

## China's Protective Diplomacy: Safeguarding Vietnam's Sovereignty Amidst 19th Century Complexities

VU DUONG LUAN<sup>1</sup>, KU BOON DAR<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Interdisciplinary Studies, Vietnam National University,  
G7 Building, 144 Xuan Thuy Street, Hanoi, Cau Giay District, Hanoi, Vietnam*

<sup>2</sup>*School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia,  
11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia*

Corresponding author: [kubd@usm.my](mailto:kubd@usm.my)

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### Abstract

During the 19th century, a multifaceted dynamic unfolded among China, Vietnam, and France. France's ambitions to extend colonial control over Vietnam posed a potential threat to China's security and regional stability. This article delves into the historical context, exploring China's diplomatic and military strategies aimed at safeguarding Vietnam from French colonization. By analyzing historical accounts and scholarly sources, the study illuminates China's efforts to preserve Vietnam's sovereignty. Focusing on pivotal events, diplomatic initiatives, and military campaigns undertaken by China, the research sheds light on the perspectives of notable Chinese diplomats, including Zeng Jize, Tang Yanggeng, Chen Baozhen, and Zhang Peilun. The essay underscores China's pivotal role in protecting Vietnam and maintaining regional security concerns. It highlights the intricate nature of managing diplomatic relations with both Vietnam and France, necessitating a delicate balance. Through a comprehensive examination of historical dynamics, this article enriches our understanding of the intricate connections between China, Vietnam, and France during this critical period.

Keywords: Sino-Vietnamese-France; Tributary System; Chinese Diplomats; Black Flag Army's; Sino-Vietnamese Relations

### Introduction

The signing of the Saigon Treaty on March 15, 1874, marked a significant turning point in the relationship between France, Vietnam, and China. However, contrary to expectations, the treaty failed to satisfy France due to non-compliance from both the Vietnamese and Chinese governments. The treaty's terms granted France rights over Cochin China, which triggered desperate actions from the French to consolidate their power in Vietnam. This, in turn, exacerbated political instability within Vietnam, ultimately paving the way for France's colonisation of the country through subsequent treaties.

Simultaneously, China was compelled to take measures to prevent further colonisation by France and safeguard Vietnam's sovereignty. Recognising the gravity of the situation, Chinese officials sought comprehensive resolutions to address the conflict in Vietnam. This article analyses the strategy employed by Chinese officials and evaluates the extent to which the Chinese government succeeded in preventing the French colonisation of Vietnam.

It is important to note that there were differing opinions among Chinese officials regarding the best approach to tackle the conflict in Vietnam. As a result, a range of solutions was proposed, encompassing political approaches, treaty negotiations, and even military strategies. These diverse

perspectives reflected the complexities and challenges faced by China in dealing with the French threat and protecting the interests of both China and Vietnam.

By analysing historical records from both Chinese and Vietnamese sources and examining the outcomes of these proposed solutions, this paper sheds light on China's effectiveness in preventing French colonisation. It delves into the motivations, strategies, and decisions made by Chinese officials, offering insights into the dynamics of this pivotal period in history. This examination clarifies the complex relationship between China, Vietnam, and France, highlighting these events' significant implications and long-lasting consequences.

The French colonisation of Vietnam during the late 19th century has been a topic of scholarly interest, particularly the role played by China in attempting to prevent this colonisation. This literature review aims to explore the existing research on the subject, examining the key findings, theories, and perspectives put forth by scholars. In Brown's comprehensive work, he provides an overview of the historical context and events leading up to the French colonisation of Vietnam. Brown highlights China's concerns over French expansionism and its efforts to counteract it, setting the stage for further analysis.<sup>1</sup> Chen's seminal work delves into the Sino-French War and China's military strategies to resist French colonisation. The author explains the Chinese military's involvement in Vietnam, highlighting their covert operations and objectives.<sup>2</sup> Wang examines the diplomatic engagements between China and Vietnam during the early stages of French colonisation. The article explores China's political approaches and negotiations to prevent further French encroachment in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> Duiker's work provides a broader perspective on Vietnamese nationalism and its relationship with China's efforts to counter French colonisation. The author explores how China's support for Vietnam's independence movement influenced the course of events and shaped Vietnamese resistance.<sup>4</sup>

Marr's groundbreaking study delves into the intricate interplay among China, France, and Vietnam during the pivotal era of the Vietnamese revolution and the quest for independence. The author discusses the impact of China's actions on the broader geopolitical landscape and the subsequent outcomes for Vietnam.<sup>5</sup>

This literature review demonstrates the multifaceted nature of China's efforts to prevent French colonisation in Vietnam. Scholars have approached the topic from various angles, exploring political, military, and diplomatic dimensions. By synthesising these works, a deeper understanding of China's actions' historical context, motivations, and outcomes emerges. Further research could delve into primary sources and conduct comparative studies to enhance our understanding of this crucial period in East Asian history.

In reviewing the existing literature on China's efforts to prevent French colonisation in Vietnam, several gaps and weaknesses warrant further investigation in our discussion. These gaps include a narrow focus on internal Vietnamese dynamics, insufficient regional and global context exploration, limited access to primary sources, varied interpretations of China's motives and strategies, and a need for comparative studies.

While many studies examine China's role and actions, there needs to be more in-depth analysis regarding the internal dynamics and decision-making processes within Vietnam. Additionally, some works concentrate primarily on the bilateral relationship between China and France, overlooking the time's broader regional and global context. By exploring the factors influencing Vietnam's response to French colonisation and its interaction with China, we can gain valuable insights into the situation's complexities.

Furthermore, due to the historical nature of the topic, there may be challenges in accessing primary sources and archival materials. As a result, scholars often rely on secondary sources and translated accounts, which may introduce potential biases or gaps in understanding the events and motivations surrounding China's actions. Moreover, scholars may offer differing interpretations

of China's objectives and strategies in its attempts to prevent French colonisation. Some sources may emphasise political or diplomatic efforts, while others highlight military or covert actions. Addressing these perspectives and reconciling conflicting interpretations would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of China's approach.

By addressing these gaps and weaknesses in our discussion, we can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of China's endeavours to prevent French colonisation in Vietnam and shed light on the complexities of the historical events and their implications.

### **The Tributary System and its Implications for French Colonial Ambitions**

Historically, the tributary relationship between China and Vietnam involved a complex system of political and cultural interactions, with China traditionally regarded as a superior power and Vietnam as a subordinate state. In this system, Vietnam would pay tribute to China as a gesture of respect and recognition of China's dominance. China, in turn, would grant Vietnam various privileges and gifts as a sign of acceptance and protection. The relationship was characterised by unequal power dynamics, where China exerted influence over Vietnam's foreign policy and governance. Despite these imbalances, Vietnam managed to maintain a degree of autonomy and independence in its internal affairs. Over the centuries, the tributary relationship fluctuated, with periods of tension and conflict, as well as cooperation and mutual benefit, shaping the historical ties between these two neighbouring nations.

Despite France's conquest of much of Vietnam through the Treaty of Saigon in 1874, the tributary relationship between China and Vietnam persisted. The final mission to China, led by Tran Nguyen Khanh Thuan and his assistants Nguyen Thuc and Hoan Nguyen, arrived in Beijing on March 20, 1882, receiving a warm welcome. They were initially accommodated at the Gate of Divine Military Genius before meeting China's emperor, Guangxu (1871-1908). Recognising their worn appearance after a long journey, Emperor Guangxu bestowed silk garments upon the Vietnamese envoys. Emperor Guangxu emphasised Vietnam's importance as a protectorate state and urged them to strengthen their self-esteem and sovereignty.<sup>6</sup>

In 1882, Governor Le Myre de Vilers of Cochin, China, attempted to capture Hanoi. Vietnam's emperor, Tu Duc (1847-1883), promptly wrote to Emperor Guangxu, seeking assistance and emphasising Vietnam's long-standing tributary status under China. According to Emperor Tu Duc, every part of Vietnam belonged to China, and it was China's responsibility to protect Vietnam's sovereignty. He implored China only to allow France to destroy Vietnam without taking necessary actions to defend it. Emperor Tu Duc had previously sent a letter to Emperor Guangxu in 1879, confirming Vietnam's continued status as a Chinese protectorate, agreeing to pay annual tribute, and pledging loyalty to the Chinese lords.<sup>7</sup>

The letter from Tu Duc, the Emperor of Vietnam, addressed to the Chinese emperor in the mid-19th century, played a crucial role in shaping China's reaction and its significance concerning the development of French activities in Vietnam. When Tu Duc sent the letter to the Chinese emperor seeking protection and asserting Vietnam's continued tribute relationship with China, it responded to the escalating encroachment of French colonial ambitions in Southeast Asia, particularly in Vietnam. The letter reflected Vietnam's concern over the growing threat of French intervention and colonisation.

Emperor Tu Duc's conviction that China's prosperity brought peace to Vietnam reflected the historical dynamics of the time. As noted by historian Li Tana that China's political stability and economic prosperity were viewed by Vietnamese rulers as crucial for the maintenance of domestic peace and security. By the mid-19th century, China was experiencing internal turmoil and weakening power, making it challenging for the Chinese authorities to exert significant military or political

pressure on the French. This weakness allowed the French to exploit the situation and gradually extend their control over Vietnam. However, during the reign of Emperor Xianfeng (1850-1861), China faced internal challenges in the form of the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) and external conflicts with the advancing European powers. China faced formidable challenges from European powers, ultimately leading to its temporary withdrawal from Vietnam.

According to Yu Changsen, China's retreat from Vietnam under Emperor Xianfeng's rule left a power vacuum that European colonial powers quickly exploited.<sup>8</sup> France, in particular, capitalised on China's weakened position and swiftly expanded its influence by capturing six provinces in Vietnam. This territorial acquisition strained Vietnam's financial resources and significantly altered the country's political landscape.

The loss of these provinces and the French's subsequent economic exploitation profoundly impacted Vietnam's stability. As historian Peng Qiaohong points out, the French imposed their economic policies on Vietnam, exploiting its natural resources and leaving the country with limited financial means.<sup>9</sup> This situation exacerbated Vietnam's economic challenges and intensified its struggle for independence and self-determination.

The consequences of China's temporary withdrawal and France's territorial expansion highlighted the need for Vietnam to assert its autonomy. As scholar Long Yongxing emphasises, Vietnam was compelled to confront the reality of foreign domination and reevaluate its path towards independence.<sup>10</sup> The events that unfolded during this period shaped Vietnam's resolve to rebuild, resist foreign intervention, and strive for self-preservation.

In summary, Emperor Tu Duc's belief in China's prosperity as a source of peace for Vietnam was disrupted by the challenges China faced from European powers. China's temporary withdrawal allowed France to control Vietnamese territories, straining Vietnam's financial resources. These circumstances heightened Vietnam's awareness of the need to assert its independence and navigate the complex dynamics of foreign domination.<sup>11</sup>

China was aware of France's long-standing interest in Vietnam. Left vulnerable, Vietnam was unable to defend itself against French attacks. The Treaty of Saigon in 1862 allowed France to expand its territory up to the Red River, posing a threat to China as it provided easier access for France to reach China through Yunnan. China feared that the deterioration of security would jeopardise the sovereignty of both Vietnam and China. Vietnam's position and location were viewed as a protective barrier by China. In other words, the collapse of Vietnam would have the same impact on China. Governor General Liu Changyou of Shanxi Province highlighted this concern.

“The borders of China are our neighbouring countries; States on the borders of China are the door while fences are the tributary gates of China. We [China] erected fences to protect the door because the door guarantees the security of our home country. If the fence is broken, then the door will shake. If the door shakes, our home [China] will face a disaster.”<sup>12</sup>

In a proposal to Emperor Guangxu, Zhou Derun, an officer of the Academic of the Grand Secretariat emphasised that,

“The capture of Vietnam was a disaster for China, as the famous Chinese aphorism goes “*zhenlin qiefu, chunwang chi han*” (Neighbouring lands tremble and suffer; when the lips are gone, the teeth feel cold). Should China continue to show apathy, will it bring about the collapse of the tributary system? Not only the Ryukyu Islands would be lost, but Chinese protectorate states like Korea, and Mongolia would be

difficult to defend.”<sup>13</sup>

Subsequently, Zhou Derun urged China to take necessary measures, as the loss of Vietnam would have catastrophic consequences for the survival of the Qing Dynasty and its other protectorates. The concept of “*zhenlin qiefu, chunwang chihan*” advocated by Zhou Derun, gained support from officials of the Hanlin Academy, who maintained that China should adopt the “*baoyue gubian*” (defending Vietnam and strengthening the borders) strategy to protect Vietnam's sovereignty and improve border security. The Chinese idiom “*zhenlin qiefu, chunwang chihan*” symbolises the close interdependence between neighbouring entities, emphasising that harm or disturbance one faces will affect the other. It underlines the significance of maintaining harmonious relations and mutual support with neighbours, reminding us that cooperation and unity are vital for the well-being and stability of both parties. If one neighbour suffers a loss or downfall, the other will also feel the consequences, stressing the importance of interconnectedness and collaboration in various aspects of life. These views, known as the “*rujia voice*” (voice of the literati), led to the establishment of the Qing Liutang (Party of the Purists). Prominent members included Zhang Peilun, the Governor General of Liangguang; Zhang Shusheng, the Governor General of Liangjiang; Liu Kunyi, the Governor of Shanxi; and Governor Zhang Zhidong. Their notable proposal emphasised the importance of defending the surrounding territories, including Vietnam, rather than solely focusing on repelling invasions from the north, south, east, and west. This proposal was known as “*suowei shou sijing, buru shou siyi*” (defend the four borders, rather than conquer the four barbarians).<sup>14</sup>

The phrase “*suowei shou sijing, buru shou siyi*” can be translated as “It is better to defend the barbarians of the four quarters than to guard the four borders.” This proposal suggests that rather than solely focusing on protecting China's borders, it is more advantageous to defend the peripheral territories and peoples, including Vietnam, that surround China. By prioritising the defence of these external territories, it is believed that China's overall security and stability would be better ensured instead of solely concentrating on repelling invasions from the four cardinal directions.

The Chinese aristocrats strongly advocated for preserving China's tributary system in its dealings with Vietnam, as they believed it would grant China authority and control over Vietnam, effectively countering French colonial ambitions. By maintaining tributary relationships, China aimed to maintain peace in the southwestern region and along the China-Vietnam border. Thus, China vehemently opposed French endeavours to safeguard the security and sovereignty of both Vietnam and China. China put forth several proposals rooted in tributary relationships to prevent Vietnam from falling under French control.

### **Zeng Jize's Proposals: Strengthening China-Vietnam Collaboration and Challenging French Colonialism**

The background to Zeng Jize's “Seven Proposals to Liberate Vietnam” lies in the historical context of the late 19th century, during which French colonialism was expanding its influence in Southeast Asia, particularly in Vietnam. China and Vietnam shared a long-standing tributary relationship, with historical ties dating back centuries. As the threat of French colonial expansion in Vietnam intensified, Zeng Jize, a Chinese statesman and scholar, saw the urgency of devising a comprehensive strategy to protect Vietnam's sovereignty and maintain regional stability.

Zeng Jize was a prominent Chinese official and diplomat during the Qing Dynasty. He was born in 1839 in Guangdong Province, China. Zeng Jize was well-educated and deeply understood Chinese history, culture, and diplomatic affairs. His expertise and background made him a trusted advisor in the imperial court. Zeng Jize's relationship with the Chinese emperor, Emperor Guangxu,

was that of an influential advisor and diplomat. His position allowed him direct access to the emperor, and the court highly valued his recommendations. His reputation for diplomatic skills and foresight earned him significant respect and authority among the officials.

Zeng Jize's "Seven Proposals to Liberate Vietnam" responded to the escalating French invasion of Vietnam and aimed to strengthen China-Vietnam cooperation to resist colonialism. His recommendations stressed the importance of unity and collaboration between China and Vietnam to confront the French threat effectively. The seven proposals encompassed various aspects, including strengthening military cooperation to protect Vietnam's borders from French aggression, engaging in diplomatic efforts to garner international support and raise awareness about the French expansion in Vietnam, providing economic aid and assistance to bolster Vietnam's resources and resist French economic influence, emphasising the shared cultural heritage between China and Vietnam to foster a sense of solidarity and unity against colonialism, establishing an effective information network to exchange intelligence and coordinate efforts against the French, enhancing maritime defence capabilities to safeguard Vietnam's territorial waters, and strengthening border control measures to prevent French infiltration. Zeng Jize's proposals reflected a comprehensive approach to addressing the challenges of French colonialism in Vietnam. His emphasis on cooperation between China and Vietnam highlighted the significance of historical ties and the need for a united front against foreign encroachment. While his efforts were not entirely successful in preventing French colonisation, his initiative demonstrated a commitment to regional stability and preserving traditional Chinese-Vietnamese relations in the face of external threats.

In his proposal, Zeng Jize advocated deploying Chinese troops to Vietnam to assist in border conflicts and deter further French encroachment. This military collaboration was seen as crucial in protecting Vietnam's sovereignty. He notes to Emperor Guangxu that he sought to create a united front against France by using China's military power to support Vietnam. Zeng recognised the strength that could be derived from a coordinated defence effort.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, Zeng stressed the significance of diplomatic endeavours. He proposed leveraging China's diplomatic channels to garner support from other Western powers sympathetic to Vietnam's cause. Historian Shao Xunzheng highlights that Zeng aimed to create a favourable international environment by enlisting the help of Western powers who shared China's concern about French expansionism.<sup>16</sup> This diplomatic approach sought to mobilise broader international support for Vietnam's struggle against colonial rule.

Zeng's proposals also included economic measures to enhance Vietnam's resilience. He emphasised the importance of trade and economic exchanges between China and Vietnam and financial assistance in Vietnam's economic reconstruction. Shao Xunzheng observes that Zeng's economic initiatives aimed to promote Vietnam's self-sufficiency and strengthen its capacity to resist foreign exploitation.<sup>17</sup> Economic stability was viewed as crucial in supporting Vietnam's resistance efforts.

Zeng Jize's 'Seven Proposals to Liberate Vietnam' represented a strategic and comprehensive approach to addressing the crisis in Vietnam. Although the full implementation of these proposals faced challenges, they reflected China's commitment to forging a solid alliance with Vietnam and pursuing collaborative strategies to counter French colonialism. Zeng's initiatives demonstrated China's recognition of the importance of Vietnam's independence and willingness to support Vietnam in its struggle against colonial domination.

From a diplomatic perspective, Zeng Jize suggested allowing Vietnamese officers to be stationed in Beijing, enabling prompt transmission of vital information from China to Vietnam. Furthermore, he proposed that the Chinese embassy in France serve as a space where Vietnamese officials could operate, facilitating their role as intermediaries in resolving issues between the two

countries. Regarding military considerations, Zeng Jize recommended that China's Navy assume control over the Red River, enabling China to monitor and safeguard Vietnam, thereby preventing further encroachment by Western powers, particularly France.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, China planned to dispatch officials to Vietnam to investigate the latest developments within the country. China aimed for a comprehensive solution to resist the French invasion by facilitating information and intelligence exchange. As a result of resolutions presented by Chen Baozhen and Zhang Peilun to China's emperor Guangxu on March 15, 1881, China decided to send Tang Yanggeng to Vietnam to establish contact and cooperation with Vietnam's emperor Tu Duc (1829-1883) to drive France out of Vietnam.<sup>19</sup>

### **Efforts to Preserve Vietnam's Sovereignty: Proposals and Suggestions by Chinese Officials**

Chen Baozhen (1831-1900) and Zhang Peilun (1848-1903) emerged as notable individuals during the latter period of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Their significant contributions played a pivotal role in shaping the intricate dynamics of Vietnam-China-France interactions during the 19th century. Alternatively, Chen Baozhen occupied prominent positions within China's political and military spheres throughout the Qing Dynasty. Known for his practical and realistic approach, he was the Viceroy of Liangjiang, responsible for the governance and management of the provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi. Zhang Peilun (1848-1903) was a late Qing dynasty government official from China. He was a naval commander during the Sino-French War from August 1884 to April 1885. Drawing upon his extensive experience in diplomacy, he actively participated in official matters, providing a distinct viewpoint on international relations.

On the fifteenth of March in the year 1881, a resolution was delivered to Emperor Guangxu by officials Chen Baozhen, Zhang Peilun, and others, addressing the more aggressive colonial endeavours undertaken by the French in Vietnam. The decision above underscored the pressing necessity of addressing the issue of French aggression in Vietnam. It proposed dispatching Tang Yanggeng, a distinguished government official, to Vietnam, intending to initiate diplomatic dialogue with Emperor Tu Duc. The primary aim was to cultivate a spirit of cooperation between China and Vietnam, to establish a unified front against the expansionist endeavours of France and ultimately expel French influence from Vietnam.

Tang Yanggeng's endeavours focused on leveraging the historical connections and cultural affinities between China and Vietnam to safeguard Vietnam's sovereignty and promote regional stability by mitigating French influence. Although the resolution and efforts of Tang Yanggeng did not result in the quick withdrawal of French forces from Vietnam, they effectively showcased China's dedication to regional issues and acknowledgement of the significance of Vietnam's autonomy in the face of external encroachments. The initiatives above demonstrated China's commitment to fostering collaboration with Vietnam and addressing the various obstacles presented by French colonialism in the region.

Chen Baozhen and Zhang Peilun believed that Tang Yanggeng's position as a manager in the China Merchants Steam Navigation Company in Guangzhou (Canton) would not arouse suspicion from France. They also had confidence in Tan Yanggeng's political acumen and capabilities. Consequently, Tan Yanggeng was appointed as the Lieutenant-Governor of Guangdong based on the recommendation of Zhang Peilun and Zhang Shusheng from Guangxi.<sup>20</sup>

In February 1882, Tan Yanggeng, Huang Guoan, Pan Tangjing, and Zhou Binglin journeyed to Vietnam. The Chinese envoys disguised their purpose as managing rice importation and conducting business transactions between China and Vietnam. This approach was taken to buy China more time to prepare for a confrontation with France. Tang Yanggeng's mission did not involve meeting

Emperor Tu Duc due to concerns that such a meeting would raise suspicion from France. However, Tang Yanggeng successfully engaged with influential royal advisers of Vietnam, such as Nguyen Van Tuong, the president of the Ho-bo (Board of Finance), and Tran Thuc Dam.<sup>21</sup> During these discussions, Tang Yanggeng informed Nguyen Van Tuong and Tran Thuc Dam about France's intention to conquer northern Vietnam, urging Vietnam to exercise greater vigilance. Although China and Vietnam needed to devise a comprehensive plan to expel the French from Vietnam, the meeting resulted in Vietnam making the following requests to China.<sup>22</sup>

- a) To establish a Vietnamese embassy in Beijing to report to Zongli Yamen (Yemen Tsungli, China's Foreign Ministry) as soon as possible with any urgent matters involving establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries.
- b) To open a Vietnamese trade centre in Guangdong so that Vietnam and Chinese traders could mutually exchange intelligence and information about the activities of the French in Vietnam.
- c) To allow all Vietnamese envoys to board any Chinese ports.

Tang Yanggeng's statements deviated from the established norms of China-Vietnam tributary relations, which traditionally involved Vietnam offering tribute to China as a sign of recognition and seeking protection. In this customary system, China, as the dominant power, would provide its protection in exchange for loyalty and tribute. However, Tang Yanggeng proposed a reversal of this norm, suggesting that China should seek tribute from Vietnam instead. This unconventional proposition challenged the traditional power dynamics and China's role as the superior and protector. As a result, Tang Yanggeng's proposal was dismissed and remained only a claim since implementing such an approach required China's cooperation. Nonetheless, Vietnam recognised the importance of maintaining and strengthening ties with China, given China's historical influence and dominance in the region, making its support more significant than that of any other entity.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, the Chinese government instructed Tang Jingsong (1841-1903), the official secretary of the Department of Civil Affairs, to travel to Vietnam and assess the situation in Tonkin. Tang Jingsong's primary objective was to act as the spokesperson for Emperor Tu Duc and dissuade him from expelling Liu Yongfu (1837-1917), the leader of the Black Flag Army, under pressure from France.

Liu Yongfu, also known as Liu Yung-fu, held a prominent position in Chinese military history, rising to lead the Black Flag Army in the latter half of the 19th century. Born in 1837 in Guangdong, China, he gained significant recognition and emerged as a strong leader during the tumultuous era of the late Qing Dynasty. Tang Jingsong played a vital role as the designated representative for Emperor Tu Duc in Vietnam. As a Chinese diplomat appointed to Vietnam, his primary responsibility was to advocate for preserving Liu Yongfu and the Black Flag Army within the Vietnamese context, a decision influenced by external French pressure. The Black Flag Army, established initially to oppose the Taiping Rebellion in China, was successfully restructured by Liu Yongfu into a formidable military entity, playing a crucial role in Vietnam's defence.

The significance of the Black Flag Army lies in its pivotal contribution to Vietnam's resistance against French colonial forces. Under the leadership of Liu Yongfu, the army demonstrated exceptional military capabilities, engaging in numerous successful campaigns against the French. As a powerful ally, the Black Flag Army significantly supported Vietnam's pursuit of independence and sovereignty in the face of growing French influence.

Initially established for internal defence in China, the Black Flag Army redirected its efforts to aid Vietnam's resistance against external colonial threats. This shift exemplified the interdependence



of China and Vietnam's interests and their mutual aspiration to counteract colonial encroachment.

Liu Yongfu's historical importance in Vietnam's resistance movement and the essential role of the Black Flag Army in preserving Vietnam's sovereignty in the latter half of the 19th century remain subjects of scholarly interest. This highlights the intricate interactions among Vietnam, China, and France, with Tang Jingsong's diplomatic endeavours promoting collaboration and sustaining crucial military ties to offset French influence. The text underscores the significance of historical figures and military entities in shaping the complex dynamics of Vietnam-China-France relations during that period.

Additionally, Tang Jingsong aimed to provide moral support to Vietnam through his visit and caution Vietnam about the unreliable nature of the promises made by the French.<sup>24</sup>

On March 25, 1883, upon his return from Tonkin, Tang Jingsong, a Chinese general of the Yunnan army and a statesman submitted a proposal to China to strengthen China-Vietnam relations. The unexpected arrival of Tang Jingsong within the historical framework outlined in the passage carries considerable significance in bolstering the provided concepts. The individual in question emerged as a prominent personality, assuming a pivotal role in promoting enhanced diplomatic ties between China and Vietnam in the latter half of the 19th century, despite the formidable obstacles presented by French colonial presence in Vietnam.

This proposal, titled "*Xiangdu Bianqing Tiao Chenban Fazhe*" (A Proposal to Save China's State Border from French Colonialism), advocated for China's assistance and recognition of the leadership of Liu Yongfu.<sup>25</sup> Tang Jingsong suggested that China deploy troops from Yunnan, Guilin, and Guangdong to Vietnam to unite with the Chinese army and resist invading French forces. However, he emphasised the importance of recognising and supporting the Black Flag Army without directly engaging in conflict with France. Tang Jingsong further emphasised the significance of addressing the welfare and safety of the Chinese population (Thanh Nhan) residing in Vietnam. He proposed that the Chinese government establish contact with these individuals to prevent mistreatment by the French while utilising their skills and knowledge for China's benefit.<sup>26</sup>

However, Zeng Jize held a contrasting perspective regarding recognising the Black Flag Army. He advocated for unequivocal support to be extended to the army. According to Zeng Jize, China should officially acknowledge the legitimate status of the Black Flag Army to prevent their expulsion by France. The French had denounced them as 'rogues' and 'troublemakers' responsible for disrupting the China-Vietnam border. Zeng Jize recognised the crucial role played by the Black Flag Army in Vietnam's resistance against the French, considering them a formidable obstacle in the eyes of the French. The Black Flag Army's effectiveness in combatting French soldiers further reinforced this perception, as acknowledged by Jules Ferry (1832-1893), the Prime Minister of France, who made the following remark,

... We [the French] have a variety of ways to capture the state [Vietnam]. All over the empty chat! As long as the Black Flag Army is there [in Vietnam], all of them will not be successfully implemented [to conquer Vietnam].<sup>27</sup>

Hence, on September 18, 1883, Zeng Jize told Jules Ferry that China could not turn a blind eye to the predicament of the Black Flag Army. Nevertheless, on December 19, 1883, Jules Ferry advocated eradicating this group from its roots. Zeng Jize submitted detailed reports to the *Zongli Yamen* (Office of the Premier) outlining the oppressive actions of the French and strongly recommended that China recognise and forbid any endeavours aimed at eliminating the Black Flag.<sup>28</sup>

Consequently, during the Li-Fournier Negotiations of 1883, where Li Hongzhang represented China, Emperor Guangxu explicitly instructed Li Hongzhang not to entertain any demands put forth

by France regarding the expulsion of the Black Flag Army from Vietnam. China's strategy of rescuing and recognising the Black Flag Army proved prudent, as the group later emerged as an impregnable security barrier during the Sino-French War.<sup>29</sup>

An attempt was made through political negotiations between Li Hongzhang and Frederic Albert Bouree, the French ambassador in Beijing, to rescue Vietnam from French colonial domination. China had advised Vietnam to dispatch competent officials to Tianjin to participate in the Chinese deliberations to find a negotiated solution.<sup>30</sup> As a result, Pham Than Dat, the President of the Board of Justice, and Nguyen Thuat, the Vice President, were sent as Vietnam's representatives in the negotiations. During these negotiations, China and France resolved and tentatively agreed to the following.<sup>31</sup>

- a) China was asked to retreat its army from Vietnam because France had no intention of taking control of Vietnam.
- b) China and France were allowed to establish their own tax collection centres and marketing facilities in Lao Cai (also called Lao Kay or Laokai) near the Red River.
- c) Delineation of a clear border between China and France. Northern Vietnam was under the protection of China, while France patronised the provinces in southern Vietnam. The two countries agreed to protect northern Vietnam from any other aggression of a foreign power.

Unfortunately, the series of consultations proved unsuccessful as they were rejected by Jules Ferry, who took over as the Prime Minister of France, replacing Charles de Freycinet on September 23, 1880. Charles perceived the recommendations and demands put forward by Frederic Albert Bouree as a concession to China and a diminishment of France's position, contrary to the Saigon Agreement of 1874, which had already acknowledged the special rights of the French provinces in Cochin, China. In light of this, Arthur Tricou, the French ambassador to Japan, was appointed as a special representative (Envoy Extraordinaire) to replace Bouree and resume negotiations.<sup>32</sup>

### **China's Diplomatic Efforts and The Coronation Ceremony: Striving to Protect Vietnam and Counter French Ambitions**

Therefore, China adopted a different approach in its efforts to protect Vietnam. It redefined the dynamics of its tributary relations with Vietnam, aiming to strengthen the bond between the two nations and reclaim sovereignty over its provinces in Vietnam. Zeng Jize, representing China, initiated discussions and debates regarding the tributary system with France. As part of these efforts, on September 20, 1881, Zeng Jize, who was stationed in St. Petersburg, Russia, lodged a formal protest with the French Foreign Ministry through Antoine Chanzy, the French Ambassador in Russia, regarding the French military intervention in Tonkin. He highlighted the fact that,

Vietnam has long enjoyed China's protection and is a protectorate of China. In any urgent matters in the State of Vietnam, China cannot be ignored, let alone not be informed.<sup>33</sup>

However, Bouree, who had recently assumed a position in the French Foreign Ministry, strongly objected to Zeng Jize's suggestion. He argued that "Tonkin is under the protection of Annam [Vietnam], and Annam [Vietnam] is under the protection of the French. Therefore, the issue of whether Annam [Vietnam] belongs to China or not is irrelevant." Following the resolution of the

China-Russia conflict (1879-1880) over the sovereignty of the Province of Ili (Xinjiang), Zeng Jize promptly reported to the French authorities that,<sup>34</sup> “the borders are linking Vietnam with China. By maintaining Vietnam, China sustains the provinces in it [China]”.<sup>35</sup>

He stated that China's ultimate goal is establishing Vietnam as its protectorate, regardless of the ongoing discussions in Shanghai or Paris. No satisfactory resolution was reached despite Zeng Jize's objections conveyed diplomatically. He conceded to this fact.<sup>36</sup>,

Even though we argued strongly against their invasion [the French] in Vietnam and questioned the terms of the agreement signed by them [the French]. They [the French] have been determined to capture Vietnam. They [the French] will not let its escape so easily again.<sup>37</sup>

Hence, to reinforce the already tributary solid relationship, China placed great importance on the traditional coronation ceremony of the Vietnamese king. Emperor Ham Nghi, who succeeded Tu Duc as the ruler of Vietnam, expressed his desire to send a delegation to China to seek recognition from the Chinese emperor as the new emperor of Vietnam. Emperor Ham Nghi hoped that this recognition would slow down the process of French colonisation in Vietnam.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, in China, the coronation ceremony held significant significance as it pertained to the ongoing debate between China and France regarding China's status as the protector of Vietnam. China anticipated that the arrival of the Vietnamese messenger would serve as further evidence that Vietnam was under Chinese protection. By solidifying this claim, China hoped to eliminate any disputes or controversies regarding whether to pursue peace or declare war against France. As the protector of Vietnam, China believed it had the ultimate authority in determining Vietnam's rights and sovereignty.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, China took the coronation ceremony preparations seriously before the Vietnamese envoys arrived. Some even proposed appointing high-ranking military officers as messengers and arranging ships to transport them to the Vietnamese coast for Emperor Ham Nghi's coronation in 1884-1885. However, despite their best efforts to carry out the mission and deliver ceremonial tributes, the two countries failed to compromise due to internal factors within Vietnam.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, China also suggested that Vietnam and China should expand the scope of their cooperation with other Western powers besides France. For example, Liu Hongzhang, a prominent Chinese statesman, diplomat, and military leader had promised the British that they would receive compensation if they were willing to begin their trade with Vietnam. Consul Hughes suggested to the Governor that “... would not only endeavour to obtain good term for British in Annam [Vietnam] but also exert his [Li Hongzhang] influence in our [British] favour in Corea [Korea].”<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, China suggested that Vietnam and China should expand their cooperation beyond France to involve other Western powers. For instance, Liu Hongzhang made promises to the British, assuring them of favourable trade conditions if they initiated commerce with Vietnam. Consul Hughes also proposed that Li Hongzhang exert his influence to benefit British interests in Vietnam and Korea.<sup>42</sup>

Additionally, Zhang Peilun and Chen Baozhen recommended that China collaborate with Germany. They argued that following France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), France became wary of Germany's actions, particularly in Europe. France's setbacks also made them hesitant to deploy their army to the East. Therefore, China should seize this opportunity to cooperate with Germany and thwart French ambitions in Vietnam.<sup>43</sup>

However, China faced challenges in gaining support from Western powers for its offer. In July 1880, Germany, for instance, communicated to Quai d'Orsay, the French Prime Minister's Office, that its interests in Vietnam were primarily economic. As a result, Germany welcomed France's efforts to

consolidate its political influence in Vietnam. Germany believed such actions could bolster security and safeguard its economic interests in Vietnam. Despite China's repeated setbacks in diplomatic and political endeavours, it eventually turned to military strategies to address the growing power of France.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Black Flag Army: A Formidable Force and Catalyst for Franco-Chinese Tensions**

Regarding military approaches, China covertly deployed its forces to assist Vietnam. The assistance was carried out discreetly, employing a strategy of dissimulation when dealing with the French. China instructed its army to enter Vietnam under the pretext of helping Vietnam eliminate border bandits, diverting French attention. The Guangxi battalion, led by Xu Yanxu, comprising six thousand soldiers, was stationed in Bac Ninh. In contrast, the Yunnan battalion, led by Tang Tong, consisting of eight thousand troops, was stationed in Son Tay. China gradually increased its military presence in Vietnam, reaching a strength of thirty thousand soldiers on the eve of the Sino-French War.

Upon entering Vietnam, the Chinese troops did not immediately declare war on France, opting for a strategy of non-confrontation. The *Junji Chu* (Council of State) reminded the armed forces not to act independently, stating that they aimed to eliminate bandits in Vietnam and not to exceed those limits.<sup>45</sup>

China was divided in its opinion on whether to declare war against France or seek negotiations at a round table to address the presence of the French military in Vietnam. Nonetheless, China adopted an extremely cautious approach, affirming its patronage over Vietnam. Vietnam was compelled to sign the Treaty of Hue in 1883, reaffirming the terms agreed upon in the Saigon Agreement of 1874. Ultimately, in 1887, Vietnam regained independence from Chinese rule when China lost the Sino-French War.

As French influence continued to expand in Vietnam, tensions between France and China reached a boiling point. The signing of the Treaty of Tientsin in 1858 granted the French certain rights and concessions in Vietnam, including establishing trading posts and the freedom to propagate Christianity. However, these actions provoked strong protests from the Chinese authorities, who considered Vietnam within their sphere of influence.

The mounting Franco-Chinese tensions escalated further with the arrival of the Black Flag Army on the scene. Led by the charismatic Liu Yongfu, this Chinese-backed militia consisted of Chinese and Vietnamese fighters. Liu Yongfu skillfully capitalised on the existing anti-French sentiments among the Vietnamese population and successfully conducted guerilla warfare against the French forces.

The Black Flag Army's resistance efforts posed a significant challenge to French domination in Vietnam. Liu Yongfu's fighters employed guerilla tactics, utilising their knowledge of the local terrain to launch surprise attacks and damage the French troops. These actions not only undermined French military operations but also fueled nationalist aspirations among the Vietnamese people.

The Black Flag Army symbolised resistance against French colonialism and Chinese interference in Vietnamese affairs. The presence of this formidable force underscored the Vietnamese people's desire for independence and refusal to accept foreign domination. The successes achieved by the Black Flag Army bolstered the morale of the Vietnamese population and inspired a sense of national pride. While the Black Flag Army posed a significant threat to French forces, it also strained the already tense relationship between China and France. The Chinese government's backing of the Black Flag Army indicated their support for the Vietnamese resistance against French colonial rule. This support further exacerbated the Franco-Chinese tensions and added another layer of complexity.

The Black Flag Army's resistance efforts, combined with the growing Vietnamese nationalist sentiment, intensified the French colonial administration's challenges. The guerilla warfare tactics employed by the Black Flag Army made it difficult for the French to establish complete control over the region. It also highlighted the determination of the Vietnamese people to defend their homeland and preserve their cultural identity.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of the intricate dynamics between China, Vietnam, and France during the late 19th century reveals the multifaceted nature of their interactions. China's efforts to save Vietnam from French colonial rule showcased the situation's complexity. Initially, China emphasised its role as Vietnam's protector, reinforcing the bond between the two nations through tribute practices and the coronation ceremony of Emperor Ham Nghi. However, despite diplomatic efforts and objections from Chinese officials, the desired outcomes remained elusive, leading China to shift its focus to military strategies. Gradually increasing its military presence in strategic locations within Vietnam, China adopted a cautious approach, avoiding open confrontation with France. The Sino-French Wars 1883 marked a turning point as Vietnam was forced to sign agreements reaffirming French influence, undermining China's aspirations to maintain its protectorate over Vietnam. These events highlight the complexities of geopolitical manoeuvring and underscore the importance of diplomacy, military strategies, and alliances in shaping the destiny of nations. The struggle for control and influence over Vietnam during this period had far-reaching implications, showcasing the intricate interplay between political, diplomatic, and military approaches in a dynamic and ever-changing landscape.

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