

The Strategic Vision and Policies of the Nguyễn Lords and Early Nguyễn Dynasty Rulers Regarding Vietnam's Southwestern Sea

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Abstract: The Southwestern Sea has been one of the essential economic and cultural centers of Vietnam, possessing vast and diverse natural resources. Inheriting the legacy of the Nguyễn Lords, successive Nguyễn emperors since Gia Long established effective governance institutions to manage the seascape, extract minerals, and expand dynastic influence in the area. This article analyzes the objectives and policies enacted by the dynasty regarding this region, examining both their direct and long-term impacts, especially those on Vietnamese sovereignty and socio-economic development in Southern Vietnam, the southernmost part once known as Cochinchina. Thanks to the diverse, prosperous ecosystem of this area as well as the Southwestern Sea and islands, the rapid development of the coastal area is facilitated. Nguyễn Lords and successive Nguyễn emperors paid special attention to the establishment and exercise of sovereignty over maritime spaces to foster economic and social activities formed the essential foundation for the emergence of many inter-regional ports and economic centers. Today, the Southwestern Sea continuously fosters Vietnam's strategy of blue economy and sustainable development.

Keywords: Nguyễn Lords, early Nguyễn kings, visions, policy, Southwestern Sea.

Subject classification: History.

1. Introduction

The sovereign territory of Vietnam from the Northeastern to the Eastern regions, and from the Southeastern to the Southwestern region, is encompassed by seas. While the Northern gulf (or the Gulf of Tonkin) acts as an economic center for the Northeast region - serving as a conduit between the area and Northeast Asian

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nations, the Southwestern Sea at the southern frontier of the country is a vast seascape with rich mineral potential and a long history as a cultural zone. Since the early centuries CE, the inhabitants of the lower Mekong delta established a diverse range of connections with many East Asian and Southwest Asian countries (Vietnam Historical Science Association, 2008: 328&347). As with Biển Đông (the East Sea, also known as the South China Sea) maritime region, the Southwestern Sea is one of the maritime regions rich in natural resources, as well as being one of the destinations for many regional cultural and economical centers. Drawing on its many resources, especially maritime resources, the inhabitants of the Óc Eo culture had not only been able to exploit the resources from the delta, the rivers, the mountains, and the seas but they were also able to establish and maintain various economic and diplomatic ties with many Asian states (Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2024: 3-9).

In the *longue-durée* up to the 17th-18th centuries, the Đàng Trong (Cochinchina) administrations incrementally expanded their influence in the Đồng Nai river basin and the Mekong river delta (Taylor, 1993: 42-68). The Nguyễn Lords set up new tax collection checkpoints, instituted new settlements in Biên Hòa and Gia Định and then expanded their control across Hà Tiên and the faraway islands. A new area opened up for those with fortitude and indomitable spirits. Inheriting the legacy of the Đàng Trong kingdom, the Nguyễn dynasty entrenched its firm sovereignty over the Mekong delta region, where the Southwestern Sea is located (Trương Minh Đạt, 2008: 41-49).

In recent decades, scholarly interest has grown significantly in the studies of Vietnam's southern territories and the adjacent Southwestern Sea. While these studies have approached the topic from diverse methodological perspectives, there has been limited in-depth research examining the region within the broader context of Vietnam's maritime territory, particularly regarding efforts to maintain naval sovereignty and develop maritime prosperity. Using historiographical methodologies, in conjunction with area studies and interdisciplinary studies, this article seeks to illustrate the orientations, objectives and policies implemented by the early Nguyễn emperors in the Southern maritime region.

2. The potential and strategic position of the Southwestern Sea

Owing to its geo-strategic location, the Southwestern Sea (encompassing the seven provinces of Tiền Giang, Bến Tre, Trà Vinh, Sóc Trăng, Bạc Liêu, Cà Mau, and Kiên Giang) right from the beginning had become a major production, trading, and cultural hub of the entire region. From here, many trading routes were established connecting neighboring states: Chân Lạp (Chenla), Siam, and maritime Southeast Asian island nations. In Vietnamese popular consciousness, Cà Mau and Kiên Giang provinces mark the southernmost boundary of the Motherland. Yet, from a different perspective, viewed from South to North, the Cape of Cà Mau and its adjacent Southwestern provinces form *the bulwark frontier* of the nation. This

strategic position offered these provinces abundant opportunities to accept, discuss, and confront the political, economic, and cultural flows from maritime Southeast Asia, Southwest Asia, and the West.

From the perspective of Vietnam's maritime geography, the Southwestern Sea provided access through two major seaways passing through the Malacca and Sunda straits, enabling merchant fleets to enter either the South Pacific region, or travel westward to the Indian Ocean. This maritime route opened connections to South and West Asia, extending as far as the eastern shores of Africa and the Mediterranean Sea. The Southwestern Sea, with the Gulf of Phú Quốc, was well known for being the home of the Óc Eo - Phù Nam (Funan) population. Regarding Phù Nam's position, the *Liang shu* [Book of Liang] stated: "The state of Phù Nam is situated to the south of the district of Nhật Nam, bordered by a large gulf to the west located 7,000 miles from Nhật Nam and 3,000 miles from Lâm Ấp in the Southwest. Its capital was situated 500 miles inland from the sea. A large river, 10 miles wide, flowed from the Northwest to the sea in the East. The country covered an area of 3,000 *li* (Chinese) miles, consisting mainly of low-lying flatlands. The climate and local culture were similar to those of Lâm Ấp. Its natural resources were gold, silver, copper, tin, agarwood, tusks, tree kingfishers feather, and five-coloured feathered parrots" (Nguyễn Hữu Tâm, 2008: 273). This gulf was home to the '*kiến đồng* fish' - a unique species with four leg-like appendages and no scales. It possessed an elephant-like trunk (nose - editor's note), and was known for sucking in water and spouting it to heights of 50-60 *thước* (*chi*, traditional measurement units); there were *phù hồ* fish resembling parrots, with parrot-like beaks and eight legs. Here, people often witnessed schools of *lục* fish gliding along the water's surface. There were also large fish species that would swim with their backs exposed above the water, appearing like mountains when viewed from afar. Currently, around 200-300 dugongs still inhabit the waters around Phú Quốc island. These are rare and precious animals, facing extinction and are listed in the Red Book. Along with these animals, the Southwestern Sea region was also home to "a plant called *đại nhược* (large water plant), with leaves reaching 7-8 *thước* in length. People would weave these leaves together to thatch their houses. Common people also built stilt houses to live in. Their boats were constructed up to 7-8 *trượng* (*zhang*) in length, with hulls 7-8 *thước* wide, with both the bow and stern shaped like a fish" (Nguyễn Hữu Tâm, 2008: 271).

The Southwestern Sea is an enclosed maritime region, bound by the Strait of Malacca situated Northwest of Sumatra Island, the Sunda Strait in the Southeast, and the Isthmus of Kra on the Eastern coast of the Malay Peninsula. The Isthmus of Kra used to be an important point in the Inter-Asian trade route, connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The Isthmus, situated in the narrow land area of the Malay Peninsula, acted as the most important entrance for ancient kingdoms to facilitate various cultural exchanges and economic initiatives with the Southwest Asia region (Hall, 1985: 20-25). For many centuries, before the Malacca and Sunda straits gained prominence, the Isthmus of Kra was the main trading hub, as well as a

node for cultural and religious exchanges with India (Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2005: 42-57). Undoubtedly, the sea route from Southwest Asia through the Isthmus to the ports and islands of the Southwestern Sea such as Thổ Chu, Phú Quốc, Hòn Khoai, Hòn Chuối, Hòn Đá Bạc (Cà Mau), and the islands further to the Central coast - Côn Đảo (Pulau Condore), Cù Lao Ré (Lý Sơn) (Lê Đức An, 2008: 107-132), Cù Lao Chàm (the “precursor” of Chiêm Cảng or Port of Champa - Hội An) etc. all played an important role in the Asian trade network.

Many archipelagos and islands are situated in the Southwestern Sea, with some of them home to various ethnic groups. In particular, in the Bay of Kiên Giang, there are around 43 populated islands. Due to historical and cultural reasons, some of these places may be known by many different names. Vietnamese names coexist alongside names derived from the Malayo-Polynesian language family; for example, “Cù Lao” originates from Malayo-Polynesian ‘Pulao’. Among the islands of the Southwestern Sea, Phú Quốc holds a special role due to its size, economic potential, and historical legends. With an area covering 580 square kilometers, Phú Quốc is Vietnam’s largest coastal island, possessing high development potential and the most significant influence in the gulf region. The richness of Phú Quốc’s resources can be inferred from *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* (Unified Gazetteer of Đại Nam): “The distance between the Eastern and the Western side of the island is 200 miles, the distance from the North to the South is 100 miles; on the island there are no tigers or leopards; however, wild pigs and deer could be found in the mountains, alongside swallow’s nests, rattan, good quality wood, tortoise shells, sea cucumber, and fragrant cinnamon. The land was fertile and suitable for cultivating various crops including rice, beans, corn, and sticky rice. The mountains bore deposits of stones with a luster comparable to paint. These stones were used for making gemstones, while larger pieces were carved into betel containers, plates.... The island was also believed to harbor ambergris (*long diên hương*) and spotted ebony trees (*hắc ban hương*), with mottled bark was as dark as agarwood.” (National History Institute of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2012: 18).

The warm waters surrounding Phú Quốc provide an ideal habitat for marine life. Surveys reveal a rich biodiversity including 273 species of fish, 44 species of shrimp, 52 species of mollusks, 10 species of cephalopods, 32 species of echinoderms, and six species of marine mammals. Among these, dugongs are particularly notable, and are listed as an endangered species requiring protection. The area also harbors more than 150 species of ornamental fish, 48 species of mollusks, and 25 species of echinoderms. The island’s coral reefs span 470 hectares and are home to 260 species, including both hard and soft corals, alongside nine species of seagrass and 50 species of seaweed (Bùi Quang Thắng, 2018: 38-39). Given its exceptional marine biodiversity, the waters around Phú Quốc stand out as one of Vietnam’s most valuable natural resources, effectively functioning as a living marine museum. Along with its islands, the coastal port system demonstrates the prosperity of Cà Mau and Kiên Giang provinces. West of Rạch Giá lies Hòn Chông Cape, characterized by multiple rocky outcrops extending into the sea. Hòn

Chông was historically renowned as a pepper supply center for international merchant vessels. Traders from Canton [Guangdong], Fujian, Xiamen, Hainan (China); Batavia (Indonesia), Siam (now Thailand), and other regions frequently visited Rạch Giá and Hà Tiên to buy goods.

The population in the Southwestern Vietnam - Southwestern Sea region was historically renowned for their craftsmanship. From the 17th century, the people of Hà Tiên harnessed various local resources and specialties to craft many prized products. They and the Phú Quốc islanders were also known for their specialties in white wax (*bạch Lạp*), pepper, seafood processing, fish sauce production, and hawksbill sea turtle hunting, etc. Merchant fleets from China, Siam, and Malaya regularly traded in these exotic items. In *Phủ biên tạp lục* (Frontier Chronicles), the author Lê Quý Đôn had something to say regarding the value of gagate stones: “The gagate stones from Hà Tiên, formed in cube-like blocks resembling copper, had an iron ore-like black coloration. These stones were valued both as health talismans and for crafting fine beaded necklaces” (Lê Quý Đôn, 1977: 330). The author of the book *Gia Định thành thông chí* (Gazetteer of Gia Định) stated: “Qiongzhou merchant vessels from Guangdong stop at the island ports to purchase sea cucumbers and swim bladders, they blended in with our people, their ships and masts totally resemble ours”. Regarding the Đông Hồ area in Hà Tiên: “Sailing ships anchored so closely together, merchants gathering in crowds” (Trịnh Hoài Đức, 1998: 69).

Thus, the environment and resources of the Southwestern Sea region created favorable conditions for the prosperous development of regional economic centers. Moreover, the creative labor of its inhabitants made this maritime region renowned in the history of Southeast Asia and the world. In the southern region during the 18th century, under the Mạc family’s administration, the people of Hà Tiên achieved significant accomplishments in pioneering development, becoming an economic center in the Southwest region. The book *Hoàng triều Văn hiến Thông khảo* mentioned: “The Port (*cảng khẩu*) is a small state in the Southern Sea (Nanhai)... people of this land are fond of literature and scholarly texts. This land has temples dedicated to Confucius and schools to teach young students... Local products include sea cucumber, fish, meat, and dried shrimp. In the 7th year of King Yongzheng (1729), a trade route was established between this region and Guangdong, spanning 7,200 *li* by sea.” (Sơn Hồng Đức, 1973: 38).

3. The Southward vision of Nguyễn Lords

During the era of expanding the territory, the political ambitions of the Ayutthaya Dynasty (1351-1767) led to worries by the Đàng Trong court and the Mạc clan in Hà Tiên. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Ayutthaya harbored various territorial ambitions in Southeast Asia. Thanks to the open policies that successfully harnessed the economic potentialities of the region, the Siamese ports were able to

attract many merchant fleets from Europe to Asia (Tarling, N., 1992: 168-171). Regarding Đàng Trong, owing to the proximity to the eastern axis of the Asian maritime trade route, Ayutthaya vessels regularly visited the ports of central Vietnam for storm shelter, as well as for food and water. From there, merchant fleets set sail to Northeast Asian ports. The Siamese realized the economic significance of the Southwestern Sea region and the Đàng Trong trading port system (Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2003: 181-208). Thus, besides merchant vessels coming to Hội An, Nước Mặn etc. for trade, Siamese vessels were also sent to Đàng Trong for studying the situation and collecting information.

The flexible but principled diplomatic policy of the Nguyễn Lords was able to bar various schemes of the Siamese court, forcing the Siam kingdom to concede to the Nguyễn demands in various diplomatic deals. However, diplomacy alone could not stop the ambitions of the Siamese elites, especially their ambition for dominance in the Hà Tiên and Southern lands – as the innovative economic policies of Mạc Cửu (1655-1735) and Mạc Thiên Tứ (1718-1780) had transformed the regions of Hà Tiên - Phú Quốc into a prosperous residential area and trade center.

The Hà Tiên - Phú Quốc area was not only renowned for exotic maritime specialities: sea food, fish sauces, swallow's nests, tortoise shells, etc. but also its valuable forest products including *kiền kiền* and *sao* wood used in shipbuilding. For many centuries, *sao* wood was prized by both Asian and European navigators as suitable material for shipbuilding. Furthermore, pearls and agarwood from Phú Quốc were also of high quality and highly sought after in global markets. Additionally, the inhabitants of the Southwestern Sea region were skilled in agricultural techniques, adept at understanding the patterns of water movements, and well-versed in trading skills. Throughout the settlement process, they quickly adapted to, and mastered, the abundant resources including land, rivers, lagoons, canals, and the tropical flora and fauna systems. In a land where “the benefits from rivers and marshes never cease” (National History Institute of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2012: 27), the natural ecosystem contributed to nurturing and enriching people's lives, while creating an attraction that drew many groups of people to settle and establish their livelihoods there.

In the diplomatic history between Vietnam and its neighbors, Siamese trade made significant contributions to the economy of Đàng Trong, facilitated by geographical proximity and deliberate cultivation of maritime relations. In the 16th to 17th centuries, the Siamese kingdom had striven to maintain diplomatic relations with the Nguyễn Lords. According to British tradesman Bowyear in 1697, Southeast Asia's trade vessels exported various products to Đàng Trong: “From Siam - betel leaves, red wood (used for dyeing fabric), lacquer, mother-of-pearl, ivory, tin, lead, and rice; from Cambodia - *thư hoàng* (a material used in painting), styrax benzoides, amomum, wax, lacquer, mother-of-pearl, red wood, resin, buffalo hide, deer hide and sinew, ivory, rhinoceros horn, etc.; from Batavia - silver, eucalyptus, betel leaves, red and white '*cát bá*' fabric, red dye; from Manila - silver, sulfur, red wood, seashells, tobacco, wax, and deer sinew. Meanwhile, Đàng Trong

exported gold, iron, silk and woven goods such as *lĩnh* and *lụa* (types of silk), *kỳ nam* (premium agarwood), agarwood, sugar, rock sugar, bird's nests, pepper, cotton..." (Thành Thế Vỹ, 1961: 227).

There were some diplomatic documents between Đàng Trong and Siam and other states in the region at that time. In the 16th year of Cảnh Hưng (1756), the Siamese authority sent a diplomatic letter for "long-term partnership" and asked the Nguyễn Lord at the time - who was Nguyễn Phúc Khoát (1738-1765) - to accommodate Siamese merchants for economic exchange. The letter stated: "An Nam and Siam share the same vast sea, united under one sky. Though our two nations are separate, we are as if sharing the same land. Through exchanges back and forth across distant borders, over many generations, we have maintained the noble way of cherishing those from afar and maintaining neighborly relations... May Your Majesty of the superior Kingdom of An Nam live for ten thousand years, and kindly consider these words presented below the royal pavilion" (Lê Quý Đôn, 1977: 262).

In his reply letter, the Nguyễn Lord emphasized the tradition of peaceful relations and affirmed: "My nation and your honorable kingdom have been bound together as neighbors for generations, without the slightest misgivings, our mutual trust as enduring as gold and stone" (Lê Quý Đôn, 1977: 267). However, alongside such diplomatic language, the Nguyễn Lord firmly demanded that the Siamese court return displaced soldiers and civilians, and commit to cooperating in pirate suppression, while skillfully declining to issue Siam ten '*long bài*' (lit. "dragon (=royal) badges" for tax exemption), thus preventing Siamese merchants from gaining overwhelming advantage in maritime trade activities. This refusal was also aimed at maintaining active control over Siamese penetration into Đàng Trong's territorial waters and port markets.

After the appointment to the position of *tổng binh* (military governor, or military commander) of Hà Tiên *trấn* in 1708, Mạc Cửu and his son - Mạc Thiên Tứ - realizing the significant power of Đàng Trong endeavored to garner the patronage of the Nguyễn administration. Regarding their economic policies, this political clan continually strengthened relations with the Nguyễn Lords through maritime trade activities. Besides three ships bearing *long bài*, (granted in 1736) thus enjoying tax exemption, being permitted to sail abroad seeking rare commodities, the Nguyễn Lords also established a mint bureau to facilitate trade. Furthermore, when ships from Hà Tiên arrived for trading in Hội An, Đàng Trong's largest international port, they were subject to only minimal taxation. Specifically, "the arrival tax was 300 *quan* and the departure tax was 30 *quan*" (Lê Quý Đôn, 1977: 232). In comparison, ships from Siam and Luzon (*Lữ Tống*) were subject to an arrival tax of 2,000 *quan* and a departure tax of 200 *quan*. While these tax rates might have reflected Hà Tiên's smaller vessel tonnage, they more likely represented the Nguyễn Lords' preferential policy arising from their close relationship with Hà Tiên's leaders.

Recognizing favorable conditions for developing regional trade relations,

continuing Mạc Cửu's business vision, Mạc Thiên Tứ proactively established administrative offices, selected military officials, built fortifications, opened markets and streets, attracting numerous foreign merchants. He also invited scholars, established *Chiêu Anh Các* ("Recruitment of Talents" Pavilion), where "daily lectures and poetry exchanges took place" (National History Institute of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2002: 145-146). During 1724-1750, trade relations between China and Southeast Asia increased threefold in Fujian and fivefold in Canton. Chinese merchant vessels visiting Đàng Trong increased fourfold during 1750-1820. The regular appearance of those merchant vessels contributed to increasing the Nguyễn Lords' revenue. The total income of Đàng Trong's government during 1746-1752 was approximately 380,700 *quan*, but by 1800, revenue from Gia Định alone reached 489,790 *quan*. Similarly, the Siamese court's trade revenue during 1740-1820 also increased approximately fourfold. The benefits derived from trade with Southeast Asia also transformed the lives of many Southern Chinese residents (Li Tana, 2006: 3).

In the latter half of the 18th century, Canton (the only international port still open after 1757) continually maintained trade relations with the Mekong River Delta. As per primary sources, Cantonese junk fleets had visited the ports of Sóc Trăng and Cảng Khẩu (Cancão, or Hà Tiên) and even Chân Lạp. Of the 37 merchant vessels traveling to Southeast Asia, 85% to 90% visited the lower Mekong delta region. International scholars have termed this area the "*Water Frontier*," reflecting its fluid and dynamic border characteristics. British merchant records dating from 1767 document the return of 34 ships to Canton: nine from the Central Vietnam, nine from Sóc Trăng, seven from Hà Tiên, two from Chân Lạp, four from Palembang, and one from Batavia. Regarding trade volumes, historical records indicate that in 1761, Đàng Trong (possibly through Hội An???) exported 2,539 *piculs* (a picul is about 60.5kg) of agarwood to global markets, while Siam exported only 563 *piculs*. Following the 5th Siamese-Burmese War (1766-1767), Siam's tin exports decreased to 200 *piculs*, while Hà Tiên exported 2,700 *piculs*, and the Sóc Trăng – Chân Lạp region, known for pure tin exports, contributed 1,000 *piculs*. Documents also reveal that Hà Tiên was a major rice exporter, with rice being the primary export commodity of both Hà Tiên and the broader Mekong delta region (Li Tana, 2006: 148-149).

Situated in the frontier bulwark, Hà Tiên – as a vital maritime trade center on the maritime route from the lower Chao Phraya area to the ports of Southeastern Vietnam – became a strategic location, a "touchstone" in the diplomatic relations between the Đàng Trong regime, the Mạc clan and other regional powers. After the establishment of the Trần Biên garrison (currently the Biên Hòa area) in 1698, in the 17th year of King Lê Hiển Tông's rule (1708), Lord Nguyễn Phúc Chu (ruling period: 1691-1725) made a bold yet astute decision to appoint Mạc Cửu (1655-1735) – a foreigner of non-Vietnamese ethnicity and not from the traditional

mandarin lineage, as *tổng binh*, the military commander, of Hà Tiên*. Mạc Cửu, originally from Lei Zhou (Canton), had fled south following the Ming Dynasty's collapse and sought settlement in Hà Tiên for land reclamation. Being an experienced merchant with economic vision, upon noticing frequent merchant traffic passing through Hà Tiên, he established gambling houses for tax collection (Phan Khoang, 2001). Furthermore, Mạc Cửu “gathered displaced people to settle in Phú Quốc, Cần Bột, Giá Khê, Luống Cày, Hương Úc, and Cà Mau [all in Hà Tiên province], establishing villages. As local legend told of immortal beings sometimes appearing on the river, he named the area Hà Tiên [lit.: “immortal river”]. There, he delegated his subordinates Trương Cầu and Lý Xá to submit a petition requesting his appointment as the Hà Tiên chief. The Lord approved and granted him the position of Military Commander. Cửu constructed military quarters at Phương Thành, and the population gradually increased” (National History Institute of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2004: 122). The Mạc clan accurately assessed the political dynamics and actual strength of both the Đàng Trong government and regional powers. The successful establishment of tax collection stations “marked an important milestone in Vietnamese progress toward formalizing the development of the Southern land”, from which the Nguyễn Lords “deployed activities to implement and protect sovereignty in a determined and effective manner” (Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, 2008: 368).

The Nguyễn Lords, recognizing shifts in international trade systems, pursued a dual strategy: developing the delta region's agricultural potential while maintaining control over natural resources, the maritime economy, and seaport revenues to strengthen their economic power and sustain an increasingly bureaucratic administrative system. Their position was further pushed by several factors: opposition from the Lê-Trịnh government in Đàng Ngoài (Tonkin), lack of formal relations with the Qing Dynasty, inconsistent policies from Chân Lạp, Siam's expansionist ambitions, and the economic potential of Chinese merchants; leading to the Nguyễn Lords seeking to leverage Mạc Cửu's influence and generally maintain favorable relations with such displaced power groups coming to settle in the region (Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, 2001).

Under the rule of Mạc Cửu and Mạc Thiên Tứ, the Phương Thành authority pursued a policy of *mercantilism*, and instituted a *laissez-faire policy regarding commerce*. Thus, Hà Tiên became the attraction for international merchants for economic exchange. Flourishing trade made Hà Tiên (and the entire Southwestern Vietnam region) a focal point and target for penetration by the Ayutthaya government, a kingdom seeking to assert its regional political and economic dominance. As an astute administrator, Mạc Thiên Tứ continued expanding ports to accommodate foreign merchant vessels. During this period, Hà Tiên earned the moniker “Little Canton,” attracting merchant fleets from Malaya, Sumatra, Java,

* Regarding Mạc Cửu's appointment as Military Commander of Hà Tiên, historical records differ. *Đại Nam thực lục* records it as 1708. However, *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* (1997) states that it is in 1714 (Giáp Ngọ) on page 6, but 1708 on page 31. In our assessment, 1708 is the accurate date.

Siam, India, Burma, Fujian, and Hainan. Each year, on the 12th day of the 12th lunar month (Mạc Thiên Tứ's birthday), arriving merchant vessels would receive tax/duties exemptions. Foreign merchants typically used this occasion to express goodwill toward local authorities. While Malayan vessels enjoyed preferential treatment, Burmese merchant ships received the most favorable considerations due to Burma's rivalry with Siam.

To facilitate commerce, alongside the currency minted by the Nguyễn Lords in 1736, the Mạc family in Hà Tiên permitted domestic and international merchants to use two additional foreign currencies: Chinese copper cash coins and *Spanish dollars*. The standard weight unit was the *picul* (equivalent to 60.5kg). Chinese merchants typically brought distinctive products to Hà Tiên for daily use such as ceramics, wooden household items, lacquerware, silk, confectionery, tea, and clothing. Their imports included betel nuts, tin, ebony, bird's nests, deer hide, dried shrimp, agarwood, and pepper. For decades, Chinese merchants also transported substantial rice shipments northward. Before the Tây Sơn Uprising (1771-1802), each year approximately 341 merchant vessels visited Đàng Trong for food provisions. Annual rice exports totaled between 5,000 and 6,000 tons. The Nguyễn Lords also dispatched vessels to purchase rice from the delta. When war broke out, disrupting southern rice supplies, severe food shortages immediately struck the central region, challenging the Nguyễn Lords' authority. Meanwhile, maritime trade routes continued carrying rice from the Mekong Delta to China and various Southeast Asian nations (Li Tana, 2004: 74). Consequently, the wealthy landowners - notables who controlled the delta's economic resources - drew special attention from both the Tây Sơn movement and Nguyễn Ánh's faction. Their policies toward 'southern major landowners and the local force of Chinese origin were different, resulting in many influential southern elites ultimately supported Nguyễn Ánh. Historical records reveal how he leveraged resources from the Đồng Nai - Gia Định region and Mekong delta in his campaign. The crucial support of southern landowners and the merchants of Chinese origin provided the economic foundation that enabled him to send envoys (Chinese, French, and British) to various trading ports - Goa, Malacca, Penang, Macau, and later Singapore - to acquire military supplies including cannons, firearms, ammunition, gunpowder and equipment (Wook, 2004: 86).

4. Establishing and defending sovereignty: The early Nguyễn Dynasty emperors

The turbulent period of China's transition from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), combined with Burma's military campaigns against Siam, maritime peoples' migrations, and the arrival of Western powers in the region, significantly altered the political equilibrium between regional entities. Confronting these historical challenges, the Đàng Trong regime and the

people of the Southwestern region persevered with the struggle to defend their homeland, demonstrating unwavering commitment to protecting the national sovereignty of the region.

With political ambitions in mind, in 1784, the Siamese authorities mobilized a military force of 20,000 troops and 300 warships from Bangkok, coordinating with a 30,000 strong infantry from Chân Lạp to invade the Mekong delta. By early 1785, under the direct command of Nguyễn Huệ (1788-1792), within a single day (the 10th day of the 12th month in the Year of Giáp Thìn, or 19 January, 1785), the Tây Sơn forces crushed the Siamese army in the Rạch Gầm-Xoài Mút battle, halting the eastward expansion ambitions of the Chakri I Court. According to Nguyễn Dynasty historians: “The Siamese, after their defeat in the Year of Giáp Thìn, though appearing boastful, feared the Tây Sơn like men fearing tigers” (National History Institute of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2002: 227-228). Unable to pursue their “Eastward Policy,” the Siamese Court had to adjust their strategic objectives, redirecting their sphere of influence southward to the Malay Peninsula and maritime Southeast Asia.

To protect maritime sovereignty, establish territorial boundaries, and secure marine economic resources, the Nguyễn Lords established the “Hoàng Sa” and “Bắc Hải” squadrons to control and protect maritime spaces. Regarding the Southwestern maritime region, recognizing that the Hoàng Sa squadron could not effectively manage both the Hoàng Sa archipelago as well as overseeing the Trường Sa and Hà Tiên waters, the Nguyễn Lords established the additional Bắc Hải squadron. According to Lê Quý Đôn (1726-1784), the Nguyễn Lords selected “either people from Tứ Chính village in Bình Thuận or from Cảnh Dương commune; whoever volunteered was issued official papers, exempted from head tax and ferry fees, and allowed to take small fishing boats to Bắc Hải territories, Côn Lôn and Hà Tiên islands, to collect pieces of the shipwrecks and items such as turtle shells, sea snails, abalone, and sea cucumber, also under the Hoàng Sa squad commander’s supervision” (Lê Quý Đôn, 2021: 120). Established shortly after Lord Nguyễn Phúc Chu (1691-1725) created the Bình Thuận prefecture in the 6th year of his reign (Đinh Sửu, 1697), the Bắc Hải naval squadron regularly conducted surveys and asserted sovereignty in the nation’s southern waters. Additionally, this squadron was responsible for protecting the Mạc family’s economic interests in Hà Tiên.

Notably, after gaining power, Nguyễn Ánh named his ruling period as Gia Long (1802-1819) and promptly implemented important policies to protect and assert sovereignty in Southwestern Vietnam and the Southwestern Sea. The Huế Court, from Gia Long through to Minh Mạng (ruling period: 1820-1841), Thiệu Trị (ruling period: 1841-1847), Tự Đức (ruling period: 1847-1883) paid special attention to the nation’s southern maritime regions. The Huế Court strove to commit this maritime zone to evermore increased administration and sovereignty assertion. In 1816, Gia Long incorporated the activities of the Hoàng Sa and Bắc Hải squadrons into the navy to assert complete and integral sovereignty of the Đại Nam

(lit. the great [country in the] South) over the Hoàng Sa, Trường Sa, and Southwestern Sea regions (Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, 2017: 192-199).

During Minh Mạng's reign, alongside establishing administrative units, the Huế Court strengthened its social control, disease prevention, and resource exploitation in Hà Tiên and the Mekong Delta. In Minh Mạng's first year (1820), a major epidemic broke out in Hà Tiên, Vĩnh Thanh, and Định Tường. The emperor "decreed local authorities to perform prayer ceremonies. Those infected, whether officials, soldiers, or civilians, were all given medicine. For the deceased, the families of dead soldiers received death benefits plus an additional cloth sheet; civilians - men, women, old, and young - each received 3 *quan*. The imperial court would provide burial space for exposed remains. Imperial messengers were dispatched to instruct local officials to personally distribute death benefits, monitor epidemic severity, and report daily on military casualties" (National History Institute of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2004b: 70). In 1832, the emperor decreed: "the Côn Lôn and Hà Tiên-Phú Quốc fortresses are strategic locations with a high population density, yet pirates frequently appear. Orders are hereby given to provincial officials to select sites at these two fortresses for building artillery platforms, supplying guns, ammunition, weapons, vessels, and deploying garrison troops" (National History Institute of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2004c: 384). To preserve military readiness, the Nguyễn Court established regulations on flag-raising and cannon-firing ceremonies at Kim Dữ fortress in Hà Tiên. The fortress flew "one yellow cloth flag, 5.5 *thước* wide and 6.6 *thước* long, raised on ceremonial days and the 1st and 15th [new moon and full moon] days of each lunar month, replaced every six years. Henceforth, when large bronze vessels, dispatched from the capital, pass by the station flying yellow flags and firing cannons, the fortress shall raise the yellow flag and fire three cannon shots. For entire fleets, regardless of multiple shots fired, only three shots shall be returned. For foreign vessels anchoring or departing, if they raise flags and fire guns, no signals are required, and only three shots shall be fired without raising flags" (National History Institute of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2010: 1649).

For security, the Huế Court allocated Hà Tiên a fleet of 30 vessels: five *Điện hải* ships, five small sampans, five each of *Hải đạo* and *Lê* vessels, and ten *Chu* boats for maritime patrol. Also in 1832, Emperor Minh Mạng focused on securing Côn Lôn and Phú Quốc: "His Majesty considered that Côn Lôn and Phú Quốc beaches in Hà Tiên province have large populations but face persistent pirate harassment, the emperor orders Hà Tiên provincial officials to immediately select sites for artillery platforms at both locations, provide weapons, ammunition, vessels, deploy troops for defense; arm residents for defense participation. Additionally, to establish the Phú Quốc fortress, reinforced with stone walls" (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2010: 1649). The emperor also instructed the Ministry of War regarding sea pirates from Đồ Bà island who typically raided coastal populations during the summer-autumn transition. Consequently, Bình Định, Phú Yên, and Khánh Hòa provinces were ordered to supply *ô sang* muskets and spears to coastal villages for

defense against pirates. In March 1833, Emperor Minh Mạng established the Phú Quốc fortress under Hà Tiên's jurisdiction. By then, Phú Quốc had a substantial population and a flat sandy beach 50-60 *trượng* wide, suitable for vessel anchorage in all seasons and wind directions. Due to frequent pirate raids, a fortress was established to provide rigorous defense.

Phú Quốc fortress was recorded to have constructed with walls of mountain stone, topped with quarters for duty soldiers. It was equipped with four *hồng y cương* cannons, eight *quá sơn* bronze cannons, and garrisoned by 50 provincial soldiers. Authority was permitted to recruit locals to assist in guard duties and they were provided with weapons and vessels to strengthen defense arrangements. In May 1833, the Nguyễn Court allowed Hà Tiên to stockpile 300 *cân* of lead, 100 *cân* of copper, 1,000 *cân* of saltpeter, and 200 *cân* of sulfur for the manufacture of weapons. The establishment of the fortresses in Phú Quốc-Hà Tiên and deployment of patrol troops aimed to “prevent unexpected threats. Thus, our coastal defenses present an intimidating yet impenetrable presence. With military preparedness maintained, foreigners’ ill intentions will dissipate. Not only will distant Westerners not dare to challenge our nation, but even powerful neighboring countries will abandon thoughts of encroachment” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2004e: 829). In 1838, alongside the Phú Quốc fortress, the Nguyễn Dynasty constructed Hàm Ninh fortress, as Phú Quốc was a strategic coastal position. With 12 villages covering substantial territory, an additional fortress was built in An Thái village to guard against pirates. “Hàm Ninh fortress measured 32 *trượng* long, with a height and thickness matching the Phú Quốc fortress, wooden fences erected on all sides, a left gate eight *thước* high and five *thước* wide with a wooden roof; a moat eight *thước* wide and three *thước* deep; internal three-bay barracks with two wings; central front watchtower two *trượng* high; two ‘*quá sơn*’ bronze cannons at left and right corners, garrisoned by one squad leader and 20 soldiers” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2004e: 241).

To assert maritime boundaries and sovereignty in the Southwestern Sea, the Nine Dynastic Vessels [or Urns, *Cửu Đỉnh*] in the Huế Imperial City (cast under Emperor Minh Mạng's order from December 1835, completed in 1837) clearly inscribed the geographical names: Đông Hải [East Sea], Nam Hải [South Sea], Tây Hải [West Sea]. Đông Hải was inscribed on *Cao Đỉnh*, the largest of the Nine Vessels. Nam Hải was inscribed on *Nhân Đỉnh* and Tây Hải on *Chuong Đỉnh*. In 1836, upon completion of the Nine Vessels, the emperor ordered the East Sea image be cast on *Cao Đỉnh*. (Phan Thanh Hải, 2015).

In the East Sea lay the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa archipelagoes under the sovereignty of the Đại Nam (Vietnam's name at that time, meaning “the great country in the South”) state. This was the area described as “*Bản quốc hải cương Hoàng Sa xứ tối thị hiểm yếu*” [Our nation's most strategic maritime frontier of Hoàng Sa] (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2004d: 867). Nam Hải (“nam” means “south”, “hải” means “sea”) refers to the southeastern waters under Vietnamese sovereignty. Tây Hải represents the western waters under Vietnam sovereignty,

containing the islands of Đại Kim, Mãn Hòa, Nội Trú, Phú Quốc, Thổ Chu etc. Upon completion, the Nine Dynastic Vessels were placed solemnly before Thế Miếu, the most important architectural structure in the Huế Imperial City. The name given to each urn corresponded to the posthumous title of a Nguyễn emperor[†]. The Nine Vessels were considered a graphic “*Geographical Record*” and represented the Nguyễn dynasty’s exemplary historical, cultural, and artistic achievements, becoming a Vietnamese cultural heritage. Emperor Minh Mạng instructed the cabinet: “The Vessels demonstrate the legitimacy of the throne and the convergence of mandate. They are truly precious objects of the ancestral temple... I respectfully continue the precedent legacies, following clear guidelines. Now wishing to emulate the ancient, casting nine vessels for the Thế Miếu... They symbolise eternal stability, to be passed down through the generations. Officials are hereby ordered to follow the newly established patterns for casting” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2004d: 792-793). Upon completion of the vessels, Emperor Minh Mạng was recorded to have further instructed his court: “Now following ancient precedents while adding our own modifications, we have cast nine great vessels, standing tall and firm, massive and stable, without any flaws, worthy as treasures for endless generations of descendants. This shall be announced to all 31 provinces and *Trấn Tây Thành* region to acknowledge” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2004e: 21-22).

In 1836, the emperor instructed the minister of war: “Our nation has a very long coastline, and maritime patrol is crucial and essential. Now it is decreed that the capital and coastal regions shall dispatch patrol forces annually from the second month until returning in the seventh or eighth month. For the region from Gia Định to Hà Tiên provinces, patrols shall depart in the fourth month and return in the tenth month [of the lunar calendar]” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2010: 1659). By royal decree, maritime patrol personnel must dedicate themselves fully to their duties and conduct thorough inspections. Those who capture pirates would be rewarded, while those who fail to achieve merits and allow pirates freedom would face punishment. With deep awareness of maritime sovereignty, all orders and duties were implemented rigorously. Thus, continuing the maritime governance philosophy and methods of the Nguyễn Lords, the early Nguyễn emperors such as Gia Long, Minh Mạng and others established fundamental principles and institutions for maritime management and development of maritime potential. This tradition continued through subsequent reigns.

[†] Accordingly: 1. Cao Đinh (Gia Long): 2601.4kg, 2. Nhân Đinh (Minh Mạng): 2152.6kg, 3. Chương Đinh (Thiệu Trị): 2079kg, 4. An Đinh (Tự Đức): 2595.7kg, Nghị Đinh (Kiên Phúc): 2595.7kg, Thuần Đinh (Đồng Khánh): 1950.3kg, Tuyên Đinh (Khải Định): 2066.4kg, Dụ Đinh (Hàm Nghi): 2017kg, Huyền Đinh (Duy Tân): 1935kg. The Nguyễn court mobilized skilled craftsmen and artisans, using 22,473kg of bronze to cast the Nine Urns. All elements of astronomy, geography, humanities, famous national locations (mountains, rivers, seaports), along with representative weapons, vehicles, vessels, and typical birds, fish, animals, and plants were carved with complete annotations. Each urn featured 17 decorative carvings and one calligraphic inscription, totaling 162 engravings.

5. Economic policies under the reign of Emperor Gia Long and Emperor Minh Mạng

In December 1818, Emperor Gia Long initiated the construction of a canal from Châu Đốc to Hà Tiên - the famous Vĩnh Tế Canal. This waterway, bordering Chân Lạp, primarily facilitated public and private transportation, benefiting both Vietnamese and Chân Lạp residents. The emperor instructed the Vĩnh Thanh inhabitants (the main workforce of 5,000 people working in the canal): “The construction work on this canal is an arduous job. The state’s strategy and border planning are of great significance. Your current hardship will benefit countless generations. Therefore, encourage each other to persevere” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2004a: 997). The canal was completed in 1824, during Minh Mạng’s reign, and became not only a national border but also ‘the largest irrigation project of the southern Vietnam and a crucial trade route in the country’s southwestern region.

In the 19th century, regional economic and cultural exchanges were restored and developed. In Hà Tiên: “Kinh [i.e. the Vietnamese] and Man [denoting non-Vietnamese ethnic minority groups] people mingle together, more than half engage in trade... Chinese, Khmer, and Javanese people inhabited coastal areas; they were nomadic rather than permanently settled” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2012: 10). In this economic and cultural environment, Hà Tiên residents developed distinct cultural characteristics. According to Nguyễn dynasty historians, Hà Tiên residents were “light-hearted in nature, fond of refinement; neither greedy nor thieving, being mostly generous” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2012: 10). These refined, generous people were united to build and protect the Cà Mau-Hà Tiên region and the Southwestern Sea. Thanks to the open-mindedness and hardworking spirit of Hà Tiên, “the streets are all connected and continuous, the Kinh, the Chinese, the Khmer, and the Cham live in their own neighborhoods. Ships and river boats shuttle to and from, it is truly a metropolis in the coastal region” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2012: 10). Such proud spirit and prosperity are largely rooted from the period of the Nguyễn Lords.

Regarding the Southwestern Sea, upon ascending the throne in 1802, Gia Long, recognizing Hà Tiên’s vulnerability to Siamese attacks, dispatched Governor Mạc Tử Thiêm to resettle the population and granted tax exemptions as an encouragement. Later, the Emperor abolished certain taxes, stating: “Hà Tiên is a distant border region. The previous dynasty established this garrison for defense, not for taxation. Since the uprising, the population has suffered, Tử Thiêm was responsible for safeguarding the territory and protecting the people; however he did not follow his majesty’s good intentions, and instead got involved in corruption and exploited the people to enrich himself... Therefore, miscellaneous taxes on the slaughter of pigs, opium, and gambling are all abolished. The poll and vessel taxes without fixed quotas are also exempted. Only population registration with the Ministry of Population remains for census purposes” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2004a: 788). According to Nguyễn dynasty historians: “After the decree was

announced, the people were all delighted.”

The development of Hà Tiên always formed a part of the inter-regional economic network with domestic and international markets for exchanging and supplying goods. For the domestic market, by the 19th century, Nguyễn court historians described how Hà Tiên’s markets thrived: “*Mỹ Đức market* in Hà Châu District has stalls and shops lined up continuously, usually attracts Kinh and Chinese traders; *Sái Phu market* in Kiên Giang district, commonly called Rạch Giá market has streets bustling with people and merchant vessels; *Hoàng Giang market* in Long Xuyên district featured dense shophouses, attracting merchant vessels”, and notably, the *Sân Chim* [lit. Bird Ground] market “in Đông An and Vĩnh Hoà villages in Kiên Giang district is a haven for birds where tens of thousands of seabirds gathered annually for breeding, with small merchants obtaining a license called ‘bird ground tax’ to gather bird feathers to trade with Chinese merchants” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2012: 28).

Understanding the Mekong Delta’s economic potential, in 1836 Emperor Minh Mạng established annual product procurement orders from Quảng Nam to Hà Tiên provinces. According to which: “Quảng Nam - ivory. Quảng Ngãi - ivory, ebony wood, apitongen boards. Bình Thuận - ivory, ebony wood, apitong, and *tử thuận* wooden boards of various qualities. Biên Hòa - fish fins, fish bladders, deer antlers, tendons, velvet, ivory, rhino horns and skins, 100,000 *cân* of refined sugar, apitong and *tử thuận* wooden boards of various qualities. Gia Định - deer hide, antlers, velvet, lotus seeds, sea cucumbers, fish fins, fish bladders, ivory, rhino horns and skins, deer tendons, nutmeg, wild horse skins, 10,000 *cân* of dried areca nuts, apitong and *tử thuận* wooden boards of various qualities. Định Tường - deer antlers and skin, fish bladders and fins, 3,000 *cân* of peeled and dried shrimps, 3,000 *cân* of dried shortfin eels, *bình lang* 20,000 *cân*, apitong and *tử thuận* wooden boards of various qualities. An Giang - deer, doe skin and tendons, nutmeg, *sa nhân* [*Wurfbainia villosa*] seeds, fish bladders and fins, ivory, deer antlers, rhino horn, pangolin skin, 10,000 *cân* of lotus seeds, 3,000 *cân* of shrimps peeled and dried, 5,000 *cân* of dried carp, apitong and *tử thuận* wooden boards of various qualities. Hà Tiên - turtle shell, sea cucumber, fish fins and bladders, birds’ nests, 10,000 *cân* of peeled and dried shrimps, 10,000 *cân* of dried carp, 10,000 *cân* of pepper, apitong and *tử thuận* wooden boards of various qualities. All *trâm thị* and ebony wood are required to be at least 3-4 *thước* in length and the diameter must be 3-4 *tấc* more or less; apitong and *tử thuận* wooden boards of various qualities should all be more than 15 *thước* in length, more than 5 *tấc* wide, and a thickness varying from 8 *phân* to 1 *tấc 2 phân*” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2004: 1037).

Comparing these procurement orders, we notice how Gia Định had the highest requirements. However, except for 10,000 *cân* of betel nuts, other products had no specific quotas. Biên Hòa and Hà Tiên each supplied 12 types of products. Hà Tiên provided seven marine products and six forest products: pepper and five types of timber. Three main products stood out: dried shrimp (10,000 *cân*), dried *thiết linh* fish (10,000 *cân*), and pepper (10,000 *cân*). This demonstrates the Huế

Court's thorough understanding and high regard for this frontier region's economic resources and product quality.

To attract merchants and revive Hà Tiên's economic role, in 1811 Gia Long continued to abolish rice trade restrictions. Consequently, "trade circulation became convenient for all people". The Nguyễn court also established specific tax rates (based on cargo size) for merchant vessels from Hà Tiên, Siam, Hezhou, Hainan, and Java. They prohibited trade in "gold, silver, salt, rice, copper coins, agarwood. For luxury goods like ivory, rhinoceros' horn, cardamom, *sa nhân*, cinnamon bark, pepper, and various hardwoods, that Hà Tiên and Siamese merchants are allowed to buy, they must pay tax of 5 *tiền* per 10 *quan* of purchase value. Domestic resale was tax-exempt" (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2004a: 762). The emperor also prohibited illegal passenger transport and restricted access for foreign vessels to trading ports from Gia Định to Quảng Ngãi (excluding the Huế capital, most likely for security reasons). Domestic merchants and Chinese residents in Nam Bộ were forbidden from conducting unauthorized trade with Hezhou and Siam, with violators facing severe punishment.

The Nguyễn Dynasty viewed Hà Tiên as a crucial border region. Thus, Gia Long ordered Governor Trương Phúc Giáo and Deputy Governor Bùi Đức Miên to implement a simple and generous administration, avoid harassing people, maintain military camps, attract settlers, establish schools, cultivate wasteland, organize markets, and segregate residential areas for Vietnamese, Chinese, Cambodian, and Javanese communities (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2004a: 821). This policy helped minimize inter-community social issues. On the other hand, regarding sovereignty and security, officials in Hà Tiên, Long Xuyên, and Kiên Giang were required to frequently monitor Siamese activities and report back to the central court. The Gia Định governor had to report border situations every five days. In the emperor's view, Châu Đốc and Hà Tiên held importance equal to the important Bắc Thành *trấn* in the North.

The Nguyễn Court also addressed "Javanese pirates" encroaching into the Southwestern Sea, whose activities frightened Phú Quốc islanders and disrupted trading activities. Gia Long dispatched troops from Gia Định to quell the pirates and encouraged Macanese and Western traders to trade in Gia Định. Merchants could "pay port and cargo taxes in foreign silver, medium-grade silver, pure silver, currency, or combinations thereof, without restrictions" (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2004a: 971). This careful administrative and security management coupled with open trade policies facilitated rapid development of the Southwestern maritime region. By the 19th century, in Hà Tiên, "over half the population engaged in trade" (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2012: 10). Economic interests fostered social and economic integration between Vietnamese, foreigners, and immigrants. Phú Quốc Island developed multiple industries: agriculture, fishing, seafood processing, and trade. Merchants from central regions as well as regional countries were attracted to Phú Quốc and Hà Tiên.

6. Conclusion

Just as the Mediterranean Sea nurtured the Greco-Roman civilization, from the early centuries CE, the Southeast Asian Sea provided a favorable natural environment for regional state formation. Here, from the 2nd to 3rd centuries CE, merchant vessels, diplomatic missions, and missionaries from South and Northeast Asia visited the lower Mekong delta for trade and exchange. The diverse, prosperous ecosystem of this area as well as the Southwestern Sea and islands facilitated the rapid development of the Óc Eo culture. From the 15th to 17th centuries, during the Golden Age of Asian Trade (1450-1680), the Southwestern Sea region gradually revived its economic position to become a regional economic maritime trade center in Southeast Asia. The Southwestern Vietnam region's abundant resources became highly valued commodities in international markets, with its potentialities and resources attracting numerous merchant groups and settler communities. These economic and social activities formed the essential foundation for the emergence of many inter-regional ports and economic centers.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Nguyễn Lords, and subsequently the Nguyễn Dynasty, achieved remarkable success in resource exploitation and sovereignty assertion strategies. Recognizing the outstanding potential and strengths of this economic space, emperors Gia Long and Minh Mạng implemented various policies, mobilizing resources from the Mekong Delta and Southwestern maritime region to strengthen national power and expand regional influences. In Vietnamese history, the territorial process has always been linked with the establishment and exercise of sovereignty over maritime spaces. The Mekong Delta became a strategic area ensuring national food security. Today, the Southwestern Sea, particularly the Hà Tiên-Phú Quốc maritime zone, remains a driving force for implementing Vietnam's strategy of blue economy and sustainable development.

In the context of international cooperation and integration becoming contemporary trends, alongside policies for economic resource development, the Southwestern provinces have been mobilizing cultural resources, emphasizing positional resources in socio-economic development strategies and maritime sovereignty protection. The Southwestern maritime region has great potentialities to become an international tourism center, inter-Asian trade hub and export center (especially for high-quality and green agricultural products), and a key national maritime economic zone. Premium resort tourism, maritime services, financial-banking, aquaculture, and seafood processing can simultaneously be developed. The presence of economic conglomerates and international enterprises investing in development continues to affirm Vietnam's position. The Southwestern maritime region serves not only as an economic center but also as a solid great wall protecting national sovereignty and security.

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