economic tools but part of a wider repertoire of governance strategies employed by non-Western states to manage foreign contact. Similar dynamics can be observed in Japan's Tokugawa shogunate, which restricted foreign trade to Nagasaki under strict customs regulations until the treaties of the 1850s. The difference, of course, was that Japan managed to transform its institutions rapidly during the Meiji Restoration, whereas Vietnam lacked the internal capacity and political consensus to undertake such reforms. Comparative analysis thus highlights both the commonalities and divergences in how Asian polities confronted the challenges of global trade (Totman, 1980). The erosion of Nguyễn tariff autonomy also illustrates the asymmetric nature of nineteenth-century globalization. While Western powers promoted free trade as a universal principle, they simultaneously maintained protective tariffs at home. The imposition of low duties in Vietnam was therefore less about economic efficiency than about establishing geopolitical control. Tariff clauses in treaties were part of a larger colonial strategy that combined military force with legal instruments to undermine sovereignty. Vietnam's experience mirrors that of Qing China after the Treaty of Nanking and of Ottoman Turkey under the capitulations, where the loss of tariff autonomy signaled the subordination of local economies to global imperial systems (Ferguson, 2002).

In evaluating the overall trajectory of Nguyễn tariff policy, one must balance recognition of its coherence with acknowledgment of its limitations. The policies were coherent in that they sought to integrate fiscal, moral, and sovereignty objectives into a

single framework. They were limited in that they failed to adapt to a rapidly shifting international environment. Ultimately, the rigidity of tariff policy was both its strength and its weakness: it symbolized sovereignty in the short term but contributed to colonial dependency in the long term. What lessons can be drawn from this history? For scholars of Southeast Asia, the Nguyễn case demonstrates the importance of examining economic policies within their ideological and geopolitical contexts. Tariffs cannot be reduced to mere percentages or revenue streams; they are expressions of how states understood their place in the world. For historians of globalization, Vietnam's experience underscores the uneven nature of integration, where efforts to preserve autonomy often collided with the expansionist ambitions of industrial powers. For contemporary policymakers, the history of Nguyễn tariff policy offers a reminder that debates over trade and sovereignty are not new but part of a long historical continuum.

In conclusion, tariff policies under the Nguyễn dynasty from 1802 to 1884 were central to the dynasty's efforts to secure revenue, assert sovereignty, and preserve cultural integrity in a time of profound global change. Initially effective in regulating commerce and protecting domestic interests, these policies ultimately proved insufficient in the face of colonial pressures. Their legacy lies not only in their immediate fiscal and political effects but also in the way they framed commerce as inseparable from sovereignty, a theme that would resonate in Vietnamese history long after the fall of the dynasty.

Port Administration and Control Mechanisms

Port administration under the Nguyễn dynasty constituted a crucial dimension of the state's broader maritime strategy, complementing the tariff policies that sought to regulate commerce and safeguard sovereignty. Whereas tariffs were primarily fiscal instruments, port control reflected the dynasty's determination to maintain surveillance over the physical spaces through which foreign contact occurred. From the early years of Gia Long's reign until the late nineteenth century, the administration of ports such as Đà Nẵng, Hội An, Gia Định, and later Sài Gòn revealed both the strengths and the vulnerabilities of imperial governance. These ports served as gateways for external trade, nodes of surveillance, and symbols of sovereignty, yet they also became contested sites where

foreign powers pressed for concessions, smugglers sought to evade control, and local officials mediated between imperial edicts and pragmatic realities.

Historically, Vietnamese ports had long been integrated into regional trading networks. Hội An, in particular, had flourished in the seventeenth century as a hub for Japanese, Chinese, and European merchants (Li, 2006). By the time the Nguyễn dynasty consolidated power in 1802, however, Hội An's prominence had waned, partly due to silting and partly because of deliberate imperial policy to redirect foreign contact toward Đà Nẵng. Gia Long and his successors recognized Đà Nẵng's geographical advantages: it was a deep-water harbor, defensible against naval incursions, and close to the imperial capital at Huế. By concentrating maritime entry at Đà Nẵng, the dynasty sought to strengthen surveillance and reduce the risks of uncontrolled interaction. This centralization of port control was consistent with Confucian notions of hierarchical order, where the periphery was subordinated to the center and commerce was subordinated to state oversight (Woodside, 1971, pp. 92–95). The procedures imposed at Nguyễn ports were deliberately elaborate. Upon arrival, foreign vessels were required to anchor at designated zones, submit detailed cargo manifests, and await inspection by customs officers and military patrols. Fees were levied at multiple stages: anchorage dues, inspection charges, and final customs duties on goods. These procedures often extended over several days or even weeks, as imperial officials sought to ensure that all cargo was accounted for and that prohibited items, such as firearms and opium, were not smuggled ashore. The Đại Nam thực lục records multiple edicts by Minh Mạng in the 1830s emphasizing that “no foreign vessel shall unload its cargo until the inspectors have completed their verification; violators shall be punished as pirates” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 1992, vol. 6, p. 88). Such measures reveal how port administration blurred the lines between customs enforcement and security policy, treating commercial regulation as inseparable from the defense of sovereignty.

For Vietnamese traders, port administration presented both opportunities and constraints. Domestic vessels engaged in coastal trade generally faced lighter scrutiny and lower fees, reflecting the dual system that privileged local commerce over foreign merchants. Yet even domestic traders were required to pass through customs houses and

obtain permits when transporting goods between regions, a practice designed to prevent tax evasion and monitor flows of strategic commodities such as rice and salt. While this system ensured a measure of fiscal control, it also imposed bureaucratic burdens that could slow the circulation of goods. Complaints of delays and corruption at customs stations were not uncommon, as officials exploited their authority to extract bribes. Missionary reports from Đà Nẵng and Gia Định frequently mentioned that mandarins demanded payments beyond the official schedule of fees, creating an additional layer of cost for merchants (Brocheux & Hémery, 2009, p. 114).

Foreign traders, particularly Europeans, found Nguyễn port administration especially restrictive. British and French captains often described the procedures as opaque and extortionate, contrasting them unfavorably with the more predictable environments of Singapore or Hong Kong. In 1822, the British envoy John Crawfurd noted in his journal that “the Vietnamese ports are so hedged about with prohibitions and exactions that trade there is scarcely profitable” (Crawfurd, 1828, p. 233). Such accounts reveal the ways in which imperial efforts to control ports had unintended consequences, diverting international trade flows toward more open colonial entrepôts. Yet from the Nguyễn perspective, such restrictions were necessary to prevent foreign penetration and cultural subversion, even at the cost of reduced commercial integration. The military dimension of port administration was particularly evident at Đà Nẵng. The Nguyễn court constructed fortifications, stationed garrisons, and deployed coastal patrols to secure the harbor. These defenses were intended both to deter smugglers and to signal strength to foreign observers. Yet the arrival of French gunboats in 1858 exposed the limits of such defenses. Despite the presence of fortifications, French forces were able to bombard and occupy Đà Nẵng, demonstrating that traditional methods of port defense were insufficient against modern naval technology (Brocheux & Hémery, 2009, pp. 102–105). This episode underscored the vulnerability of port administration when confronted with the asymmetries of colonial power.

Port administration also intersected with the dynasty’s management of tributary relations. Chinese junks, which had long dominated regional trade, were subject to both

customs duties and ritualized exchanges framed as tribute. These exchanges reinforced hierarchical notions of order while providing the state with symbolic acknowledgment of its authority. The *Đại Nam thực lục* records annual ceremonies in which Chinese merchants presented gifts to imperial officials in exchange for licenses to trade, blurring the boundaries between commerce, diplomacy, and ritual (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 1992, vol. 5, p. 317). Such practices reflected the dynasty's attempt to embed port administration within a broader moral and political framework, consistent with Confucian principles of regulated hierarchy. At the same time, however, the dynasty's restrictive port administration stimulated illicit networks that circumvented official controls. Smuggling along the coast became increasingly sophisticated in the mid-nineteenth century, with traders exploiting remote coves and river mouths to land contraband. Goods such as opium, firearms, and luxury textiles were particularly prone to illicit circulation, as duties and prohibitions made legal trade unprofitable. Local communities often participated in these networks, finding them more lucrative than submitting to official channels. The persistence of smuggling illustrates a recurring tension: the more rigorously the dynasty sought to control ports, the more it encouraged parallel systems of illicit exchange (Tagliacozzo, 2004, pp. 65–70).

Comparisons with neighboring polities highlight both similarities and differences. In Siam, port administration was less centralized, with multiple entry points open to foreign vessels, though still subject to duties. The signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1855 institutionalized a regime of lower tariffs and freer access, effectively integrating Siamese ports into global trade networks while preserving political sovereignty (Reid, 1993). In contrast, the Nguyễn court resisted similar concessions, insisting that restrictive port control was essential to defend sovereignty. In Qing China, the Canton System represented an extreme form of centralized port administration, restricting foreign trade to a single city under strict oversight. When the system collapsed under British pressure, the Qing, like the Nguyễn, lost both revenue and regulatory authority (Wakeman, 1978). These comparisons suggest that while restrictive port administration was a common strategy in Asia, its long-term effectiveness depended on the ability of states to adapt to shifting global dynamics.

The decline of Nguyễn port administration became most evident after the 1860s, when treaties imposed by the French eroded imperial control. The 1862 Treaty of Saigon required the opening of ports to French merchants and the acceptance of fixed duties, undermining the elaborate procedures that had previously governed entry. French officials gradually assumed control of customs houses in occupied territories, standardizing procedures in ways that reflected colonial rather than imperial priorities. This process culminated in the 1880s, when the establishment of the French protectorate effectively ended Nguyễn authority over ports altogether. What had once been spaces of sovereign surveillance became instruments of colonial exploitation, integrated into the global circuits of empire.

The historiographical interpretation of Nguyễn port administration has shifted over time. Colonial writers tended to depict it as evidence of backwardness and hostility to commerce, framing Vietnam as isolationist and resistant to progress. More recent scholarship, however, has emphasized its coherence as a strategy of governance. Nguyen Thi My Hanh (2019) argues that anti-piracy measures and port surveillance reflected active engagement with maritime trade, designed to protect both revenues and sovereignty. Nguyen Duy Phuong (2022) similarly highlights the role of port administration in combating smuggling and maintaining order, suggesting that the system was not static but responsive to challenges. This reinterpretation situates Nguyễn port policies within broader debates about state formation and globalization, recognizing them as rational, if ultimately constrained, efforts to navigate a turbulent era.

The legacy of Nguyễn port administration lies in its demonstration of the intimate link between commerce and sovereignty. Ports were not merely commercial gateways but sites where the state enacted its authority, asserted its moral vision, and confronted the challenges of foreign intrusion. The elaborate procedures, the ritualized exchanges, and the fortifications all reveal a vision of governance that sought to contain commerce within the bounds of political and cultural integrity. While ultimately overtaken by colonial power, this vision illustrates the agency of a traditional monarchy in shaping its engagement with the wider world.

In sum, port administration under the Nguyễn dynasty was central to the state's maritime strategy. By concentrating trade at selected harbors, imposing elaborate procedures, and embedding commerce within a framework of sovereignty and morality, the dynasty sought to regulate foreign contact and protect its fiscal and cultural foundations. The system's effectiveness was mixed: it generated revenue, maintained order, and reinforced authority, but it also encouraged smuggling, alienated foreign traders, and proved vulnerable to colonial intervention. The trajectory of port administration thus encapsulates the broader dilemmas of the Nguyễn dynasty in the nineteenth century: how to defend sovereignty while participating in global trade, how to assert control without closing off opportunities, and how to preserve tradition in the face of modern challenges. The answers the dynasty provided were coherent within their own logic but ultimately insufficient against the pressures of imperialism and globalization.

Maritime Trade and Foreign Interaction

Maritime trade under the Nguyễn dynasty represented both a continuation of earlier regional patterns and a new arena of contestation shaped by the pressures of nineteenth-century globalization. From 1802 to 1884, Vietnam's engagement with foreign traders unfolded through carefully managed ports, tariff regulations, and a diplomatic discourse that framed commerce as inseparable from sovereignty. While the dynasty recognized the material benefits of maritime trade, it approached foreign interaction with caution, seeking to extract revenue and secure goods without surrendering political control. This balancing act defined Vietnam's position in the South China Sea and shaped its relations with neighboring Asian states as well as encroaching European powers.

The structure of maritime trade was anchored in well-established routes linking Vietnam with China, Southeast Asia, and, increasingly, Europe. Chinese junks were the backbone of these exchanges, arriving seasonally with silk, ceramics, tea, and manufactured goods, and departing with rice, salt, pepper, and forest products. These junks operated within a tributary-like framework, paying duties at Vietnamese ports and presenting ritualized gifts to imperial officials, which reinforced symbolic hierarchies even as they facilitated commerce (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 1992, vol. 5, p. 317). For the

Nguyễn court, the junk trade was familiar and relatively manageable, offering a steady source of revenue and goods without the disruptive cultural and political influence associated with Europeans.

Relations with Siam were more complex. Both Vietnam and Siam sought to dominate trade in the Gulf of Thailand and the Mekong Delta, leading to repeated clashes over Cambodian territory and tributary relations. Maritime trade in this region often blurred into political rivalry, with merchants doubling as envoys and trade missions masking geopolitical maneuvering. Vietnamese sources describe Siamese traders as both partners and threats, reflecting the dual nature of regional interaction. Rice exports from the Mekong Delta were highly coveted, and control over these flows became a point of contention between the two monarchies (Choi, 2004, pp. 118–121). Yet commerce also created channels for negotiation, as both states recognized the mutual benefits of regulated exchange despite ongoing conflicts.

Trade with Japan, which had been significant in the seventeenth century, diminished under the Nguyễn dynasty due to the Tokugawa shogunate's sakoku (closed country) policies. However, limited contacts persisted through indirect exchanges via Chinese and Ryukyuan intermediaries. Vietnamese records occasionally mention Japanese goods such as copper, swords, and lacquerware, which reached Vietnamese markets through these networks. Although the scale was small compared to earlier centuries, these flows illustrate Vietnam's embeddedness in East Asian circuits even under conditions of Japanese seclusion (Li, 2006).

The most fraught interactions were with Western traders, particularly the French and British. Initially, European merchants approached Vietnam with commercial aims, seeking markets for textiles, arms, and manufactured goods, as well as sources of rice and raw materials. Yet they quickly encountered the restrictive framework of Nguyễn port administration and tariff policies. Reports by British envoys, such as John Crawford in the 1820s, complained of “endless prohibitions and exactions” that rendered trade unprofitable

(Crawfurd, 1828, p. 233). French traders faced similar frustrations, though their commercial ambitions soon became intertwined with missionary activity and geopolitical designs. The Nguyễn court's ambivalence toward Western merchants was rooted in both ideology and experience. On the one hand, European goods were often desired by elites, particularly firearms, textiles, and luxury items. On the other hand, the court associated Europeans with religious subversion, political arrogance, and military threat, especially after the Opium War revealed China's vulnerability to Western power. Minh Mạng's edicts explicitly linked restrictions on missionaries to restrictions on trade, treating both as aspects of foreign intrusion that required containment (Woodside, 1971, pp. 142–145). The conflation of commerce and cultural defense meant that maritime trade with Europe was never simply an economic issue but always entangled with sovereignty and ideology.

Nevertheless, Europeans continued to pursue Vietnamese trade. The establishment of Singapore in 1819 as a free-trade hub under British control intensified competition. Many merchants who found Nguyễn restrictions onerous redirected their ships to Singapore, where duties were minimal and procedures straightforward. This diversion weakened Vietnam's integration into global networks, as regional flows increasingly bypassed its ports. French traders, however, persisted, motivated not only by profit but also by strategic ambitions. By the 1850s, commercial demands for lower tariffs had merged with missionary appeals for religious freedom and strategic calculations about Indochina's geopolitical value. Maritime trade thus became one of the justifications for French military intervention, with colonial propaganda portraying Vietnam's restrictive policies as obstacles to “civilized commerce” (Brocheux & Hémery, 2009, pp. 98–100).

The tension between openness and protectionism was evident in the Nguyễn court's attempts to regulate specific commodities. Rice exports were carefully monitored, as the dynasty feared that excessive outflows could undermine domestic food security. Salt, essential for both diet and preservation, was subject to monopoly control, with duties embedded in its distribution. Opium, by contrast, was officially prohibited, reflecting both moral concerns and the desire to prevent dependency on foreign suppliers. Yet opium nonetheless flowed into Vietnam through smuggling networks, often with the complicity

of corrupt officials. The contradictions of policy—official prohibition coexisting with widespread consumption—highlight the limitations of state control in the face of global demand (Tagliacozzo, 2004, pp. 67–71).

The commercial exchanges themselves reveal a diverse array of goods. Vietnamese exports included rice from the Mekong Delta, ceramics from northern kilns, pepper from the central highlands, and forest products such as eaglewood and beeswax. Imports ranged from Chinese silk and porcelain to Western textiles, glassware, firearms, and navigational instruments. These exchanges not only shaped consumption patterns but also influenced social structures, as new goods altered status markers and created new forms of cultural hybridity. Elite households displayed imported wares as symbols of prestige, while commoners encountered foreign goods through markets and smuggling networks. The diffusion of these commodities demonstrates the porousness of cultural boundaries despite official attempts at restriction.

Maritime trade also intersected with diplomacy. Foreign envoys frequently combined trade missions with diplomatic overtures, blurring the distinction between commerce and politics. Chinese junks, Siamese embassies, and Western envoys all navigated the symbolic rituals of Vietnamese court protocol, where tribute, tariffs, and trade merged into a single framework of regulated interaction. The Nguyễn court sought to maintain hierarchical superiority in these encounters, but the asymmetries of power increasingly undermined this posture. By the mid-nineteenth century, Western envoys refused to submit to tributary rituals, insisting instead on equal treaties that eroded imperial authority. Trade thus became a battlefield for competing conceptions of order: Confucian hierarchy versus European equality and free trade (Fairbank, 1968). Resistance to foreign trade restrictions took multiple forms. Smuggling, as noted, circumvented official controls. Foreign merchants lobbied their governments to intervene militarily, framing Nguyễn policies as intolerable. Within Vietnam, some local elites favored greater openness, recognizing the potential benefits of external exchange. Reformist voices, though limited, anticipated later nationalist arguments that integration with global commerce was essential

for modernization. Yet these voices remained marginal during the Nguyễn era, overshadowed by the court's overriding concern with sovereignty and cultural integrity.

The decline of Nguyễn control over maritime trade was gradual but inexorable. Military defeats in the 1850s and 1860s led to treaties that forced the opening of ports under fixed tariffs favorable to the French. The 1862 Treaty of Saigon and the 1874 treaty stripped the dynasty of tariff autonomy, allowing French merchants to trade on preferential terms. By the 1880s, with the establishment of the French protectorate, maritime trade was fully absorbed into colonial structures, with ports like Sài Gòn and Hải Phòng transformed into hubs of empire. What had once been spaces of imperial surveillance became instruments of colonial extraction, linking Vietnam to global markets on terms dictated by foreign powers.

Historians have debated how to interpret Nguyễn maritime trade policies. Colonial accounts often portrayed them as evidence of backwardness, contrasting Vietnamese “closed” ports with the “open” harbors of colonial entrepôts. Nationalist historians, in turn, have emphasized the dynasty's determination to defend sovereignty, framing restrictive policies as heroic resistance. More recent scholarship has sought a middle ground. Nguyen Thi My Hanh (2019) highlights the pragmatic aspects of anti-piracy measures, suggesting that the dynasty actively engaged with maritime trade within its own framework. Nguyen Duy Phuong (2022) emphasizes the role of port control in combating smuggling and maintaining order, pointing to the adaptability of policies in response to challenges. These reinterpretations align with broader historiographical trends that stress the agency of non-Western states in shaping their engagement with globalization.

The legacy of maritime trade and foreign interaction under the Nguyễn dynasty lies in its dual character. On the one hand, it demonstrated Vietnam's integration into regional and global networks, as goods, people, and ideas circulated through its ports. On the other hand, it revealed the limits of state control, as smuggling, foreign pressure, and internal divisions undermined imperial authority. The dynasty's cautious approach reflected a coherent vision of sovereignty but ultimately proved inadequate against the forces of industrial capitalism and colonial expansion. In this sense, the history of Nguyễn maritime

trade exemplifies the broader dilemmas of nineteenth-century Asia: how to balance openness with protection, how to benefit from global commerce without succumbing to imperial domination, and how to reconcile tradition with change.

Conclusion

The examination of tariff policies, port administration, and maritime trade under the Nguyễn dynasty between 1802 and 1884 reveals the complex interplay between fiscal imperatives, ideological commitments, and the challenges of a rapidly transforming global order. Tariffs were not simply fiscal tools but instruments of sovereignty, embedding commerce within a framework of Confucian political economy that emphasized agrarian stability and moral governance. By structuring duties to favor local merchants while imposing heavier burdens on foreigners, the dynasty sought both to nurture a domestic mercantile class and to limit external dominance. Yet such measures also stimulated smuggling, fostered corruption, and alienated foreign traders, thereby undermining the very authority they were intended to reinforce.

Port administration complemented these fiscal policies by transforming harbors such as Đà Nẵng, Hội An, and Gia Định into spaces of surveillance and control. Elaborate customs procedures, ritualized exchanges, and military fortifications embodied the dynasty's determination to regulate foreign contact. While effective in symbolizing authority, these measures also diverted international commerce toward more open colonial entrepôts such as Singapore, reducing Vietnam's share of emerging global networks. The defense of ports against foreign intrusion, most vividly demonstrated in the bombardment of Đà Nẵng in 1858, highlighted both the strengths and the vulnerabilities of traditional methods of maritime governance.

Maritime trade itself reflected the tension between openness and protectionism. Exchanges with Chinese junks and regional traders provided revenue and goods while reinforcing tributary hierarchies. Relations with Siam blended commerce with political rivalry, while contacts with Japan persisted indirectly through intermediaries. European traders, however, presented the greatest challenge. Their demands for freer access collided with Nguyễn restrictions, transforming commercial disputes into diplomatic crises and

eventually into military confrontation. The court's insistence on maintaining strict controls, rooted in both sovereignty and cultural defense, left little room for compromise once European powers embraced free trade as a principle of imperial expansion.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the limitations of this approach became starkly evident. Military defeats and unequal treaties stripped the dynasty of tariff autonomy and port control, integrating Vietnam into colonial structures that privileged French interests. What had once been instruments of sovereignty became symbols of dependency. Yet the coherence of Nguyễn policies should not be dismissed. They represented rational attempts by a traditional monarchy to navigate globalization on its own terms, balancing fiscal needs, cultural integrity, and political survival. Their eventual failure reflected less an absence of strategy than the asymmetry of power in an age of imperialism.

The legacy of Nguyễn maritime governance endures in two key ways. First, it demonstrates how non-Western states sought to assert agency in shaping their engagement with global trade, even under severe constraints. Second, it highlights the centrality of tariffs and ports as sites where commerce, diplomacy, and sovereignty converged. For modern historiography, these findings contribute to comparative debates on Asian responses to globalization, situating Vietnam alongside China, Siam, and Japan in confronting the dilemmas of the nineteenth century. For contemporary Vietnam, the history of Nguyễn maritime policies resonates in ongoing discussions of sovereignty, trade, and resource management in the South China Sea, reminding us that the defense of maritime frontiers has long been intertwined with questions of national survival and identity.

In conclusion, the Nguyễn dynasty's maritime strategy was marked by coherence, caution, and ultimately vulnerability. It reveals a state deeply aware of the benefits and dangers of external contact, determined to regulate trade in accordance with its values, yet unable to withstand the pressures of industrial capitalism and colonial expansion. This story is not one of isolation or passivity but of active engagement on unequal terms, offering enduring insights into the historical entanglement of commerce and sovereignty in Southeast Asia.

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