

HISTORY

From regional identity to national designation:

Gia Long and The naming of Việt Nam

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Abstract

In 1804, the Nguyễn dynasty officially named its state *Việt Nam* following negotiations with the Qing dynasty. This article delves into the negotiation process between the Nguyễn and Qing courts over selecting a new name, examining the outcomes and the political and cultural implications of the names involved. It claims that in the 1790s, the Nguyễn sought to adopt the name *Nam Việt* to emphasize their southern origin, linking their territorial identity to the ancient Việt Thường kingdom in the southern domain which had traditionally been ruled by the Nguyễn lords for the previous 200 years. This name did not imply any territorial connection to the An Nam kingdom in the northern domain or the Nam Việt kingdom of Triệu Đà along the southern border of the Chinese empire. In contrast, the Qing expressed concerns that the Nguyễn might use the name *Nam Việt* to assert claims over the former territory of the ancient Nam Việt kingdom. While the Qing preferred to regard the Nguyễn as the new ruler of the An Nam kingdom, the Nguyễn rejected this designation, as they did not consider themselves inheritors of either the Lê or Tây Sơn dynasties. Ultimately, the two sides compromised on the name *Việt Nam*, though they interpreted its meaning differently. For the Qing, the name *Việt Nam* acknowledged the Nguyễn as its new vassal kingdom, emerging in the former land of the ancient Việt Thường kingdom. For the Nguyễn, this name symbolized both their southern roots and their expanded territorial authority at the southern edge of the Chinese empire. These findings underscore how state names reflected a dynasty's political identity, encompassing its geographical origins, territorial ambitions, and claims to legitimacy in the context of imperial history.

Keywords: state name, country name, An Nam, Đại Việt, Việt Nam, Đại Nam, Gia Long, Jiaqing

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1. Introduction

帝王啟建有邦，必先崇國號，以昭示一統。¹

When kings and emperors established their kingdoms, they must first elevate the denomination of states in order to demonstrate unity.

The main function of naming a state is to facilitate communication. In formal communication, each state often bears two names, a country name, and a state name. The distinction between the two can be more obvious when one country has different states. In informal communication, one state can be designated by nicknames, habitually accepted names, or informal abbreviations. Each state's name often reflects how ruling regimes self-identify, as well as how native populations and foreigners perceive them. From the 20th century, with the rise of globalization and internationalization, most states have tended to adopt official titles recognized by other nations. (Ahmed, 2021; Takács, 2020) Before that time, the state's name was designated by its ruling regime, depending on the political culture of each region.

In imperial China, each political entity was called *guo/quốc* 國 which means “state”, “kingdom”, and “country”, and the ruling regime of the state was called *wangchao/vương triều* 王朝, which means “dynasty”.² The state's name or dynasty's name was chosen from Chinese characters denoting auspicious literary ideas, enfeoffed titles of the new ruler's ancestor, geographical origins of the forebears of the dynasty's founder, names of the products of the land where the new rulers or their affiliated tribes rose to power (Hok-Lam Chan 陳學霖, 1991). Therefore, state names were often associated with the legitimacy of the ruling regime regarding their geographical origins and controlled territory. Within the tributary system, the Chinese courts would denominate their vassal kingdoms by the place names where they governed (外藩屬國各以所守疆域為名). (中国社会科学院历史研究所, 1982, p. 493). The Chinese courts often denominated states emerging in the region from the Yangzi River to the south with two important features, the southern frontier, and the land of

¹ Quốc sử quán 國史館, *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên* 大南實錄正編, 慶應義塾大學 (東京: Mita Minato-ku, 1961) 第一紀. [hereafter, DNTL, I], vol.23, p.12.

² In this paper, I use both pinyin and Romanized Vietnamese to transliterate Chinese characters. When the Chinese characters are cited from primary sources published in China and Vietnam, I transliterate them by either pinyin or Romanized Vietnamese, respectively. When the Chinese characters are illustrated for Vietnamese past, I only use Romanized Vietnamese.

Việt/Yue, including *Jiaozhi/Giao Chi* 交趾, *Baiyue/Bách Việt* 百越, *Nanyue/Nam Việt* 南越, or *Annan/An Nam* 安南.

The heartland of imperial Vietnam³ centered in the Red River Delta. Throughout the first millennium, the land was consecutively managed by the Chinese rules. In the 10th century, taking advantage of the decline of the Chinese central government, local warlords in the region proclaimed independence. Each dynasty could either designate a new state name or inherit the state name of previous dynasties. Some dynasties followed the Chinese ways of naming, in which the state names often contained two characters “*Nam*”, indicating the southern edge of Chinese empires, and “*Việt*”, indicating the land of Bách Việt.

In 968, the Đinh dynasty (968-980) named the state Đại Cồ Việt 大瞿越. In 1054, the Lý dynasty (1009-1225) renamed it Đại Việt 大越. This became a long-lasting name, which was adopted by the Trần (1226-1400), Lê (1428-1789), Mạc (1527-1677), Tây Sơn (1789-1802) dynasties as well as the Nguyễn lords (1558-1777). Meanwhile, externally, in 1175, the Southern Song 南宋 (1127–1279) granted the ruler of Đại Việt as the King of An Nam (*An Nam Quốc vương* 安南國王) (*Tiền biên*, vol.4, p.21). Since then, Chinese courts used *An Nam* to refer to the Đại Việt kingdom. In the 17th – 18th centuries, when there was more than one political contender in Vietnam, besides the name Đại Việt and An Nam, ruling regimes often adopted state names to define their identity and differentiate themselves from other political rivals. European map-makers and other groups of foreigners habitually rendered different names to refer to the northern and southern Vietnamese states.

In 1802 when having successfully subjugated both northern and southern domains, the Nguyễn court requested the Qing court to recognize *Nam Việt* as the official name of the Nguyễn’s domain. However, the Qing turned it down and insisted on using the name *An Nam*. After a long negotiation, the two sides agreed on the name *Việt Nam*. In 1804, it became the official state name. After the collapse of the Nguyễn dynasty in 1945, *Việt Nam* continues serving as the name of the country to the present day.

2024 marks the history of 220 years of *Việt Nam* as a state name. Many scholars have rendered different sources from both Vietnam and China to shed some light on the history of the naming of *Việt Nam*. Some of them have proved that before 1804 *Việt Nam* had long been

³ In this paper, “Vietnam” refers to the modern Vietnamese state. When the terms were used as state names, including Việt Nam, An Nam, Nam Việt, Đại Việt, are written in italic style.

used as a geographical term (Phạm Thị Vinh, 1994; Trần Đức Anh Sơn, 2024). Others, including Bửu Cầm, Nguyễn Đình Đầu, Trần Đức Anh Sơn, Sun Hong Nian, Hoàng Phương Mai have provided detailed information of the event based on the records of the Veritable Records of both the Nguyễn and the Qing dynasties, or some documents of the Nguyễn dynasty collected in *Bang giao lục*. These scholars, however, have not exploited the Qing archives, so insight information has not been mentioned. (Bửu Cầm, 1969, pp. 109–118; Hoàng Phương Mai, 2014; Nguyễn Đình Đầu, 2017; Sun Hong Nian 孙宏年, 2004, pp. 38–40; Trần Đức Anh Sơn, 2024). Some other scholars have gone further to explain the different political implications of the name *Nam Việt*. Đinh Khắc Thuân, Liam Kelly, and Nguyễn Duy Chính have claimed that the Nguyễn court made up the name *Nam Việt* by combining An Nam and Việt Thường. This explanation is also found in Trần Trọng Kim’s *Việt Nam sử lược* published in 1920. (Đinh Khắc Thuân, 2016; Liam C. Kelley, 2005, pp. 115–116; Nguyễn Duy Chính, 2024; Trần Trọng Kim, 1920, p. 13) In difference, Han Zhou Jing, Wang Yong Wei, Ye Xiao Fei, and Kathlene Baldanza have considered that the Nguyễn took the name *Nam Việt* from the ancient kingdom established by Triệu Đà and used the historical name as a token of claiming equality with the Qing court (Han Zhou Jing 韩周敬 & Wang Yong Wei 王永伟, 2014; Kathlene Baldanza, 2016, pp. 1–6; Ye Xiao Fei 叶少飞, 2020).

Kathlene Baldanza, for example, dedicates six pages of her book to narrating the naming of *Việt Nam* and offering her interpretations of the event. She describes the negotiation between the Nguyễn and Qing courts over the state’s name in the early 19th century as an example of the give-and-take tradition between imperial Vietnamese and Chinese states throughout the second millennium. The Nguyễn did not unilaterally impose a state name but engaged in negotiations with the Qing. Despite rejecting the Nguyễn’s initial request, the Qing sought a compromise that would satisfy both sides and preserve the tributary relationship. Additionally, the contestations between the two sides reflect that, despite sharing the same diplomatic language, they often had different ways of interpreting their shared past and its implications for the present. By using the name *Nam Việt*—the name of an ancient kingdom established by Triệu Đà during the Qin-Han transitional period—the Nguyễn placed Vietnamese history on “the same ancient territorial foundation as northern states such as the Qing” and “claimed for Đại Việt the affiliation with a historical dynasty.” The Qing emperor, however, viewed *Nam Việt* “both as a rogue state occupying Chinese lands and as a historically Chinese state.” He interpreted the adoption of the name as an assertion of territorial claims over the Qing’s southern provinces, so dismissed the request. The two sides

eventually accepted the name *Việt Nam* and maintained their tributary relationship. (Kathlene Baldanza, 2016, pp. 1–6)

This paper first aims to provide a more comprehensive account of the negotiation process between the Nguyễn and the Qing dynasties. In addition to the Veritable Records of both the two dynasties,⁴ it also references relevant archival materials stored in Vietnam and China.⁵ Some of these documents were previously mentioned in Zhuang Jifa's 1977 article.⁶ The paper subsequently seeks to contextualize the political implications of the names *An Nam* and *Nam Việt* by utilizing additional primary sources. These new understandings will subtly challenge previous scholars' interpretations of the naming of *Nam Việt*. Rather than making a territorial connection with the ancient Nam Việt kingdom and the An Nam kingdom, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh rendered the name Nam Việt for his southern-centric view in narrating his geopolitical identity. Ultimately, this paper clarifies how the Nguyễn and the Qing courts interpreted the name *Việt Nam*.

2. Historical contexts

The founder of the Nguyễn dynasty, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh 阮福映 (1762-1819) was born in Phú Xuân— the former capital of the Nguyễn lords. His ancestor, Nguyễn Kim 阮淦 (1468–1545), was a meritorious general of the Lê dynasty. In the early 16th century, when the Lê emperor was dislodged from Thăng Long by Mạc Đăng Dung 莫登庸 (1483-1541), Nguyễn Kim and his son-in-law, Trịnh Kiểm 鄭檢 (1503-1570) assisted the Lê emperor to defeat the Mạc (Taylor, 2013, p. 243). However, after retaking Thăng Long, the Nguyễn and the Trịnh families began to compete for power to dominate the Lê court. In 1558, to avoid the conflict with the Trịnh in Thăng Long, Nguyễn Kim's second son, Nguyễn Hoàng 阮黃 (1525-1613), took the position of Defense Commander in Thuận Hóa. In 1570, he was concurrently in charge of Quảng Nam, becoming the absolute over the Thuận Quảng region. He committed to provide a compromised annual payment and military support to the Lê Trịnh court to suppress the Mạc (Taylor, 2013, p. 253) (Taylor, 2018) . However, in 1624, his successor, Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên 阮福源 (1563- 1635) decided to withdraw the annual tribute, marking

⁴ Although some of these materials have been translated into Vietnamese, this present paper only mentions the original version written in Literary Chinese which are either collected into edited books, or digitalized data.

⁵ National Palace Museum 國立故宮博物院, Taipei, Qing archives.

<https://qingarchives.npm.edu.tw/index.php?act=Landing/information> (accessed November 2024)

⁶ 莊吉發, 越南國王阮福映遣使入貢清廷考, 大陸雜誌, 54 卷 2 期, 1977; Cited from Vietnamese translation: (Zhuang Jifa 莊吉發, 2017)

the beginning of the north-south division. The Trịnh launched the first attack on the Nguyễn in 1627. (Taylor, 2013, p. 275) The two sides were intermittently engaged in conflict for 50 years. In 1672, they eventually accepted the stalemate and used the Gianh River as the drawn line. The two states existed as two independent political entities for the next hundred years. After the cease-fire, the Nguyễn significantly expanded the southern frontier to the lowland of the Mekong River.

In the 1770s, both the northern and southern states suffered from political and social crises (G. E. Dutton, 2006, p. 162). In 1773, three Tây Sơn 西山 brothers rose against the Nguyễn. Taking that opportunity, in late 1774, the Lê-Trịnh attacked Thuận Hóa. Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, who just turned 13 years old, and the Nguyễn royal family, fled to Gia Định 嘉定.⁷ In May 1775, the Lê-Trịnh made a deal with the Tây Sơn, allowing them to manage the region from Quảng Nam to the south, as they only directly controlled the region of Thuận Hóa to the north (G. E. Dutton, 2006, pp. 18–56). In 1777, the Tây Sơn defeated the Nguyễn royal army in Gia Định, putting an end to the rule of the Nguyễn lords (Phạm Văn Sơn, 1961). Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, as the rightful prince of the Nguyễn lords, received support from some local fighters in Gia Định and continued to resist the Tây Sơn there. In 1784, after his army was defeated by the Tây Sơn, he fled to Bangkok, where he reassembled his forces and waited for an opportunity (DNTL, I, vol.2, p.9).

Meanwhile, during the 1770s–1780s, the political identities of the Lê, the Trịnh, and the Tây Sơn changed dramatically. In 1778, in Bình Định, Nguyễn Nhạc 阮岳 (?-1793) broke his alliance with the Lê-Trịnh court, proclaiming himself emperor and adopting the era name Thái Đức 泰德. He oversaw the region from Quảng Ngãi southward. In 1786, as the Lê-Trịnh coalition in Thăng Long was crumbling over the question of succession, the Tây Sơn moved northward, first taking over Phú Xuân and then advancing to Thăng Long, where they defeated the Trịnh. The Tây Sơn restored the Lê emperor to the throne but limited his authority to the region from Thanh Hóa northward. From Nghệ An southward, the three Tây Sơn brothers governed.

Initially, the region from Nghệ An to Thuận Hóa was supervised by Nguyễn Huệ 阮惠 (1753–1792) (Bắc Bình Vương 北平王/ the King of Pacified North) from Phú Xuân. Nguyễn Nhạc (Trung ương Hoàng Đế 中央皇帝/ the Central Emperor), who stayed in Bình Định, managed the region from Bình Định to Quảng Ngãi. The region from Bình Thuận to Gia Định was managed by Nguyễn Lữ 阮侶 (1754–1787) (the King of Stabilized East (Đông Định

⁷ To learn more about the place name and history of Gia Định, please see more in (Choi Byung Wook, 2004)

Vương 東定王), who was stationed in Gia Định. However, the relationship between Nguyễn Nhạc and Nguyễn Huệ quickly deteriorated and ended in bloody wars. In 1787, Nguyễn Huệ eventually won the battle and took control of the region from Quảng Nam to Nghệ An, while Nguyễn Nhạc degraded himself as King of Tây Sơn (Tây Sơn Vương 西山王), ruling the region around Bình Định (G. E. Dutton, 2006, pp. 18–56)

While the Tây Sơn brothers were engaged in internal conflict in the south, the Lê emperor sought to collaborate with two Tây Sơn officials to oppose the Tây Sơn regime in Thăng Long. This political alliance between the Tây Sơn and the Lê came to an abrupt end. Nguyễn Huệ marched to Thăng Long to suppress the insurrection. Subsequently, the Lê emperor went to China and sought the Qing court's support to fight against the Tây Sơn. In late 1788, the Qing troops entered Thăng Long and quickly defeated the Tây Sơn army stationed there. In early 1789, in Phú Xuân, Nguyễn Huệ declared himself emperor – naming his reign Quang Trung 光中, then hastened to the north. He suppressed the Qing troops and officially ended the Lê dynasty. His controlled territory was spanned from Quảng Nam to the north.

In early 1788, as the Tây Sơn was occupied by the Qing invasion in the north, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh returned from Siam, occupying Gia Định and adjacent regions (DNTL, I, vol.3, p.2, 14). By 1789, the Nguyễn controlled the area from the Gulf of Siam to Bình Thuận. Within 4 years, he turned the Gia Định region into his stronghold to combat the Tây Sơn in the further north. In 1792, he launched the monsoon campaigns to conquer the former territory of the Nguyễn lords (Vu Duc Liem, 2018). This year, Quang Trung passed away. His 11-year-old son, Nguyễn Quang Toàn 阮光纘, succeeded the throne, marking his reign Cảnh Thịnh 景盛 (G. E. Dutton, 2006, pp. 108–116) After Nguyễn Nhạc died in 1793, the Cảnh Thịnh Emperor and his generals led the war against Nguyễn Phúc Ánh.

By 1797, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh had firmly controlled Bình Khang, Bình Thuận, Phú Yên (DNTL, I, vol.6, p.16; vol.9, p.33) In 1801, he subdued Quảng Ngãi, Quảng Nam, and the region from Phú Xuân to Quảng Bình (DNTL, I, vol.14, p.19). In early 1802, he finally defeated the Tây Sơn at Quy Nhơn and Diên Khánh. In the summer of this year, he marched to Thăng Long, and quickly subjugated the territory of the Lê-Trịnh court. The Nguyễn territory was expanded from the Gulf of Tonkin to the Gulf of Siam.

3. Requesting a new state name

The demand for a new state name emerged when Nguyễn Phúc Ánh tried to establish a diplomatic relationship with the Qing court. In 1798, when victory was in sight, he received a petition from his generals, requesting his consideration of sending an envoy to the Qing dynasty (DNTL, I, vol.10, p.5-7). By doing so, they hoped to avoid the Qing intervention to support the Tây Sơn and the Lê. At that time, the Qing court recognized the legitimacy of Emperor Quang Trung in replacing the Lê while allowing the entourage of the last Lê emperor to take refuge in Beijing. In 1801, Triệu Đại Sĩ/Zhao Da Shi 趙大仕, a native of Guangdong, drifted to Hội An and received the Nguyễn's support to return home. Taking this chance, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh prepared a petition to submit to the Qing emperor, expressing his gratitude to the Qing emperor for supporting Nguyễn drifters in 1799. The letter was entrusted to Triệu Đại Sĩ to bring to Guangdong (DNTL, I, vol.11, p.23; vol.14, p.36). The Governor-General of Liangguang Jiaoluo Jiqing 覺羅吉慶 (HV: Giác La Cát Khánh) presented the letter to Emperor Jiaqing 嘉慶 (HV: Gia Khánh). However, at this time, Jiaqing still recognized the legitimacy of the Tây Sơn. He tried to avoid making any official contact with the Nguyễn and remain neutral in the Tây Sơn- Nguyễn war. He instructed Governor-General Jiqing to reply to the Nguyễn that the support given to the Nguyễn drifters was only regular activities of the Celestial Empire, and unnecessary to be reported to the emperor. He also instructed border officials to support Quang Toản if he took refuge in the Qing border (雲南省歷史研究所, 1986, pp. 277–278).

In 1802, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh successfully recovered the former territory of the Nguyễn lords and decided to go further to conquer the northern domain of the Lê-Trịnh court. Before marching to Thăng Long, he announced to use of *Gia Long* as the new era name, terminating the usage of the last era name of the Lê dynasty, *Cảnh Hưng*. He once again tried to make contact with the Qing court by appointing Trịnh Hoài Đức 鄭懷德, Ngô Nhân Tĩnh 吳仁靜, and Hoàng Ngọc Uẩn 黃玉蘊 to lead the envoy to Guangdong from Phú Xuân (DNTL, I, vol.17, p.8). The envoys submitted to the Qing authority three Qing pirates, who were supported by the Tây Sơn, and the seals and edicts that the Qing emperors granted to the Tây Sơn and were abandoned in Phú Xuân. They also presented to the Guangdong authority one of Gia Long's letter (中国社会科学院历史研究所, 1982, p. 491) Two months later (in the 7th lunar month), when the Nguyễn had successfully defeated the Tây Sơn, another envoy led by Lê Chính Lộ 黎正路 was dispatched to Nam Quan to officially negotiate the diplomatic initiation (DNTL, I, vol.18, p.5)

These two envoys obtained great diplomatic achievements. Emperor Jiaqing accepted the victory of the Nguyễn and condemned Nguyễn Quang Toàn for collaborating with the pirates and for being “disrespectful” 不敬 to the Qing’s suzerainty as he abandoned seals and edicts granted by the Qing emperors in Phú Xuân. Jiaqing instructed officials at the Qing southern frontier to immediately confine Quang Toàn if he entered the Qing border. (雲南省歷史研究所, 1986, pp. 280–281) Even though, Jiaqing still rejected the Nguyễn’s tributed gifts, since the Nguyễn domain had not yet been listed in the Qing’s tributary state, and requested the Nguyễn to prepare an official envoy for the investiture and present a more comprehensive report on the history of the Nguyễn.

Jiaqing’s reluctance might be attributed to his confusion about Nguyễn Phúc Ánh’s background. (Sun Hong Nian 孙宏年, 2004, p. 39) In the 1790s, in the Qing correspondence, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh was often referred to as a tiny barbarian of Đồng Nai (*Nông Nại tiểu di* 農耐小夷).⁸ In Jiaqing’s impression, Đồng Nai was not a virtuous place that was infamous for selling the stolen goods of the pirates (而農耐地方，聞洋面盜匪多於彼處銷贓，亦非善類). (雲南省歷史研究所, 1986, p. 276) Besides the name Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, Jiaqing encountered another name from his officials’ reports, Nguyễn Chủng 阮種. There was a rumor saying that Nguyễn Chủng was Quang Toàn’s Minister. Jiaqing requested to investigate the issue, for the name of the vassal king could not be ambiguous. (Zhuang Jifa 莊吉發, 2017, p. 119) In the 10th month, the Governor of Guangxi Sun Yuting 孫玉庭 (HV: Tôn Ngọc Đình) clarified that both names belonged to one person and there was no such thing as Nguyễn Chủng was a Quang Toàn’s Minister (《宮中檔奏摺-嘉慶朝》，故宮 094753 號，件 2).

In the 11th month of the lunar year of 1802, from Thăng Long, the Nguyễn sent a new envoy led by Lê Quang Định 黎光定 to Guangxi. The mission of this envoy was to seek the Qing’s suzerainty and the Qing’s recognition of *Nam Việt* as the name of the country (DNTL, I, vol.19, p.9-10). Gia Long’s petition presented that his ancestors had established a kingdom for 200 years. The heartland of the kingdom was at Ô Châu or Việt Thường, so the kingdom had its name *Nam Việt*. In the past, the kingdom was too small that it had not been recognized

⁸ 海國圖志，卷六，頁二：農耐海錄作農奈，海國聞見錄作祿賴，其國在廣南之南，在東埔寨之東北即真臘東境與廣南隔一海。

as a vassal kingdom of the Celestial Empire. Its territory had recently significantly expanded, which included the former territory of An Nam, and now wished to become a tributary kingdom of the Celestial Empire (*Bang giao lục* 邦交錄 (Diplomatic Records), A.691/2, q3, 16b – 19a; (中国社会科学院历史研究所, 1982, p. 492))

On the 18th day of the 12th month, in Beijing, Emperor Jiaqing was informed the requests from Governor Sun's memorials. Jiaqing quickly accepted the Nguyễn territory as the Qing's vassal kingdom. (雲南省歷史研究所, 1986, pp. 281–282) However, he found that *Nam Việt* was a problematic name. On the 19th day, a group of Grand Academicians and Ministers were requested to deliberate the name. On the 20th day, the Grand Council prepared an imperial instruction sent to Governor Sun, instructing him to further inquiry the reason why Nguyễn Phúc Ánh wanted to use the name *Nam Việt*. Historically, the ancient Nam Việt kingdom established by Triệu Đà embraced the lands of Guangdong and Guangxi. The lands had been integrated into the Chinese territory since the Han dynasty. The present territory of the Nguyễn was only a part of it. So it was unsuitable to name the Nguyễn domain after *Nam Việt*. So, Governor Sun was instructed to further investigate whether Nguyễn Phúc Ánh was unaware of the ancient kingdom, or he was testing the attitude of the Qing and planning to retake the ancient land. The imperial instruction also asserted that if Nguyễn Phúc Ánh was faithful and sincere, the Qing emperor would agree to grant him as the King of An Nam. Additionally, since Nguyễn Phúc Ánh's motivation was unclear, the imperial instruction caveated southern frontier officials to be prepared for Nguyễn Phúc Ánh's sudden attacks, stating that "it is imperative that the authorities along the coastal areas and borders of Guangdong and Guangxi distribute secret communications to all local civil and military officials, instructing them to stay vigilant and prepared without the slightest sign of negligence or relaxation in their duties (廣東廣西一帶海道邊關俱著密飭地方文武各官留心防備，不可稍涉懈弛，是為至要) (《上諭檔嘉慶七年十二月》，故樞 001105 號，件 20). On the 23rd day, the group of Academicians led by Bao Ning 保寧 submitted to Emperor Jiaqing a full account of the territory of the ancient Nam Việt and the usage of the title King of An Nam in the past, which supported the deliberation of the Grand Council earlier. (中国社会科学院历史研究所, 1982, pp. 492–493)

On the 18th day of the 2nd month of Jiaqing 8 (1803), Governor Sun presented to Emperor Jiaqing that according to Nguyễn envoys who had just arrived at his jurisdiction, their Mater, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, was unaware of the ancient Nam Việt kingdom. This name *Nam Việt* had been used by his ancestor for more than 200 years. Nguyễn Phúc Ánh made this request

because he observed that the fortunes of the Lê and the Tây Sơn, who used the state name *An Nam*, did not last long. So he only wished to be granted a new auspicious name, not more (《上諭檔嘉慶八年二月》，故樞 001107 號，件 17). It was obvious that this explanation came from the Nguyễn envoys, not from Nguyễn Phúc Ánh himself, so Governor Sun made further communication with the Nguyễn. In the 4th month, Governor Sun had Nguyễn Phúc Ánh's letter presented to Emperor Jiaqing. In this letter, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh narrated that his ancestors emerged in the former land of the ancient Việt Thường kingdom and constantly expanded to the south, so the state was named after *Nam Việt*. As he had recently subdued the land of the An Nam kingdom, he adopted the name *Nam Việt* as he did not forsake his ancestor's political enterprise. This narration was not much different from Nguyễn Phúc Ánh's previous letters submitted in 1801 and 1802 (《上諭檔嘉慶八年四月》，故樞 001110 號，件 6). In the 6th month, Jiaqing agreed to grant the Nguyễn a new name but changed it into *Việt Nam* (《上諭檔嘉慶八年六月》，故樞 001112 號，件 26).

4. Political implications of the state names

Before the 19th century, both *Nam Việt* and *An Nam* had been used as either state names or place names for centuries. From the Nguyễn and the Qing's perspectives, these names exerted different political implications on the Sino-Vietnamese tributary relationship and the lost territory.

The ancient Nam Việt kingdom was established in 203 BCE by Triệu Đà. The capital was in Phiên Ngung 番禺 (pinyin: Panyu) in the Pearl River Delta. In 196 BCE, the Han emperor recognized Triệu Đà as the King of Nam Việt. When the Han court prohibited iron goods with Nam Việt, Triệu Đà assumed the title of the Martial Emperor of Southern Việt (*Nam Việt Vũ Đế* 南越武帝). He also imitated some of the Han emperor's ritual practices to show that he was an equal to the Han emperor. Later, at the Han emperor's request, Triệu Đà agreed to relinquish the title "emperor" and serve as a vassal king. However, he continued secretly using the designation of "emperor" within his kingdom and only referred to himself as a "king" and behaved as a vassal king when he sent envoys to the Han court. The Nam Việt kingdom was defeated and annexed into Han territory in 111 BC. (Sima Qian, 1993, pp. 208–217).

After the Han dynasty, the records of the Nam Việt kingdom were excluded from the mainstream histories of the central empires. The name *Nam Việt* gradually came to refer to a

geographical region rather than a specific political entity. During the Tang dynasty (618–907), *Nam Việt* was commonly associated with the area extending from the Five Passes southward, encompassing the Pearl River Delta and the Red River Delta (唐, 杜佑, 《通典》, 州郡典, 第一百八十四). With the establishment of the An Nam Protectorate (*An Nam đô hộ phủ* 安南都護府), centered in the Red River Delta, the term *An Nam* became more specifically associated with the region of northern Vietnam.

In the first millennium, many Sinicized political elites in the Red River Delta used *Nam Việt* for their kingdom or titles, such as Lý Bí 李贲 (r.544 – 547) proclaimed himself as the Emperor of Nam Việt (*Nam Việt Đế* 南越帝) in 544; Đinh Bộ Lĩnh 丁先皇 (r.968 – 979) granted his son, Đinh Liễn 丁璉, the Prince of Nam Việt (*Nam Việt Vương* 南越王). In 1054, the Lý dynasty (1009-1225) adopted the name *Đại Việt* 大越. The boundary of Đại Việt with the Chinese empire was demarcated in 1084 and principles remained unchanged until the modern day (James Adams Anderson, 2013, p. 24). The rulers of Đại Việt initially only received from the Song court titles which regarded them as frontier generals or princes who managed the area of Giao Chỉ, Nam Việt, An Nam of the Chinese empire. In 1175, they were first granted “the King of An Nam”, marking the official recognition of the Song over the independence of Đại Việt (*Tiền biên*, vol.4, p.21). From 1175, in the normal condition, Đại Việt rulers would receive the same title from the Chinese courts.

During the Song-Yuan dynasties, the Chinese courts tended to connect the ancient Nam Việt kingdom with the contemporary An Nam/Đại Việt kingdom. The book *Songshi* (the History of Song Dynasty) published in 1343, referred to the Đại Việt kingdom as “*Giao Chỉ*”, and clarified that this kingdom once belonged to the ancient Nam Việt kingdom (《宋史》, 卷四百八十八, 列傳第二百四十七, 外國四元, 交趾). This perception was widely adopted by Đại Việt elites. In 1272, Lê Văn Hưu claimed that the ancient Nam Việt kingdom was the precursor of the Đại Việt kingdom and that the Đinh, the Lê, the Lý, the Trần emperors were inheritors of Triệu Đà’s mandate (Kathlene Baldanza, 2016, p. 44). In 1335, Lê Tắc 黎慤, a subject of the Trần dynasty exiled to the Yuan court, identified his birthplace as Nam Việt (仆生長南越) and also included the history of Nam Việt kingdom as a part of the history of the An Nam kingdom in his book *An Nam chí lược* 《安南誌略》 (Kathlene Baldanza, 2016, pp. 34–36).

After the Ming troops withdrew from Đại Việt in 1427, Ming literati started to consider the land of Đại Việt/An Nam/Giao Chỉ lying beyond the border of the Chinese empire. The

official history of the Ming dynasty no longer included the history of the Nam Việt kingdom in the record of the An Nam kingdom (Châu Hải Đường, 2021). Similarly, Đại Việt literati started reconsidering the relationship between the Nam Việt kingdom and their kingdom. In the 18th century, Ngô Thời Sĩ 吳時士 (1726-1780), for example, overtly criticized Triệu Đà as the first Han invader of Đại Việt (An Nam) and the ancient Nam Việt kingdom was not the former land of the Đại Việt kingdom (*Tiền biên*, Ngoại kỷ, vol.1, Ngoại thuộc Triệu kỷ, p.1). Meanwhile, he did not regard the name *An Nam* as a foreign designation (exonym) imposed by the Chinese courts but considered it as a native name (autonym) to refer to the Lê territory. In compiling the annual records of Đại Việt, he used *An Nam* as state name rather than *Đại Việt*. He considered *Đại Việt* only referred to the land (*Việt*), but did not serve as the name of a kingdom. This name was not enough to distinguish the kingdom from other “*Việt*” in Bách Việt (*Tiền biên*, vol.4, p.49.). In his view, *An Nam* was more qualified for a state name. Yet unfortunately, the Song dynasty intentionally added the character “*An*” (pacified) in front of the character “*Nam*” (south), aiming to overpower its vassal kingdom. To rectify the name of the kingdom, *Nam Việt* could be a more proper name (必欲正名惟稱南越國乃可) (*Tiền biên*, vol.4, p.21-22). He further justified that in ancient times, from Dương Châu 揚州 (pinyin: Yangzhou) to the south was called *Nam Việt*; before the establishment of the Han dynasty, from Ngũ Lĩnh 五嶺 (pinyin: Wuling, English: Five Passes) to the south belonged to *Nam Việt*, An Nam was a part of *Việt Nam*, so it became a general name of the kingdom” (以其在揚州南又曰南越，漢以前五嶺以南屬南越，安南為越南境，遂以為國號通稱焉) (*Tiền biên*, vol.1, p.1). In this case, *Nam Việt* meant the south of Bách Việt, whereas An Nam was located in the area of *Việt Nam* which was the far south or beyond the territory of Nam Việt (and Bách Việt).

By the middle of the 18th century, both Vietnamese and Chinese literati no longer considered the Nam Việt kingdom as the precursor of the Đại Việt kingdom, but as an internal vassal of the Chinese empire. *Nam Việt* became a geographical indicator for the south of Bách Việt, not specifically for the territory of the ancient Nam Việt kingdom. However, in the early 1790s, in the letter sent to the Portuguese in Macao in 1792, to amplify the strength and accomplishments of his armies over the capacity of the Nguyễn in Đồng Nai, Emperor Quang Trung boasted that he had made war on China in the provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi, where he put the Chinese to flight and carried out great massacres.(G. Dutton et al., 2012, p.

169) He might have been preparing to attack these two southern provinces of China before his death. (G. E. Dutton, 2006, p. 114) It might be the reason that in 1802, as Nguyễn Phúc Ánh used the name *Nam Việt*, the Qing court was worried that the Nguyễn was mustering a plan of “restoring the lost land” of the ancient Nam Việt kingdom.

Since the name *Nam Việt* could ignite territorial disputes, it would be safer for the Qing court to use the name *An Nam*. It was a more submissive name for granting a vassal kingdom. However, from Nguyễn Phúc Ánh’s perspective, the name *An Nam* heavily referred to the northern state. During the 1530s - 1640s, as the Lê and the Mạc were competing for the leadership of Đại Việt, the Ming showed its support for the Mạc by refusing to grant the Lê rulers the title King of An Nam and giving them the title the Pacification Commissioner of An Nam Commendery (*An Nam Đô thống sứ ty* 安南都統使司). A similar title had been given to the Mạc since 1540. (Kathlene Baldanza, 2016, p. 111) It was not until 1646 when the Ming was about to collapse, that the exiled Ming court in Fujian granted the Lê ruler “King of An Nam”, (Kathlene Baldanza, 2016, p. 204) and later in 1651 granted the Trịnh lord the title “the Deputy King of An Nam” (*An Nam phó quốc vương* 安南副國王) (Kathlene Baldanza, 2016, p. 206). Meanwhile, in Beijing, in 1647, the Qing bestowed the Lê ruler the King of An Nam to show its legitimacy in ruling the Celestial Empire. (Kathlene Baldanza, 2016, p. 205)

The Ming and Qing courts never gave this title to the Nguyễn lords. Initially, the Nguyễn lords still considered the southern domain as a part of the An Nam kingdom of the Lê dynasty. In diplomatic letters sent to Japan Tokugawa in 1601, 1606, and 1688; and to the Dutch VOC in Batavia in 1626, they signed as the Overall Defense Commander - the title granted by the Lê emperor (Vũ Đức Liêm, 2019, pp. 368–369). After the cease-fire in 1672, the Nguyễn started to consider their territory as a separate state. In 1669, a Chinese Buddhist Monk, Đại Sán/Da Shan 大汕 recorded that the southern state adopted the state name *Đại Việt* (Da Shan 大汕, 1987, p. 13). In 1702, the Nguyễn attempted to send a tribute to the Qing court but was rejected (Da Shan 大汕, 1987, p. 22). The Qing only regarded the Nguyễn domain as a part of the Lê territory. Without the Qing’s recognition, the Nguyễn continued using the name *An Nam* in diplomatic letters. Even though, in 1709, they started using the seal *Đại Việt quốc Nguyễn chủ vĩnh trấn chi bảo* 大越國阮主永鎮之寶 (The Seal of the Nguyễn Lord of the Đại Việt kingdom).⁹ *Đại Việt* was presumably used as the state name within the kingdom. In 1744, Nguyễn Phúc Khoát proclaimed himself “King” (*quốc vương* 國王)

⁹ Quốc sử quán 國史館, *Đại Nam thực lục tiền biên* 大南實錄前編 [Hereafter DNTLTB], 慶應義塾大學 (東京: Mita Minato-ku, 1961), vol.8, p.7.

(DNTLTB, vol.10, p.6), using the seal “the Seal of the King” (*Quốc vương chi ấn* 國王之印). He once wanted to address himself as the King of An Nam in a letter sent to the Qing, but Secretary Nguyễn Quang Tiễn 阮光前 opposed this idea. Tiễn argued that only the Lê emperor was bestowed the title by the Qing court, so the action was considered as a transgression of the propriety. Nguyễn Phúc Khoát acquiesced and continued using the former title granted by the Lê emperor (Lê Quý Đôn, 2007, p. Hán văn, vol.5, p.11).

At the age of global commerce in the 17th century, East Asian and European merchants acknowledged the conflict between the Nguyễn and the Lê-Trịnh and used different names to mark the two domains. The Japanese and Chinese merchants were crowded at the trading center at Hội An. Since this place was managed by the authority of Quảng Nam, they called the Nguyễn domain the Kingdom of Quảng Nam (*Quảng Nam quốc* 廣南國), while called the Lê Trịnh domain as Đông Kinh, or An Nam. However, they noted that the Quảng Nam kingdom was ruled by “the An Nam King with the Nguyễn surname” (*An Nam vương Nguyễn tính* 安南王阮姓) (Sun Hong Nian 孙宏年, 2004, pp. 13–18) (Sun Hong Nian 孙宏年, 2004, pp. 13–18) (陳倫炯, 《海國見聞錄》, 藝文印書館, 1730, vol.2, p.19-20). Europeans called the northern and southern states Tonkin and Cochinchina, respectively. They were aware that native people of both states considered themselves *An Nam* (also written as *Annam*, *Annan*, *Anam*) while distinguishing the northern and southern states by two native terms *Đàng Trong* and *Đàng Ngoài*. Since the Nguyễn was only considered as a “usurper” of the Lê Emperor (Olgar Dror & K. W. Taylor, 2006, pp. 91–92), Europeans called Cochinchina “Southern Annam” (Conder, 1826, p. 314). *An Nam*, as Alexandre de Rhodes explained in 1651, embraced both Tonkin and Cochinchina as one nation that shared common customs, traditions, and language and Annamese was also called Tonkinese (Alexandre de Rhodes, 1994, p. 2)(Gaudio, 2019).

In the late 18th century, the southern and northern states crumbled with mutual wars with different political contenders, including the Lê, the Nguyễn, and the Tây Sơn brothers. Only the Lê had a clear political identity. They were, externally, recognized by the Qing court as a legitimate King of An Nam, as internally claimed the emperor of Đại Việt. Both the Tây Sơn and the Nguyễn did not have a fixed political identity and were often recognized by outsiders under different names. Before 1789, the Qing state correspondence mentioned three Tây Sơn brothers by their full names or by a designation of *An Nam thổ tù* 安南土酋 (local chief of An

Nam) (《宮中檔奏摺-乾隆朝》，故宮 080706 號, 件 1; 故宮 080638 號, 件 1). Meanwhile, in documents sent to the Qing court after defeating the Qing army in Thăng Long in 1789 and requesting the investiture, Nguyễn Huệ (Emperor Quang Trung) addressed himself as “a humble commoner from Quảng Nam 廣南之布衣” or “a small humble foreigner from Việt Nam” (小番越南一布衣) (Lâm Giang & Nguyễn Công Việt, 2005, pp. 408, 461). The Chinese privates called him “the big boss of Yueh Nan” (HV: Việt Nam) (G. E. Dutton, 2006, p. 226). In the letter sent to the Portuguese in Macao in 1792, Nguyễn Huệ called his territory the Kingdom of Quảng Nam, and Nguyễn Phúc Ánh’s territory as Đồng Nai (G. Dutton et al., 2012, pp. 168–170), although by that time he had been recognized as “the King of An Nam” by the Qing.

In 1778, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh claimed the title “Đại Nguyên Soái” 大元帥 in Gia Định (DNTL, I, vol.1, p.1). In 1780, he upgraded his title to “King”. Initially, he followed the political identity of the Nguyễn lords, in which both Đại Việt and An Nam were considered as proper names of the state. His issued documents were affixed with the seal *Đại Việt quốc Nguyễn chủ vĩnh trấn chi bảo* 大越國阮主永鎮之寶 (Seal of Enteral Protection of the Nguyễn Lord of the Great Việt state) and dated by the era name of Cảnh Hưng of the Lê Emperor (DNTL, I, vol.1, p.8). In one letter sent to Antonio José in Bangkok on 5 December 1786, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh addressed himself as the King of An Nam (*An Nam quốc vương* 安南國王).¹⁰ Japanese drifters, who stayed in the middle of Vietnam in 1794-1795, also mentioned Nguyễn Phúc Ánh’s controlled territory as the Kingdom of An Nam 安南國, while mentioned the Tây Sơn territory in Bình Định as the Kingdom of Tây Sơn 西山 (Shihoken Seishi, 2020, pp. 87–117, 173–174). However, to the Qing, the Tây Sơn, the territory managed by Nguyễn Phúc Ánh in Gia Định was only identified as “Đồng Nai” 農耐. Besides, an English adventurer, John Borrow, mentioned Nguyễn Phúc Ánh by the name Caung-shung (Cảnh Hưng), following the era name appeared on the documents issued by the Nguyễn (Barrow, 1806).

In the late 18th century, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh started to adjust his political identity when he controlled the former territory of the Nguyễn lords. The name *An Nam*, *Đại Việt* seemed to bear intensive political legacies of the northern kingdom ruled by Đinh, Lý, Trần, Lê, and Tây Sơn by native people and foreigners. The name *Quảng Nam* had been adopted by the Tây Sơn who had occupied the land since 1785, and it was, in fact, only the name of one region of the

¹⁰ (Pierre-Yves Manguin, 1984) cited from (Nguyễn Duy Chính, 2022, p. 76)

Nguyễn controlled domain. In the letters sent to the Qing in the late 1790s, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh adopted the name Nam Việt and addressed himself as *Nam Việt quốc quốc trưởng* 南越國國長 (the Head of the Nam Việt kingdom).

The name *Nam Việt* was never used as the state name by the Nguyễn lords. (Han Zhou Jing 韓周敬 & Wang Yong Wei 王永伟, 2014) According to the Veritable Records of the Gia Long reign, in 1784 when Nguyễn Phúc Ánh was exiled to Bangkok, the Siamese king called him “Chiêu Nam Cốc” 昭南谷 which, as the Nguyễn historian explained, meant the Heavenly King of Nam Việt (*Nam Việt Thiên Vương* 南越天王) (DNTL, I, vol.2, p.11). The true meaning in Siamese of the name is still vague, yet presumably, the Siamese king only regarded Nguyễn Phúc Ánh as the king of the southern land, not the specific kingdom of Nam Việt. This name, however, in the 1790s, could distinguish the Nguyễn territory from the Quảng Nam kingdom of the Tây Sơn in the south, and the An Nam kingdom in the north. It also signified Nguyễn Phúc Ánh’s southern origin. For centuries, northerners promoted a northern-centric view in interpreting the connection between the northern domain and the southern domain in which the southern domain ruled by the Nguyễn was originally a part of the Lê territory. In contrast, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh advocated a “southern-centric interpretation” in which the southern domain had been ruled independently by his ancestor as the Nam Việt kingdom for more than 200 years. By doing so, he claimed the legitimacy of the Nguyễn lords as well as the independence of the southern kingdom in the past 200 years, simultaneously illegitimate the Tây Sơn regime. Nguyễn Phúc Ánh portrayed himself as a lawful prince of Nam Việt while denouncing the Tây Sơn as the Nguyễn’s usurper.

Furthermore, in 1802, before marching to Thăng Long, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh consulted the officials on the issue of the Lê and was convinced that the Nguyễn did not have the land from the Lê but the Tây Sơn (今我滅西賊奄有其地是取於西賊非取於黎也) (DNTL, I, vol.16, p.17-18). By abolishing the title of Cảnh Hưng 景興 of the Lê and announcing his era name Gia Long 嘉隆 (DNTL, I, vol.17, p.1), he signified that he was not the Lê loyalist. He considered his taking control of the northern domain was not a unification of the Lê territory, in which the southern domain was brought back to the northern domain. Rather it was an expansion of the Nguyễn territory, in which the northern domain was integrated to the southern domain. In other words, he inherited his ancestors’ political enterprise in the south and successfully subjugated the An Nam kingdom. Since he was not the inheritor of both the

Lê and the Tây Sơn to rule the northern domain, he would rather withdraw from the tributary relation with the Qing than receive the title of the King of An Nam, which was traditionally given to the rulers of the northern domains (DNTL, I, vol.23, p.1).

Nguyễn Phúc Ánh's political identity was rather different from that of Nguyễn Huệ. In 1789, in requesting the investiture from the Qing, Nguyễn Huệ described him as “rising from humble origins peasant, seizing opportunities as they came, and was not originally bound by a ruler-subject relationship with the Lê King.” He became the successor of the Lê to rule An Nam with the support of the people (Lâm Giang & Nguyễn Công Việt, 2005, pp. 412–413, 484). Therefore, Nguyễn Huệ expected to receive the title King of An Nam to consolidate his legitimacy in replacing the Lê dynasty.

5. Proclaiming the new state name

On the 6th day of the 4th month of Jiaqing 8 (1803), Emperor Jiaqing granted the Nguyễn territory the name *Việt Nam*. The Qing rationalized that “by placing the “*Việt*” character on the front, it shows the continuity of his historic territory, by putting the “*Nam*” character at the end, it signifies the Nguyễn being newly bestowed status as a tributary state” (以越字冠於上，仍其先世疆域，以南字列於下，表其新錫藩封). And more importantly, to the Chinese empire, the name *Việt Nam* could make a distinction from the ancient Nam Việt (且在百越之南與古所稱南越不致混淆) (《上諭檔嘉慶八年四月》，故樞 001110 號，件 6, (005)) It could avoid unnecessary territorial disputes between the Qing and the Nguyễn sides.

Given that the name Nam Việt was not an official state name sanctioned by his ancestor, newly adopted by Nguyễn Phúc Ánh in the late 1790s, he was “overjoyed” and “grateful” for the name *Việt Nam*. (中国社会科学院历史研究所, 1982, p. 495) In the 5th month, the Nguyễn envoys with 36 people led by Trịnh Hoài Đức, Lê Chính Lộ, Lê Quang Định headed to Beijing (中国社会科学院历史研究所, 1982, p. 496) In the 8th month, they paid tribute to Emperor Jiaqing. The envoy finally returned to the country in late 1803 (DNTL, I, vol.22, p.25).

In the spring of 1804, the Qing delegation came to Thăng Long to grant Nguyễn Phúc Ánh/Gia Long as “the King of Việt Nam”. The Nguyễn did not follow the original interpretation of the meaning of the name *Việt Nam* of the Qing. The Nguyễn veritable record clarifies that “by placing the character *Việt* 越 on the top, it symbolizes our country inheriting the old subdued territory, and successfully continuing the former achievements; by placing the character *Nam* 南 at the bottom, it signifies our country's expansion to the southern regions and newly

receiving the mandate of favor.” (以越字冠於上示我國承舊服而克繼前徵，以南字列於，表我國拓南交而新膺眷命。) (DNTL, I, vol.23, p.1).

On the 17th day of the 2nd month (28 March 1804), the Nguyễn officially announced *Việt Nam* as the name of the country and prohibited using the name *An Nam*. Concerning the meaning of the new name, the edict simply explains that the “*Việt*” was derived from *Việt Thường*, and “*Nam*” was derived from *Giao Nam* (DNTL, I, vol.23, p.12). The term *Giao Nam* 交南 or *Nam Giao* 南交 both mean the southern border. They were often used by the Ming elites for referring to the land of *Đại Việt*, inferring that the land was located at and beyond the southern border of the Ming empire.¹¹ From the Nguyễn’s viewpoint, the name *Việt Nam* emphasized that the Nguyễn empire emerged in the land of *Việt Thường*, subsequently expanded the territory from the southern frontier of Chinese empires to the further south. In the Nguyễn narration of its history and territorial expansion presented in the edict, all political heritages of previous dynasties of the *An Nam* kingdom were completely silenced.

The Qing’s granting the Nguyễn the name *Việt Nam* did not carry any international legal sanction but only indicated that the Qing accepted the Nguyễn’s takeover of the former *An Nam* kingdom. The Nguyễn received the name to show their willingness to be a Qing’s vassal kingdom. Within the country, other state names were habitually used. The books composed in the Gia Long reign often rendered the name *Nam Việt*, or *Hoàng Việt* rather than *Việt Nam*, such as *Hoàng Việt luật lệ* 皇越律例, *Hoàng Việt nhất thống địa dư chí* 皇越一統地輿志, *Nam Việt thần kỳ hội lục* 南越神祇會錄. In 1810, the Nguyễn court continued using the name *Đại Việt* in the court calendars and records. Although Minh Mệnh argued in 1838 that it was not the *Đại Việt* kingdom ruled by the Lý, Trần, Lê dynasties, but the *Đại Việt* kingdom ruled by the Nguyễn lords,¹² the name still caused great confusion. Meanwhile, the people kept considering themselves “*An Nam* people” despite the name *An Nam* being banned by the court. Jean-Louis Taberd recorded that “Some sovereigns of the country have endeavored from superstitious motives to change this name to *Nam Viet*, *Dai Viet*, *Viet Nam*, but these names, employed only in their edicts or in the laws of the realm, are not in vogue among the

¹¹ In 1488, Qiu Jun 丘濬 wrote the book *Ping ding Jiao Nan lu* 平定交南錄 (the Records of the Pacification of Southern Border).

¹² Quốc sử quán 國史館, *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên* 大南實錄正編, 慶應義塾大學 (東京: Mita Minato-ku, 1961), 第二紀 [Hereafter DNTL, II], vol.190, p.1.

people, who always call themselves ‘children of the country of An Nam’.” (Right Rev. Jean Louis, Bishop of Isauropolis, Vic. Apost. of Cochin China. Hon. Mem. As. Soc., 1837, p. 738)

In 1838, being confused about the old and new names of the state, the Censor-in-chief of Nam Ngãi Nguyễn Văn Lượng 阮文諒 memorialized Minh Mệnh to create a new name for the state. He argued that: “*Nam Việt* is only considered as one of Hundred Việt [...] Our kingdom, from the establishment to the present, has not changed the old name of Việt” (DNTL, II, vol.188, p.31) Emperor Minh Mệnh condemned Lượng for being madness 狂妄, because, as he justified, “In the land of Our Việt, the kingdom of the Trần, Lê was called An Nam kingdom, Our dynasty changed the name into *Việt Nam*, that officials and populace inside and outside have all known” (DNTL, II, vol.188, p.31). Lượng, who was considered a scholar-official holding the disciplinary post, was criticized for having such narrowed knowledge. He was dismissed from the position and sent to servitude in the army in Trấn Tây (Cambodia). After the incident, Minh Mệnh was no longer satisfied with the name *Việt Nam* and decided to change the name to “*Đại Nam Quốc*” 大南國 (the Kingdom of Great South) which could be also called *Đại Việt Nam Quốc* 大越南國 (the Kingdom of Great Việt Nam). It was forbidden to use the old name *Đại Việt* (DNTL, II, vol.190, p.1).

Since the name *Đại Nam* was not recognized by the Qing court, it was used domestically and in diplomatic intercourses with Southeast Asian and Western states. The name *Việt Nam* was used to communicate with the Qing court until the late 19th century. In the age of nationalism and revolution in the early 20th century, there were different choices for the name of the country, including *An Nam*, *Việt Nam*, *Đại Nam*, *Đại Việt*, *Nam Việt*. Eventually, the name *Việt Nam* stood out as the most suitable choice as it could signify the former territory of the Nguyễn dynasty before the colonial period. In March 1945, Emperor Bảo Đại announced the establishment of the Empire of Việt Nam. The name *Đại Nam* officially was eliminated. (Goscha, 2012, pp. 138–139) On 2 September 1945, the revolutionary government Việt Minh (Vietnamese Independence League) declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam. The name which was promulgated in 1804 by Emperor Gia Long has become the official name of the country since then.

6. Conclusion

In imperial Vietnam, the state names were mostly based on geographical factors: the southern edge of the Chinese empires and the land of Việt. From the 12th century, the state which centralized at Thăng Long was named *Đại Việt*. But externally, the Chinese often

called it *An Nam*. By the 17th – 18th centuries, *An Nam* had become the common name for both the Lê-Trịnh in the north and the Nguyễn in the south. In the late 18th century when Nguyễn Phúc Ánh rose to power, there were different political contenders concurrently existed in Vietnam. Two of them, the Lê and the Tây Sơn, were once granted as King of An Nam by the Qing court. Whereas, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh was only considered “a tiny barbarian” by the Qing. Against this context, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh used a new state name as both an “identity-maker” and “an identity-protector” of the Nguyễn regime.

In the late 1790s, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh abandoned the name *An Nam* and chose the name *Nam Việt*. He claimed that his ancestors had adopted the name for more than 200 years. By doing so, the Nguyễn lords were no longer portrayed as the Lê generals but as the founders of the Nam Việt kingdom. In 1802, he considered himself neither the Lê’s opponent as the Lê had been ended by the Tây Sơn, nor the successor of the Tây Sơn to rule An Nam as the Tây Sơn were only the Nguyễn’s usurpers. He put forward a southern-centric interpretation for the political development of the Nguyễn. To legitimate his political interpretation, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh requested the Qing to grant him the title “King of Nam Việt” rather than “King of An Nam”. With the Qing’s investiture, he successfully legitimated the rule of the Nguyễn lords in the past and secured his political identity in the present.

The Qing considered the name *Nam Việt* could reminisce the ancient Nam Việt kingdom of Triệu Đà and invoke unnecessary territorial contestation, and wanted to use the name *An Nam*. Facing strong opposition from the Nguyễn, the Qing agreed to grant the Nguyễn a new state name, but changed it to “*Việt Nam*”. This name could firstly avoid any confusion with the ancient Nam Việt kingdom, while still signify the geographical identity of the Nguyễn. Both the Qing and the Nguyễn agreed that the character “*Việt*” was derived from Việt Thường. The Qing considered the character “*Nam*” to have no specific meaning but only to make up a new name to mark the Nguyễn as a newly bestowed tributary state. The Nguyễn interpreted that this character was derived from “*Giao Nam*” or “*Nam Giao*”, denoting the southern region beyond the Chinese empire. The name is *Việt Nam*, therefore, could cover the expanded territory of the Nguyễn empire from the Gulf of Tonkin to the Gulf of Siam.

In 1804, Emperor Gia Long officially adopted the name *Việt Nam*. However, within the country, this new name was not immediately embraced by the local population. A few years later, the Nguyễn resumed using the name *Đại Việt*. In addition, other old names, *An Nam* and *Nam Việt* died hard, causing a great confusion of the name of the country. In 1838, Emperor

Minh Mệnh changed the state name to *Đại Nam* or *Đại Việt Nam*. In March 1945, Emperor Bảo Đại changed the state name from *Đại Nam* to *Việt Nam*. After the collapse of the Nguyễn dynasty in 1945, *Việt Nam* remains the name of the country until the present day. If in the early 19th century, the name *Việt Nam* was designated by the Qing dynasty, in the early 20th century, this name was chosen for the country name by Vietnamese nationalists and revolutionists. The journey of how *Việt Nam* became the name of a nation in the 20th century will be presented in other studies.

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