

Chapter 3

Economic Aspects of Court Rituals and Ceremonies in Nineteenth Century Hue

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In nineteenth century Vietnam, the court rituals and ceremonies staged in the imperial capital of Hue assumed an essential role in the social integration encouraged by the Nguyen dynasty. Solemn court rituals, such as the worship of ancestors or the Suburban cult revering Heaven and Earth, were indispensable to the effort to demonstrate the legitimacy of dynastic rule to subjects who shared Confucian doctrine. Splendid ceremonies held on auspicious occasions such as the Emperor's birthday or that of the Empress Dowager demonstrated the empire's prosperity. At the same time, with attendance of the ambassadors of neighboring countries, these ceremonies visualized a dynastic world order centered on the imperial capital of Hue.

The importance of court rituals and ceremonies was never confined to the cultural or ideological dimensions. They entailed the exchange of various goods or money, in the form of gifts distributed by the ruler or offerings from the subjects. As a sign of allegiance and celebration from subjects to ruler, various goods were forwarded to Hue from throughout the country to support both rituals and ceremonies. In exchange, precious items kept in the state coffers were dispensed to subjects to demonstrate the ruler's wealth and benevolence. Although studies on the Nguyen dynasty's court rituals have been done since the French colonial period, their economic meaning has been scarcely examined up to now.¹

In this study, I shed new light on the economic aspects of the court rituals and ceremonies performed at Hue in the first half of the nineteenth century in order to understand social and economic integration in Vietnam during the Nguyen dynasty. To this end, I begin the study with a discussion of economic exchanges pertaining to rituals and

¹ In the French colonial period, pioneer research concerning court culture of Nguyen dynasty was conducted by intellectuals belonging to the Association des Amis du Vieux Hué (1914–1945). The results of their research were published by the renowned journal of the association, *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hué*. Recently, based on earlier studies of the colonial period, Võ Hương An published elaborate research dealing with court rituals and ceremonies of the Nguyen court under the reign of Khải Định Emperor [Võ Hương An 2016].

ceremonies organized annually by the Nguyen court. Following that, I examine the grand ceremonies held on exceptional auspicious occasions from the perspective of economic exchanges. Among other ceremonies, those celebrating the longevity of the Emperor and Dowager Empress will be looked at closely. Last but not least, the distinctive use of products and money in ritual and ceremony will be scrutinized by focusing on various fabrics and decorative coins issued by the Nguyen dynasty for distribution at ceremonies.

1. Economic Exchange on Annual Court Rituals and Ceremonies

1-1

Hue's court life in the nineteenth century was filled with a variety of rituals and ceremonies in every season. Among them, ancestral worship of the imperial clan had great importance. In the Nguyen period, in each season, particular days were chosen for rituals at a Confucian shrine named “miếu” 廟 that commemorated the imperial ancestors. The days when rituals for ancestral worship were to be conducted at miếu were designated as “hưởng” 享 (or 饗). There were five kinds of hưởng days corresponding to each season: “xuân hưởng” 春享 (the eighth day of January in the lunar calendar), “hạ hưởng” 夏享 (the first day of April), “thu hưởng” 秋饗 (the first day of July), “đông hưởng” 冬饗 (the first day of October), and “hạp hưởng” 禘饗 (22nd day of December) [Võ Hương An 2015, tập 1: 316]. Based on the imperial chronicle record of *DN TL*, the hưởng ritual of the Nguyen dynasty was first instituted in 1803. The chronicle relates that on each hưởng day, the Emperor himself practiced the ritual at the Thái Miếu 太廟 shrine. Other royal clans conducted it at the Liệt Miếu 列廟 shrine.² In addition to hưởng days, imperial ancestors were worshipped on the anniversaries of their births and deaths (đản thần 誕辰 and kỵ thần 忌辰) at temples named “điện” 殿. As will be discussed below, on the occasion of these ancestral worship days, local products were to be delivered from the entire country as an offering to the imperial ancestors enshrined at miếu and điện.

Along with solemn court rituals such as ancestor worship, the Nguyen court organized various ceremonies celebrating auspicious events. These auspicious occasions were collectively called “khánh tết” 慶節 or “Occasion of Celebration” including the birthday of the Emperor and Empress Dowager as well as seasonal festival days derived from Chinese custom.

In nineteenth century Vietnam, the birthdays of the Emperor and Dowager Empress were called “vạn thọ tết” 萬壽節 and “thánh thọ tết” 聖壽節, respectively, becoming a central part of the khánh tết ceremony organized by the imperial court. The ceremony of

² *DN TL*, I, vol. 20, 18a–b.

van thọ tết was first established in 1791, when Nguyễn Phúc Anh, later Emperor Gia Long, waged war against Tây Sơn from his stronghold of Gia Định, located in southern Vietnam. According to the regulation issued at that time, on the day before his birthday, the Emperor would practice rituals at the Thái Miếu shrine for imperial ancestors and at the Hậu Điện 後殿 temples for his mother. On the very day of the birthday, the Emperor was celebrated by his subjects at the Phương Điện 方殿 temple. Subsequently, the Emperor organized a court banquet for his subjects who participated in the ceremony.³ With the establishment of a new dynasty, Gia Long invested his mother, Nguyễn Thị Hoàn, as the first Empress Dowager in 1803. Following her investiture, the ceremony of thánh thọ tết was instituted in that same year.⁴ In the early Nguyen period, in addition to the birthday of the ruling Emperor and Empress Dowager, the birthdays of the Empress and Crown Prince were celebrated as “thiên thu tết” 千秋節 and “thiên xuân tết” 千春節. These two events, however, lost their importance when the second Emperor, Minh Mạng, decided that the positions of Empress and Crown Prince should remain vacant in order to prevent the fragmentation of power inside the royal court.

Seasonal festival days of the lunar calendar were also the main occasions of court ceremony. These included New Year’s Day (chính đán tết 正旦節 or nguyên đán tết 元旦節), the Dragon Boat Festival (đoan dương tết 端陽節) on the fifth of May, the Mid-Autumn Festival (trung thu tết 中秋節) on the 15th of August, and the Double Ninth Festival (trùng dương tết 重陽節) on the ninth of September. As is well known, these seasonal festivals were originated in ancient China then spreaded to the Sinicized regions, including Vietnam. The official record of the Nguyen dynasty indicates that after building the Gia Định citadel, Nguyễn Phúc Anh established the conduct of ceremonies on New Year’s Day and the Dragon Boat Festival for the first time.⁵ Various ceremonies held on khánh tết days, New Year’s and Dragon Boat day, as well as the Emperor’s birthday were frequently referred to as the “Three Great Holidays” (tam đại tết 三大節) on which the Nguyen court placed great importance [Woodside 1988: 36].

1-2

It should be noted that an indispensable part of the court rituals and ceremonies mentioned above was the offerings of goods or money from the Emperor’s subjects. References to offerings for the annual court ritual first appeared in 1803 concerning the anniversary of the king’s death (hoàng khảo kỵ thần 皇考忌辰). We are lacking information, however,

³ *DNTL*, I, vol. 5, 14a–b.

⁴ *DNTL*, I, vol. 22, 2b.

⁵ *DNTL*, I, vol. 4, 32b.

concerning the types and amounts of goods that were offered.⁶ In the same year, detailed instructions pertaining to offerings for the khánh tết ceremony were established.⁷ According to those instructions, an offering was to be made on the birthdays of the Empress Dowager, Emperor, and Empress as well as on the two seasonal ceremonies of New Year's Day and the Dragon Boat Festival. On New Year's Day and the Dragon Boat Festival, subjects had to make an offering to both the Emperor and Empress Dowager. Goods used for the offerings consisted of a decorated lantern called the Dragon lantern (rồng đèn), betel and areca, as well as polished perfume rice. As Table 1 shows, the value of the offered goods was commuted to cash. Those who made an offering were categorized into a rank according to their social position inside the imperial order. In this hierarchy, the highest rank was occupied by the Imperial Clan Court (Tôn Nhân Phủ 尊人府) which was the organ charged with managing the royal clan, and descendants of the Emperor (Princes, Princesses, Emperor's grandchildren). The second rank included women serving in the royal court, civil and military officials in Hue, and women holding official ranks (Mệnh Phủ 命婦). In the third and fourth ranks were various units of the royal guard and defense forces of the capital, as well as officials of Gia Định and Bắc Thành whose jurisdiction preceded other regions. The fifth and sixth ranks comprised mainly officials governing the outer regions, and officers or artisans of Đồ Gia 圖家 and Bạch Công 百工, both of which manufactured goods for the state. Next, ranking seventh, was the Duke Diên Tỵ 延祀 of the Lê dynasty, who was entitled to care for the ancestral tomb of the Lê kings, and officers of the Trường Đà 長舵 units that undertook the government's rice transportation. The eighth rank consisted of Công Tính 公姓. According to an explanation provided by Võ Hương An, the term Công Tính referred to members of the Nguyễn clan who originated from the Gia Miêu Ngoại trang 嘉苗外庄 of Thanh Hóa province. They were not, however, directly descended from the lineage of the lords and the Emperor of the Nguyen dynasty [Võ Hương An 2015, tập 1: 102]. After that, the Công Tính branch in the Northern region (ninth rank), and the villages of the Tổng Sơn district⁸ and Trịnh clan (tenth rank) were listed.

In 1808, offerings on the day commemorating the deaths of ancestral kings and khánh tết ceremonies were integrated into a contribution called the Ngân Lễ 銀禮, which is tentatively translated as “Silver Rites”.⁹ Silver Rites, alternatively referred to as “Ritual Silver” (Lễ Ngân 禮銀), was an idiosyncratic practice that was observed in the domain of the Nguyen lords by the eighteenth century, if not earlier.¹⁰ The term Ritual Silver first

⁶ *DNTL*, I, vol. 20, 17b.

⁷ *HĐSL*, vol. 72, 24a–25b.

⁸ Gia Miêu Ngoại trang in the Tổng Sơn district was seen as the birthplace of the Nguyen clan.

⁹ *DNTL*, I, vol. 34, 6b–7a.

¹⁰ To my knowledge, there have been no previous studies dealing with this intriguing practice.

Table 1: Amount of Goods to Be Offered at the Khánh Tết Ceremony (1803)

Rank	Category of those who make offering	Occasion of offering	To whom offering made	Contents of offering (weight)	Amount committed to cash (Unit: Quan 貫)
1	Imperial Clan Court (Tôn Nhân Phủ), Princes, Princess, Emperor's grandchildren	Thánh Thọ ceremony	Empress Dowager	Dragon lantern (20 cân)	40
		Vạn Thọ ceremony	Emperor	Dragon lantern (20 cân)	40
		Thiên Thu ceremony	Empress	Dragon lantern (15 cân)	30
		New Year's Day	Empress Dowager	Betel and areca	10
		New Year's Day	Empress	Betel and areca	9
		Dragon Boat Festival	Empress Dowager	Polished perfume rice	10
2	Women serving in royal palace, Civil and military officials in Hue, Women bearing official rank (Mệnh phu)	Thánh Thọ ceremony	Empress Dowager	Dragon lantern (20 cân)	40
		Vạn Thọ ceremony	Emperor	Dragon lantern (20 cân)	40
		Thiên Thu ceremony	Empress	Dragon lantern (15 cân)	30
		New Year's Day	Empress Dowager	Betel and areca	10
		New Year's Day	Empress	Betel and areca	9
		Dragon Boat Festival	Empress Dowager	Polished perfume rice	10
3	Officers of Thần Sách army, Civil and military officials in Gia Định and Bắc Thành	Thánh Thọ ceremony	Empress Dowager	Dragon lantern (15 cân)	30
		Vạn Thọ ceremony	Emperor	Dragon lantern (15 cân)	30
		Thiên thu ceremony	Empress	Dragon lantern (13 cân)	26
		New Year's Day	Empress Dowager	Betel and areca	9
		New Year's Day	Empress	Betel and areca	8
		Dragon Boat Festival	Empress Dowager	Polished perfume rice	9
		Dragon Boat Festival	Empress	Polished perfume rice	8

		Thánh Thọ ceremony	Empress Dowager	Dragon lantern (15 cân)	30
		Vạn Thọ ceremony	Emperor	Dragon lantern (15 cân)	30
		Thiên Thu ceremony	Empress	Dragon lantern (13 cân)	26
4	Officers of Five army, Thần Vũ army, Chấn Vũ army, Elephant army and Navy	New Year's Day	Empress Dowager	Betel and areca	9
		New Year's Day	Empress	Betel and areca	8
		Dragon Boat Festival	Empress Dowager	Polished perfume rice	9
		Dragon Boat Festival	Empress	Polished perfume rice	8
		Thánh Thọ ceremony	Empress Dowager	Dragon lantern (8 cân)	16
		Vạn Thọ ceremony	Emperor	Dragon lantern (8 cân)	16
		Thiên Thu ceremony	Empress	Dragon lantern (6 cân)	12
5	Officers and soldiers of Tiên phong army, Officers of Đồ Gia, Artisans of Bạch Công, Civil and military officials of Quảng Nam, Quảng Trị, Quảng Bình, Quảng Ngãi, Bình Định, Phú Yên, Bình Hòa, Bình Thuận, Phiên Trấn, Trấn Biên, Vĩnh Trấn, Trấn Định, Nghệ An, Thanh Hóa, Sơn Nam Thượng, Sơn Nam Hạ, Kinh Bắc, Hải Dương, Sơn Tây	New Year's Day	Empress Dowager	Betel and areca	7
		New Year's Day	Empress	Betel and areca	6
		Dragon Boat Festival	Empress Dowager	Polished perfume rice	7
		Dragon Boat Festival	Empress	Polished perfume rice	6
		Thánh Thọ ceremony	Empress Dowager	Dragon lantern (6 cân)	12
		Vạn Thọ ceremony	Emperor	Dragon lantern (6 cân)	12
		Thiên Thu ceremony	Empress	Dragon lantern (4 cân)	8
6	Governors of Thái Nguyên, Hưng Hóa, Yên Quảng, Lạng Sơn, Tuyên Quang and Cao Bằng	New Year's Day	Empress Dowager	Betel and areca	6
		New Year's Day	Empress	Betel and areca	5
		Dragon Boat Festival	Empress Dowager	Polished perfume rice	6
		Dragon Boat Festival	Empress	Polished perfume rice	5
		Thánh Thọ ceremony	Empress Dowager	Dragon lantern (3 cân)	6
		Vạn Thọ ceremony	Emperor	Dragon lantern (3 cân)	6
		Thiên Thu ceremony	Empress	Dragon lantern (2 cân)	4
7	Duke Diên Tự of Lê dynasty, Officers of Trường Đà units	New Year's Day	Empress Dowager	Betel and areca	3

	New Year's Day	Empress	Betel and areca	2
	Dragon Boat Festival	Empress Dowager	Polished perfume rice	3
	Dragon Boat Festival	Empress	Polished perfume rice	2
	Thánh Thọ ceremony	Empress Dowager	Dragon lantern (1.5 cân)	3
	Vạn Thọ ceremony	Emperor	Dragon lantern (1.5 cân)	3
	Thiên Thu ceremony	Empress	Dragon lantern (1 cân)	2
	New Year's Day	Empress Dowager	Betel and areca	1.5
	New Year's Day	Empress	Betel and areca	1
	Dragon Boat Festival	Empress Dowager	Polished perfume rice	1.5
	Dragon Boat Festival	Empress	Polished perfume rice	1
	Thánh Thọ ceremony	Empress Dowager	Dragon lantern (1.5 cân)	3
	Vạn Thọ ceremony	Emperor	Dragon lantern (1.5 cân)	3
	Thiên Thu ceremony	Empress	Dragon lantern (1 cân)	2
	New Year's Day	Empress Dowager	Betel and areca	1.5
	New Year's Day	Empress	Betel and areca	1
	Dragon Boat Festival	Empress Dowager	Polished perfume rice	1.5
	Dragon Boat Festival	Empress	Polished perfume rice	1
	Thánh Thọ ceremony	Empress Dowager	Dragon lantern (1 cân)	2
	Vạn Thọ ceremony	Emperor	Dragon lantern (1 cân)	2
	Thiên Thu ceremony	Empress	Dragon lantern (8 lạng)	1
	New Year's Day	Empress Dowager	Betel and areca	1
	New Year's Day	Empress	Betel and areca	0.5
	Dragon Boat Festival	Empress Dowager	Polished perfume rice	1
	Dragon Boat Festival	Empress	Polished perfume rice	0.5
8	Công Tĩnh			
9	Prefects (tri phủ), Branches of Công Tĩnh in Bắc Thành region			
10	Local magistrate of circuit (đạo) and district (huyện), Villages of Tống Sơn district, Trịnh clan			

Source: *HĐSL*, vol. 72, 24a–25b.

*In the table, the term cân and lạng meant a unit of weight used in traditional Vietnam, being equal to 0.6 kg and 38 g respectively.

appeared in *Phủ Biên Tập lục* or *the Miscellaneous Chronicles of the Pacified Frontier* written by the prominent northern scholar-official Lê Quý Đôn around 1776. In this work, Lê Quý Đôn described the Ritual Silver practice as follows:

Every year, on the New Year's Day and the birthday (of the lord), officials in two regions (Thuận Hóa and Quảng Nam) should contribute "Ritual Silver" (Lễ Ngân 禮銀), amounting to 1 tiền to 2 or 3 hốt. There is also "Betel and areca cash" (Trầu Tiền 莢錢), amounting to 15 pieces to 5 quan. Local officials collect them. There are some cases in which the commune leader (xã trưởng 社長) collected this money, 1 tiền of silver and 30 pieces of Betel and areca cash per person. The Death Day (of deceased lord) is also like this.¹¹

Based on this description, officials serving the Nguyen lords were required to contribute silver and an amount of cash as a substitute for betel and areca, on New Year's Day as well as on the birthday of ruling lords and the death day of deceased lords.

After an interruption caused by a civil war at the end of the eighteenth century, Gia Long resurrected this practice and extended it to the whole country. According to a decree issued in 1808, subjects were required to deliver the Silver Rites yearly on six separate occasions. These included the birthdays of the Empress Dowager, Emperor, Empress, and Crown Prince as well as New Year's Day, the Dragon Boat Festival, and the death days of the ancestral kings in May and September. Table 2 illustrates the classification of the Silver Rites contributors and the amounts of contributed silver stipulated in 1808.

As shown in the table above, those who held any official position in the dynasty's bureaucratic system, from high-ranking mandarins in Hue to military officers garrisoned in remote areas, were all required to contribute an amount of silver which varied from 5 lượng from the highest rank above 1a to 0.15 lượng of Vậ Nhập Lưu 未入流 for the lowest (below rank 9b). As was the case with the 1803 stipulation, groups such as the Imperial Clan Court, descendants of the Emperor, women serving in the royal palace, the Công Tĩnh people, the Tống Sơn district, descendants of the meritorious retainers, and the Lê and Trịnh clan were also required to contribute. Moreover, it should be noted that Silver Rite contributions were imposed on the Upper Circuit of Thanh Hóa (Thanh Hóa Thượng Đạo 清化上道), Hà Tiên, and Thuận Thành as well. Of these groups, the Upper Circuit of Thanh Hóa probably referred to the local chiefs who enjoyed autonomous authority within the western highlands of the Thanh Hóa region. The term Hà Tiên meant the Mạc clan that had governed this region for generations. Additionally, Thuận Thành included the Cham kingdom of Panduranga which was under protection of the Nguyen dynasty at that time, an area that extended into today's Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận provinces. Although

¹¹ *PBTL*, vol. 3, 125a.

Table 2: Classification of Silver Rites Contributor and Amounts of Contributed Silver (1808)

Category of those who contribute Silver Rite	Amount of silver (Unit: lượng)
Above 1a	5.00
1a	4.00
1b	3.50
2a	3.00
2b	2.50
3a	2.00
3b	1.50
4a	1.00
4b	0.95
5a	0.85
5b	0.80
6a	0.70
6b	0.65
7a	0.55
7b	0.50
8a	0.40
8b	0.35
9a	0.25
9b	0.20
Vị nhập lưu	0.15
Imperial Clan Court (Tôn Nhân Phủ), Princes, Princess, Emperor's grandchildren	50.00
Women serving in royal palace	40.00
Công Tính	5.00
Branches of Công tính in Bắc Thành region	5.00
Tổng Sơn district	4.00
Descendants of the meritorious retainers	4.00
Lê clan	10.00
Trịnh clan	4.00
Upper circuit of Thanh Hóa (Thanh Hóa Thượng Đạo)	10.00
Hà Tiên	10.00
Thuận Thành	15.00

Source: *ĐNTL*, I, vol. 34, 6b–7a.

contributions to the Silver Rites were set to begin on New Year's Day of the next year, a partial or full exemption was given to low ranking officials (below 4a) and military officers for the first three years as remedy for those who less well off financially.¹²

Considering the frequent contributions of silver demanded every year, the financial burden imposed by the Silver Rites custom was significant. Actually, Emperor Gia Long sometimes decreed exemptions from the Silver Rites. For example, in 1812, an exemption granted to officials below the 4a rank and military commanders was extended for another three years.¹³ In 1815, soldiers stationed in Cambodia were exempted from silver contributions for three years.¹⁴ In 1816, both civil and military officials who still had not received their stipulated salary were exempted from silver contributions for the next five years.¹⁵ In 1818, it was decreed that retired officials would be exempt from making contributions of silver.¹⁶

The second Emperor Minh Mạng was also concerned about the onerous burden of the Silver Rites contribution. In 1822, Minh Mạng revised the stipulation on the Silver Rites contribution to reduce the amount to 1,190 *lượng* silver per year, an amount to be provided by royal clan members, *Tôn Nhân Phủ*, and civil and military officials. For the outer regions, the annual quota of the Silver Rites was abolished permanently. Instead, regional governments were to dispatch officials from each jurisdiction to present a congratulatory document on the Empress Dowager's birthday. Local products had to be attached to the document on the Emperor's birthday, New Year's Day, and the Dragon Boat Festival.¹⁷ Finally, to eliminate the financial burden and corruption on the part of officials, all contributions that stemmed from the Silver Rites custom were suspended in 1829.¹⁸ From then on, the term "Silver Rites" disappeared completely from the official record.

1-3

Other than the contributions imposed on individual subjects such as the Silver Rites, the Hue court demanded that each region offer local products whenever court rituals and

¹² *DN TL*, I, vol. 34, 7a.

¹³ *DN TL*, I, vol. 45, 2b–3a.

¹⁴ *DN TL*, I, vol. 50, 10a.

¹⁵ *DN TL*, I, vol. 52, 3a.

¹⁶ *DN TL*, I, vol. 58, 1b.

¹⁷ *DN TL*, II, vol. 15, 10a–11a.

¹⁸ *DN TL*, II, vol. 66, 10b–11b. On the royal edict abolishing the Silver Rites, a description almost identical to the entry of *DN TL* can be found in CBTN. See CBTN, *triều Minh Mạng*, vol. 29, 146a–b, 16/6/Minh Mạng 10.

ceremonies were implemented. In Sino-Vietnamese sources, these local products were generally termed as “phương vật” 方物. The regulation recorded in *HDSL* explained that, on the occasions such as Suburban cult (Giao Tự 郊祀), the Hưởng cult, the birthdays of the Emperor and Empress Dowager, as well as seasonal festivals, each regional governor must personally select suitable products, and then package and seal them. These packaged products were to be delivered to Hue using the post station system. It was required that packaged products should arrive in Hue one or two days prior to the actual day of the ritual or ceremony.¹⁹ Table 3 indicates annual quota of phương vật imposed on the regions.

As mentioned above, procuring these phương vật was the personal responsibility of regional governors. To fulfill the quota of phương vật, each governor purchased the necessary items from producers or merchants in his jurisdiction. For the purpose of alleviating the financial burden on the local population, in 1837 an official price was established for 28 items so that the proper price was paid to those who delivered products as phương vật (Table 4).

As Tables 3 and 4 illustrate, the phương vật consisted mainly of fresh fruits such as limes, langsat, oranges, litchis, and pears. It was in 1812 that the delivery of fresh fruits as phương vật was imposed on the three regions of Bắc Thành, Bình Định, and Quảng Nam. At this time, while 4,500 oranges and 4,200 litchis were allocated to Bắc Thành for offerings for New Year’s Day and the xuân hưởng, hạ hưởng, and đông hưởng ritual days, 2,200 langsat were allocated to Quảng Nam and 1,000 limes to Bình Định for offerings for the Dragon Boat Festival and the death day of the imperial ancestor.²⁰ Although the stipulation on the kind or amount of offerings was altered several times, fresh fruits invariably accounted for the largest part of phương vật items through the nineteenth century.²¹

For regional governors, the delivery of fresh fruit was an assignment requiring meticulous attention. If a package of fruit did not arrive at Hue on the due date, there was no escape from punishment.²² Problems that could occur in the delivery process were not limited to delays in arrival. For instance, on the occasion of the thánh thọ ceremony in the 19th year of Minh Mạng’s reign, a snake was found in the package of oranges dispatched from Hải Dương province. Based on the trial convened by the Board of Rites and censors, the Board of Justice proposed that the penalty of beheading and forced labor should be

¹⁹ *HDSL*, vol. 120, 1a–b.

²⁰ *DN TL*, I, vol. 44, 14b.

²¹ Other than fresh fruits, beginning in 1815 delivery of mountain animals to Hue was required from the outer regions as sacrifices for the death day ritual of the imperial ancestors at Liệt Miếu (*DN TL*, I, vol. 51, 13b). Minh Mạng, however, abolished this practice immediately after his accession because the procurement of animals would impose difficulties on the local population (*DN TL*, II, vol. 1, 19b–20a).

²² *DN TL*, II, vol. 180, 1a–b.

Table 3: Annual Quotas of *Phương Vật* Imposed on Regions

Region of offering	Occasion of offering	Contents of offering
Thừa Thiên	Harvest day of spring and autumn	Newly harvested rice
	New Year's Day	Local products and fruits
	Dragon Boat Festival	Local products and fruits
	Emperors' birthday	Local products and fruits
Vĩnh Long and Định Tường	New Year's Day	300 pieces of coconut leaves 200 pieces of coconut seeds
	Death anniversary rite at Phụng Tiên Điện 奉先殿 (18 th day of September and 19 th day of December)	
	Death anniversary rite at Hiếu Tư Điện 孝子殿 (28 th day of December)	200 pieces of coconut seeds
	Death anniversary rite at Long An Điện 隆安殿 (27 th day of September)	200 pieces of coconut seeds
	Birth anniversary rite for Empress Thuận Thiên 順天 (27 th day of November)	200 pieces of coconut seeds
	Rite of Tiên Tân 薦新	200 pieces of coconut seeds
Phú Yên	Rite of Hạ Hường	100–200 pieces of lime (Đại Mông 大檬)
	Rite of Thường Tân 嘗新	100–200 pieces of lime
	Birth and Death anniversary rite at Hiếu Tư Điện (23 rd day of April and 23 rd day of May)	600 pieces of lime
	Birth anniversary rite at Long An Điện (11 th day of May)	600 pieces of lime
	Dragon Boat Festival	600 pieces of lime
	Empress Dowager's birthday	600 pieces of lime
Bình Định	Rite of Hạ Hường	200 pieces of lime
	Rite of Tiên Tân	200 pieces of lime
	Dragon Boat Festival	1,000 pieces of lime
	Empress Dowager's birthday	1,000 pieces of lime
	Rite of Hạ Hường	100–200 pieces of lime
	Dragon Boat Festival	600 pieces of lime
Quảng Nam	Birth and Death anniversary rite at Hiếu Tư Điện (23 rd day of April and 23 rd day of May)	600 pieces of lime
	Birth anniversary rite at Long An Điện (11 th day of May)	600 pieces of lime
	Rite of Thường Tân	600 pieces of lime
	Emperors' birthday	8–12 baskets of langsat (Nam Trân 南珍)
	Death anniversary rite at Hung Miếu 興廟 (14 th day of September)	8 baskets of langsat
	Death anniversary rite at Long An Điện (27 th day of September)	4 baskets of langsat 4 baskets of langsat

Quang Bình	Rite of Hạ Hường Rite of Tiên Tân Dragon Boat Festival Empress Dowager's birthday Death anniversary rite at Phụng Tiên Điện (3 rd day of February and 19 th day of December) Death anniversary rite at Hiếu Tư Điện (23 rd day of May and 28 th day of December) Death anniversary rite at Long An Điện (27 th day of September)	2 bottles of mulberry liquor (Dầu Cùm Từ 桑糖酒), 30 pieces of watermelon 100 pieces of watermelon 50 pieces of watermelon 150 pieces of watermelon 10 cân of solomon's seal powder, 2 bottles of soybean 10 cân of solomon's seal powder, 2 bottles of soybean, 5 cân of dried abalone (Cửu Không Kiên Nhục 九孔乾肉) 10 cân of solomon's seal powder, 2 bottles of soybean, 5 cân of dried abalone 300 pieces of orange 300 pieces of orange 300 pieces of orange 400 pieces of orange 300 pieces of orange 300 pieces of orange 2,000 pieces of litchi 2 bottles of fish sauce made from ragworms (Đại Hoa Hàm 大火鹹) 2 bottles of fish sauce made from ragworms 1 bottle of fish sauce made from ragworms 1 bottle of fish sauce made from ragworms 200 pieces of pear 100 pieces of pear 300 pieces of pear 300 pieces of pear 300 pieces of pear
Thanh Hóa	Grand rite of Nam Giao 南郊 Rite of Tiên Tân Death anniversary rite at Long An Điện (27 th day of September) Rite of Xuân Hường Birth anniversary rite at Phụng Tiên Điện (27 th day of November) Death anniversary rite at Hiếu Tư Điện (28 th day of December) Rite of Hạ Hường Death anniversary rite at Long An Điện (27 th day of September)	
Hải Dương		
Hà Nội		
Ninh Bình		
Nam Định	Death anniversary rite at Phụng Tiên Điện (19 th day of December) Death anniversary rite at Hiếu Tư Điện (28 th day of December)	
Cao Bằng	Emperor's birthday Rite of Tiên Tân	
Tuyên Quang	Emperor's birthday Mid-Autumn Festival Double Ninth Festival	

Source: *HDSL*, vol. 120, 6a–27b.

Table 4: Official Price for Items Offered to Hue Court (1837)

Products	Amounts	Purchase price in cash
Coconut leaves	100 leaves	3 quan
Fish sauce made from ragworms	1 bottle	
Lime	100 pieces	
Litchi	1,000 pieces	
Langsat	4 baskets	
Orange	100 pieces	2 quan
Snow Pear (Tuyết Lê 雪梨)	100 pieces	5 quan
Sand Pear (Sa Lê 沙梨)	100 pieces	1 quan
Watermelon	10 pieces	6 tiền
Arrowroot powder (bột Hoàng Tinh 黄精粉)	1 cân	5 tiền
Soybean	1 copper bowl	2 tiền 30 đồng
Seeds of Canarium album	1,000 pieces	1 quan
Mulberry liquor	1 official copper bowl	1 tiền 18 đồng
Dried Abalone	5 cân	2 tiền
Marshy Shell	4 packages	8 tiền
Yellow Jujube	1 cân	8 tiền
Black Jujube	1 cân	8 tiền
Red Jujube	1 cân	8 tiền
Grapes	1 cân	8 tiền
Dried Litchi	1 cân	5 tiền
Persimmon Jam	1 cân	4 tiền
Dried Longan	1 cân	3 tiền
Longan	1 cân	8 tiền
Orange of Thanh Hoá	1 cân	3 tiền
Hoelen	10 packages	1 quan
Flatbread	10 pieces	2 tiền
Roasted Potato with sugar	100 pieces	5 tiền
Roasted Rice with sugar	1 cân	30 đồng

Source: *DNTL*, II, vol. 176, 29b–30a.

applied to the subordinate staff and senior officials of the province. Upon receiving this proposal, Minh Mạng reduced the sentence to military service for subordinate staff and demotion for senior officials, with the Empress Dowager's permission.²³

Although the rules relating to offerings made on ritual and ceremonial occasions

²³ *DNTL*, II, vol. 196, 38b–49a.

were gradually simplified through Minh Mạng's reign, the practice survived through the Nguyen period. Even when Vietnam suffered from the invasion of the Western colonizing powers and a variety of insurgents in the northern region in the late nineteenth century, goods were still delivered from provinces to the Hue court for the annual rituals and ceremonies. For example, in 1876, Trần Đình Đức, the governor of Hanoi sent liquors made from lotus and chrysanthemum, 20 packages of hoelen, as well as precious stones and teas purchased from Chinese merchants as an offering for the *vạn thọ* ceremony of Emperor Tự Đức. These goods were conveyed through the post station system and were received by the Board of Rites on time.²⁴ Furthermore there are many records in CBTN that refer to the dispatch of fresh fruit by the provinces from the late 1860s to early 1870s. Many documents allude, however, to delays of arrivals or difficulties in procuring the necessary fruit due to natural disasters.²⁵

I-4

In exchange for offerings received from their subjects, on the occasion of the annual rite or ceremony, Emperors held banquets and distributed precious items to participants. The participants receiving these gifts were usually confined to royal clan members as well as high- and middle-ranking officials of Hue.²⁶ On New Year's Day, beginning in the seventh year of Gia Long's reign, silver ingots were distributed to royal clan members and high-ranking officials.²⁷ As Table 5 shows, the amount of distributed silver varied according to the beneficiary's status, an amount that ranged from 1 to 20 *lượng* per person.

There were also distributions of money or goods on other seasonal festival days. For example, on the Dragon Boat day, royal clan members and officials received bamboo fans, handkerchiefs, tea, and fruit.²⁸ On the Double Ninth day, silver and gold coins were dispensed, at least in 1838 and 1843.²⁹ The banquet at which the gifts were distributed was

²⁴ CBTN, triều Tự Đức, vol. 272, 213a–214b, 17/8/Tự Đức 29, Memorial from the Board of Rites.

²⁵ For instance, in 1871, while the governor of Hải Dương province reported that procurement of oranges became impossible because floods and strong winds devastated the producing regions, the governor of Cao Bằng province found it difficult to obtain the required quota of pears because heavy rains in previous months had seriously damaged the pear crop in his jurisdiction (CBTN, triều Tự Đức, vol. 244, 10a–12b, 6/9/Tự Đức 24, Memorial from Board of Rites).

²⁶ Concerning the New Year's Day banquet, participants had been confined to those holding the rank of 5b rank or higher in the civil service and those military officials holding ranks above 5b. Subsequently, civil officials of holding rank 6a and military officials holding rank 5a were added to this banquet after the New Year's Day of the 19th year of Minh Mạng (*DNTL*, II, vol. 188, 1a).

²⁷ *HDSL*, vol. 242, 1b.

²⁸ See *HDSL*, vol. 242, 2a–b.

²⁹ *HDSL*, vol. 242, 5a and 9a–b.

Table 5: Amount of Silver Distributed on New Year's Day

Tiers of beneficiary	Amount of silver (Unit: lượng)
Royal Duke (Thân Công 親公) and princes	20
Officials of rank 1a	10
Officials of rank 1b	9
Officials of rank 2a	6
Officials of rank 2b	5
Officials of rank 3a	4
Officials of rank 3b	3
Officials of rank 4a	2
Officials of rank 4b	1

Source: *HDSL*, vol. 242, 1b.

also institutionalized on the *vạn thọ* ceremony no later than 1803.³⁰ As will be discussed in the following section, at grand ceremonies occasioned by special auspicious events, gift giving dramatically increased. Precious goods including Chinese and European items were lavishly distributed to ceremony participants.

2. Grand Ceremonies on Exceptionally Auspicious Event

2-1

The Nguyen court organized grand ceremonies for exceptionally auspicious occasions to be celebrated on a nationwide basis. These grand ceremonies, which Sino-Vietnamese source referred to as *Khánh Điền* 慶典, included the new Emperor's accession, the Emperor's mother's investiture as Empress Dowager, and celebrations of longevity for the Emperor and Empress Dowager. Although it was not staged at Hue, the Emperor's tour to Hanoi for receiving his investiture as "King of Vietnam" (Việt Nam Quốc Vương 越南國王) from the Qing Emperor's delegate was also seen as one of the most important *Khánh Điền*.³¹

These grand ceremonies played an important role as a means of social integration in

³⁰ *DNTL*, I, vol. 20, 4a.

³¹ In the Nguyen period, the Emperor's tour to Hanoi was known as the Northern Tour (Bắc Tuần 北巡). The significance of this event for the dynasty can be understood by the enormous number of followers that accompanied the Emperor. For example, at the time of the Northern Tour of Emperor Minh Mạng, conducted between the end of 1821 and early 1822, 1,782 officials and 5,150 soldiers accompanied him from Hue to Hanoi [Hoàng Yến 1917: 100].

nineteenth century Vietnam. They were regarded as a great opportunity to visualize the world order that the Hue court embraced.³² As is well known, the Nguyen dynasty constructed a Vietnamese-centered world order modeled on the Chinese world view, which was supported fundamentally by the distinction between “Hoa” 華 and “Di” 夷, or “Civilized” and “Barbarians”. Based on this concept, Civilization spreads radially around the imperial capital to less civilized outer regions beyond its borders. In the Vietnamese version of the Civilized-Barbarians world order conceptualized by the Nguyen dynasty, Hue, the imperial capital, occupied the most civilized position. It was surrounded by administrative units ruled directly by officials appointed by the central government. The outer fringes of this directly ruled sphere, the frontier areas were expanded where indirect rule was dominant. For example, in the northern mountain region, tribal leaders called “thổ ty” 土司, were permitted hereditary rule by the central authority. Beyond this indirectly ruled area, the more or less independent polities existed. The Nguyen dynasty claimed suzerainty over these polities and demanded that they pay tribute as a sign of vassalage.³³ Among of them, some relatively small and less independent polities were categorized as Tributary Barbarians (Cống Man 貢蠻 or Thuộc Man 屬蠻), to which polities such as Cam Lộ 甘露³⁴, Lạc Hoàn 樂丸, and Mục Đa Hán 目多漢³⁵ belonged. On the other hand, larger and independent kingdoms such as Cambodia (Chân Lạp 真臘), Luang Phabang (Nam Chưông 南掌), Vientiane (Vạn Tượng 万象), and Jarais (Thủy Xá 水舍 and Hỏa Xá 火舍) were categorized as Tributary States (Thuộc Quốc 屬國).

The grand ceremonies held in Hue were an ideal stage for visualizing the otherwise ambiguous world order of the Nguyen court. Participants in the ceremony included not only imperial family and dynastic officials, but also Thổ Ty leaders of the remote mountain region and delegates from neighboring tributary polities. In the ceremony, they were allowed an audience with the Emperor and participated in the banquet with other court officials. Although we lack records written from the view point of foreign participants, the splendid ceremony that unfolded in Hue arguably left a deep impression upon them.

The importance of the grand ceremonies held at Hue was also significant in economic terms. On the occasion of the grand ceremonies, large amounts of goods or money were distributed to subjects to show the ruler’s benevolence and affluence. The Imperial Record of the Nguyen dynasty did not lack examples to support this point. For instance, when the

³² On the problem of how the world order of the Nguyen dynasty was configured, pioneering discussion can be seen in [Tsuboi 1983; Woodside 1988].

³³ Of course, this did not mean that surrounding polities always accepted the claim of suzerainty made by the Nguyen dynasty over them. Rather, in some cases, they interpreted and utilized such claims of the Nguyen dynasty on behalf of their own interests.

³⁴ Cam Lộ is included in today’s north western part of Quảng Bình province of Vietnam.

³⁵ Lạc Hoàn and Mục Đa Hán contains Nakhon Phanom and Mukdahan provinces of modern Thailand.

70th birthday of the Dowager Empress Nhân Tuyên was celebrated in 1837, the number of loyal clan members, officials, and military commanders who received silk products or silver coins as gifts amounted to over 1,000.³⁶ In another case, at the accession of the third Emperor Thiệu Trị in 1841, 40,000 strings of cash were dispensed to royal clan members.³⁷ They received approximately 50,000 strings of cash when the fourth Emperor Tự Đức was enthroned in 1847.³⁸ Further, when Tự Đức's mother was invested as Từ Dụ Hoàng Thái Hậu, about 40,000 strings of cash as well as gold and silver coins were dispensed to subjects.³⁹

In general, dispensation of goods or money as part of the grand ceremony occurred at court banquets. Compared to banquets held as an annual event, court banquets of grand ceremony included a far larger number of participants. These banquets included senior officials serving in the outer provinces,⁴⁰ officers of various military units, ambassadors from tributary states, and patriarchs in the capital region.⁴¹ As we shall see in the following sections of this paper, those who participated in court banquets received valuable fabrics or decorative coins made of gold, silver, and copper. Other than the dispensing of goods or money, tax exemptions were also given at the grand ceremonies which had a significant economic effect. According to the fiscal record submitted by the Board of Finance (Hộ Bộ 戶部) to the Emperor Tự Đức in 1851, while the amount of exempted land and poll tax that followed Emperor Thiệu Trị's accession reached 2,141,859 strings of cash, that amount was further augmented to 2,682,995 strings of cash when Tự Đức was enthroned as the exemption was also applied to the inland custom duty along with the land and poll tax.⁴²

2-2

Among various Khánh Điền ceremonies, those celebrating the longevity of the Emperor and Empress Dowager outweighed others for their dispensation scale and variety of

³⁶ *HĐSL*, vol. 59, 6a–8a.

³⁷ *HĐSL*, vol. 59, 9a–b.

³⁸ *HĐSL*, vol. 59, 12a–b.

³⁹ *HĐSL*, vol. 59, 12b–14a.

⁴⁰ Provincial officials entitled to attend the court banquet were selected by the Emperor himself based on the list prepared by the Board of Personnel (Lại Bộ 吏部). A list of provincial officials allowed to participate in the court banquet of ngũ tuần tết of Emperor Minh Mạng was found in *DNTL*, II, vol. 208, 6b–7a.

⁴¹ At time of the ngũ tuần tết of Emperor Minh Mạng, the number of patriarchs invited to the court banquet reached 999. Of the invited patriarchs, three were over 100 years old, 21 were over 90 years old, 222 were over 80 years old, and 753 were over 70 years old. Participants received gold and silver coins according to their age. See *DNTL*, II, vol. 212, 30b–31a.

⁴² *CBTN*, triều Tự Đức, vol. 30, 78a–85a, 3/7/Tự Đức 4, Memorial from Board of Finance.

participants.⁴³ In the Nguyen period, the 40th birthday of the Emperor or Empress Dowager was celebrated extravagantly as the “40 years old anniversary” (tứ tuần tết 四旬節). Since then, the longevity of them should be celebrated every ten years on their birthday: the 50th birthday as “ngũ tuần tết” 五旬節, the 60th birthday as “lục tuần tết” 六旬節, the 70th birthday as “thất tuần tết” 七旬節, and so on. Although Emperors of the Nguyen dynasty enjoyed relatively long lives, none celebrated his 60th birthday. On the other hand, it was not uncommon for Empress Dowagers to celebrate their 60th or 70th birthdays, reflecting a longer life expectancy for women than men. Table 6 lists the grand ceremonies celebrating the longevity of the Emperor and Empress Dowager implemented in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Table 6: Grand Ceremonies Celebrating the Longevity of the Emperor and Empress Dowager in the First Half of the nineteenth Century

Month / Year	Ceremony
July / Gia Long 6 (1807)	70 years old anniversary (thất tuần tết) of Empress Dowager Hiếu Khang
November / Minh Mạng 8 (1827–1828)	60 years old anniversary (lục tuần tết) of Empress Dowager Nhân Tuyên
April / Minh Mạng 11 (1830)	40 years old anniversary (tứ tuần tết) of Emperor Minh Mạng
November / Minh Mạng 18 (1837)	70 years old anniversary (thất tuần tết) of Empress Dowager Nhân Tuyên
April / Minh Mạng 21 (1840)	50 years old anniversary (ngũ tuần tết) of Emperor Minh Mạng
May / Thiệu Trị 6 (1846)	40 years old anniversary (tứ tuần tết) of Emperor Thiệu Trị
May / Tự Đức 2 (1849)	40 years old anniversary (tứ tuần tết) of Empress Dowager Từ Dự

Based on the record of *ĐNTL*, the Empress Dowager’s (Hiếu Khang) 70th birthday (thất tuần tết) in 1807 was the first grand ceremony celebrating longevity that the Nguyen dynasty organized. On that occasion, to celebrate his mother’s long life, Emperor Gia Long visited the Trường Thọ palace, where the Empress Dowager resided, in company with his subjects, he then solemnly conducted the ritual of celebration. Those who participated in that ritual ranged from the Tôn Nhân Phủ, male descendants of Emperor, to

⁴³ So far few studies have been conducted on the grand ceremony celebrating the longevity of the Emperor and Empress Dowager in the Nguyen period except for Võ Hương An’s work, which described the Tứ tuần đại khánh of the Emperor Khải Định which occurred in 1924 under the French protectorate [Võ Hương An 2016: 137–161].

subordinate officials serving in the Trường Thọ palace. Interestingly, descendants of the Lê and Trịnh clans also participated in this ceremony. After the ceremony finished with a performance of dance and music, Emperor Gia Long hosted a court banquet at the Càn Chính palace for high-ranking officials.⁴⁴ Following the thất tuần tết of Empress Dowager Hiếu Khang, implementation of the grand ceremony of ngũ tuần tết was discussed on the occasion of Gia Long's 50th birthday. Gia Long, however, rejected a petition by the grand mandarins to organize a grand ceremony and ordered that the celebration of his 50th birthday would be conducted in the same manner as the ordinary vãn thọ tết.⁴⁵

In the Gia Long era, a ceremony celebrating the Emperor's and Empress Dowager's longevity was still organized on a modest scale. During the reign of the second Emperor Minh Mạng, however, this ceremony began to assume a more important meaning for both dynasty and country. In this respect, 60th birthday (lục tuần tết) of the Empress Dowager Nhân Tuyên was epochal because a large number of Thổ Ty chiefs and delegates of foreign countries participated.⁴⁶ Beginning ten days before the birthday, Thổ Ty and foreign delegates arrived at Hue, each bearing various goods as offerings. First, 14 representatives of Thổ Ty and native administrators of Phòng Ngự Sứ 防禦使 arrived from Bắc Thành, Thanh Hóa, and Ninh Bình regions. Receiving them in an audience, Minh Mạng returned their offerings and presented them with official garments. Subsequently, the delegates from Cambodia arrived with gifts consisting of nutmeg, cardamom, shellac, ivory, rhinoceros horn, deer's horn, and colored silk. Gifts were also contributed by the polities of Cam Lộ and Lạc Hoàn. Even King Anouvong of Vientiane, at that time taking refuge in Vietnam after losing the war against Siam, sent a gold ring and gem stone as an offering through the governor of Nghệ An. Three days before the birthday, the conduct of the grand ceremony was respectfully reported to Hoàng Nhân Điện where the royal ancestors were worshipped. Intriguingly enough, on the same day, both Minh Mạng and the Empress Dowager Nhân Tuyên enjoyed "Barbarian music" (Man Nhạc 蠻樂) at the Tiên Tho gate. The performance began with the music of Cam Lộ and Cambodia and finished with music of Vientiane. On the birthday, after the solemn celebratory ritual was carried out, a series of banquets followed. Representatives of Thổ Ty were banqueted with middle ranking officials of the Nguyen court and staffs of the Văn Thư Phòng office at Phu Văn lâu. At another military building, a banquet was prepared for "tributary states" and "tributary barbarians", including Cambodia, Cam Lộ, and Lạc Hoàn.

Three years after the lục tuần tết of Empress Dowager Nhân Tuyên, a grand ceremony of tứ tuần tết was carried out in 1830 to celebrate the 40th birthday of the

⁴⁴ *DNTL*, I, vol. 33, 1b–2a.

⁴⁵ *DNTL*, I, vol. 42, 1a–b.

⁴⁶ The following description on lục tuần tết grand ceremony of Empress Dowager Nhân Tuyên was all based on the entry of *DNTL*, II, vol. 49, 11a–18b.

Emperor Minh Mạng, assembling more representatives and delegates from the frontier region and foreign countries. This time the participants included delegates from Cambodia, Luang Phabang, Cam Lô, and the six prefectures of Lạc Biên, Trấn Tĩnh, Trấn Ninh, Trấn Biên, Trấn Man, and Trấn Định⁴⁷ as well as Mục Đa Hán.⁴⁸ Moreover, for the *thất tuần tết* of Empress Dowager Nhân Tuyên in 1837 and the *ngũ tuần tết* of Emperor Minh Mạng in 1840, the kingdom of Hỏa Xá sent delegates to the grand ceremony.⁴⁹ The Nguyen dynasty distributed precious items extravagantly to these foreign participants.

On grand ceremonies celebrating longevity, pavilions decorated with colorful fabrics were constructed around the imperial citadel, which were called, “*thái lâu*” 綵樓 or “*thái bằng*” 綵棚. On the *ngũ tuần tết* of Minh Mạng held in 1840, 5,600 soldiers were mobilized from the whole country to construct pavilions in Hue. This work force included 200 “native soldiers” (thổ binh 土兵) from the Lạng Sơn, Cao Bằng, and Trần Tây regions.⁵⁰ At these pavilions, rare and valuable items were lavishly exhibited. In the case of the *ngũ tuần tết* of Minh Mạng, courtiers submitted a petition to the Emperor requesting that 80 artisans be hired from the northern region to manufacture goods for exhibition at the pavilions. They also petitioned to receive silk products, as well as “Northern (Chinese) and Western goods” from the state coffers in order to display them at the pavilions.⁵¹ On another occasion, that of the *thất tuần tết* of Empress Dowager Nhân Tuyên in 1837, 18 of the *thái lâu* and *thái bằng* pavilions as well as eight of the “colorful gate” (*thái lâu môn* 綵樓門) were constructed. Each was wrapped in European red woolens and flower-printed cloth. At the pavilions, a variety of rare and valuable goods were on display including European and Chinese paper dolls clothed in colorful garments.⁵²

It is quite intriguing that in the grand ceremony each province was allocated its own pavilion to exhibit selected products for the Emperor’s viewing. For example, at the *ngũ tuần tết* of Emperor Minh Mạng, the tree of flat peach (*bàn đào* 蟠桃) made from gold was displayed with a painting celebrating longevity (*hải ốc thiêm trừ đồ* 海屋添籌圖) at the pavilion of Lạng Sơn province and a piece of ivory weighing 100 *cân* was exhibited at the pavilion of Quảng Nam, which impressed the Emperor deeply.⁵³ Further, even representatives of the local population like the “demotic household” (*dân hộ* 民戶) or

⁴⁷ These six prefectures were established by the Nguyen dynasty in what is now Laos to be governed indirectly in the 1830s. The prefectures of Lạc Biên and Trấn Tĩnh correspond to today’s Savannakhet, Trấn Ninh and Trấn Biên to Xiangkhouang, Trấn Man to Xam Neua, and Trấn Định to Khammouane respectively [Furuta 2015: 33].

⁴⁸ *DN TL*, II, vol. 65, 36a–37a.

⁴⁹ *DN TL*, II, vol. 186, 29a–b and vol. 204, 30a–b.

⁵⁰ *DN TL*, II, vol. 198, 12a–b.

⁵¹ *DN TL*, II, vol. 201, 23a.

⁵² *DN TL*, II, vol. 186, 21b.

⁵³ *DN TL*, II, vol. 212, 11b–12a.

“merchants household” (phố hộ 鋪戶) also established their own pavilions outside the imperial citadel.

As these examples demonstrated, in celebrating the ngũ tuần tết of Emperor Minh Mạng, not only officials but wealthy individuals competed with each other for sumptuousness in preparing the pavilions.⁵⁴ Against such tendencies, Minh Mạng himself repeatedly emphasized the importance of frugality and issued an order to eschew extravagant expenditures in preparations for the ceremony.⁵⁵ When he viewed the items displayed at the pavilion of Nghệ An province, Minh Mạng praised the rustic wood carved animals exhibited there, rather than the conspicuous display at the pavilion of Nam Định province. After touring all of the provincial displays, he expressed concern for the financial burdens on the population that might have occurred in the preparation for extravagant displays.⁵⁶ Likewise, Minh Mạng admonished representatives of the northern region for the extremely expensive display at their pavilion. He told them investing their wealth into river construction rather than constructing a splendid display at the pavilion would be better.⁵⁷ Moreover, learning that items which were displayed by the province and population included large amounts of gold in form of ingots or artifacts, Minh Mạng ordered the Board of Finance and Rites to calculate their value. He then paid them with silver from the state coffers.⁵⁸ After the ceremony was completed, Minh Mạng gave a cash award of 50,000 quan to those who prepared the pavilions inside and outside the capital.⁵⁹

3. Characteristics of Goods or Money Distributed in Ceremony

3-1

In pre-modern Vietnam, as elsewhere, items exchanged in ritual or ceremony possessed distinct social or cultural meanings that could not be reduced to an economic value. This factor made exchanges that occurred in rituals or ceremonies distinct from those practiced

⁵⁴ For example, 40 wealthy households (phủ hộ 富戶) of Hải Dương submitted their desire to offer a donation of 800 lượng of silver and 100 strings of cash and to dispatch a selected member to Hue for preparing the pavilion themselves (*DN TL*, II, vol. 206, 13a).

⁵⁵ For example, see *DN TL*, II, vol. 205, 26a–27a, vol. 206, 13b, and vol. 207, 11b–12a.

⁵⁶ *DN TL*, II, vol. 211, 10b–11a. In fact, after the ceremony was finished, Chu Đức Tuấn, the dân hộ of Hưng Yên province, accused a village chief named Lê Đa Phúc for extracting too much money from residents on the pretext that he had procured items for offering. See *DN TL*, II, vol. 213, 3b–4a.

⁵⁷ *DN TL*, II, vol. 212, 14a–b.

⁵⁸ *DN TL*, II, vol. 212, 20b–21a. At that time, approximately 469 lượng of gold were included in the items on display, for which 7,000 lượng of silver were reimbursed from the state coffers.

⁵⁹ *DN TL*, II, vol. 213, 3b.

in the marketplace. In order to make it clear how particular items functioned in the court ceremonies in nineteenth-century Vietnam, this section looks closely at goods or money distributed to the participants of ceremonies.

Among the various items that Nguyen Emperors distributed at court ceremonies, the most preferred were textiles. The official record of the Nguyen dynasty provides us many instances in which the Emperor distributed various types of fabric on ceremonial occasions as a reward for military service, a prize for an outstanding deed, or as an award for meritorious court retainers. Especially, a court ceremony was the most conspicuous occasion in which large amounts of fabric were distributed to participants from both inside and outside the country. Concerning the types of textiles presented as gifts, silk apparently predominated over other fabrics. The silk was composed of very diverse types such as *gấm* 錦 (polychrome woven silk), *đoạn* 緞 (satin), *gấm đoạn* 錦緞 (brocade), *la* 羅 and *sa* 紗 (both terms meaning gauze), *lĩnh* 綾 (twill damask), and *trừu* 紬 (pongee). All were classified according to material and woven pattern.

Although pre-modern Vietnam, especially in the northern delta region, was known as a silk producing area that had exported its products to foreign markets since the seventeenth century, imported Chinese silk was most esteemed as gifts in court ceremonies. In nineteenth century Vietnam, such imported Chinese silk products were collectively referred to as “Northern fabric” (*Bắc Thái* 北綵). For example, at the time of the *tứ tuần tết* of Minh Mạng in 1830, eight threads satin and silk gauze (*thực sa* 寔紗) with various patterns of dragons, clouds, water, and waves were awarded to royal clan members and high-ranking officials in the banquet following the ritual. Of the different types of Chinese silk, polychrome Song-style silk fabric (*Tống gấm* 宋錦) was highly esteemed and frequently distributed to kings of “tributary states” such as Cambodia and Luang Phabang.⁶⁰

In contrast to Chinese “Northern fabric”, the general term of “Southern fabric” (*Nam Thái* 南綵) referred to silk made in Vietnam. In Sino-Vietnamese sources, therefore, the word “Southern” (*Nam* 南), is customarily placed before the silk category to indicate Vietnamese origin, such as “Southern silk gauze” (*Nam la sa* 南羅紗). This Vietnamese silk was frequently distributed with Chinese silk in grand ceremonies, especially to delegates from the frontier regions and surrounding tributary countries. At the time of the *tứ tuần tết* ceremony of Minh Mạng, the king and delegates of Cambodia and Luang Phabang were given Vietnamese Southern silk gauze along with Chinese “Five threads satin”. Moreover, delegates from Cam Lộ, the six prefectures of Lạc Biên, Trấn Tĩnh, Trấn Ninh, Trấn Biên, Trấn Man, Trấn Định, and Mục Đa Hán also received Vietnamese Southern silk gauze or “Southern silk poncee” as well as Chinese “Song brocades” silk.

Each time a grand ceremony occurred, the Nguyen court required a large amount of

⁶⁰ As for the examples of dispensation of Chinese silk to “tributary states” on various court ceremonies, see *HDSL*, vol. 133.

silk to be distributed. The cost resulting from the procurement of silk, especially expensive imported Chinese silk, had become a serious concern for the Emperor by the 1860s, when Vietnam suffered from a persistent shortage of financial resources. In preparing for the 60th birthday (lục tuần tết) of Empress Dowager Từ Dụ, that was scheduled for 1869, the Board of Finance submitted a memorial requesting permission to purchase Chinese silk from the two provinces of Hanoi and Nam Định. Reading the memorial, Emperor Tự Đức commented that except under exceptional circumstances, Chinese silk should be replaced by Vietnamese as often as possible to reduce expenses. Upon receiving this comment, the Board of Finance proposed to order the La Khê village⁶¹ of Hanoi to produce the necessary silk products in time for the ceremony.⁶²

Apart from Chinese Northern fabric and Vietnamese Southern fabric, another category of fabric was designated as Dương Thái 洋綵, a term that could be translated as “Western fabric”. According to the purchase record found in the *HDSL*, Western fabric consisted of different woolen fabrics (vũ đoạn 羽緞, vũ trừu 羽紬, or vũ quyn 羽絹), twill damask, velvet (nhung 絨), white cloth (bạc bố 白布), flower-printed cloth (ấn hoa bố 印花布), striped cloth (tuyên bố 線布), canvas cloth (buồm bố 帆布), and painted cloth (dầu tát bố 油漆布). Considering the burgeoning importation of European machine-made cloth into Southeast Asia in the first half of the nineteenth century, it is highly possible that these Western fabrics were of European, especially British, origin.⁶³ John Crawford, who visited Hue in 1822 as British ambassador from the Governor General of India, wrote that, “(...) at present the army amounting to 40,000 men is uniformly and amply clothed in British woolens consisting chiefly of strong coarse scarlet broad cloth, and a small mixture of yellow and green of the same texture with few serges” [Lamb 1970: 262–263]. Wide distribution of European woolen fabrics used for military uniforms was also confirmed by Vietnamese sources.⁶⁴

Although Crawford’s description was quite impressive, the use of European fabric was never confined to military use. A rather intriguing fact is that, on the occasion of court ceremonies, the Hue court quite often distributed European fabrics as gifts to participants.

⁶¹ La Khê village, which is located in today’s Hà Đông district of Hanoi, was a well-known craft village from the seventeenth century, specializing in weaving silk textiles.

⁶² CBTN, triều Tự Đức, vol. 188, 3a–6b, 11/2/Tự Đức 22, Memorial from the Board of Finance.

⁶³ According to the research of Anthony Reid, in first half of the nineteenth century, Southeast Asian imports of European textiles dramatically increased, supplanting Indian textiles which had previously been dominant on the Southeast Asian market [Reid 2009: 47]. In the same study, citing classical studies by Wong Lin Ken on trade of Singapore, Reid points out that in first half of the nineteenth century in Vietnam, for both individual merchants and the state-run trade, British woolens were of more desirable than cotton because British woolens were more suitable for military clothing [Reid 2009: 51].

⁶⁴ For example, see *DNTL*, II, vol. 78, 27b.

For example, at the ngũ tuần tết of Emperor Minh Mạng in 1840, Western flower-printed cloth and handkerchiefs were presented to the king and envoy of Hòa Xá as well as to the local chiefs of Cam Lộ, Trấn Ninh, Trấn Định, Trấn Tĩnh, and Trấn Man.⁶⁵ The distribution of Western fabrics also occurred in the tứ tuần tết ceremony of Emperor Thiệu Trị in 1846. At that time, while the king and embassies of Thủy Xá and Hòa Xá were presented with Western velvet or garments made from Western cloth,⁶⁶ the local chiefs of Cam Lộ, Trấn Ninh, Trấn Định, Trấn Tĩnh, and Trấn Man received flower-printed velvet, red woolen fabric, and flower-printed cloth along with Vietnamese silk and silver coins.⁶⁷ Even at annual court ceremonies, Western fabric was the preferred gift. When the Dragon Boat Festival in 1843 was celebrated with a court banquet, officials of the middle rank and delegates from the provinces received red Western handkerchiefs.⁶⁸

Extensive and frequent distribution of foreign fabrics at court ceremonies was made possible by the vigorous commercial activities conducted under the initiative of the Hue court. To prepare the distribution in ceremonies, the Hue court procured foreign fabrics through a state-run trade known as the “overseas mission” (hải ngoại công vụ 海外公務), whose trade destinations ranged from Canton to the major colonial port cities of Southeast Asia such as Manila, Batavia, and Singapore. Apart from the overseas mission, the Hue court frequently purchased fabric from foreign merchants who arrived in Vietnamese ports, or entrusted Chinese merchants who resided in Hanoi to procure the necessary Chinese fabrics in Canton.⁶⁹ It is noteworthy that procurement of the foreign items necessary for court ceremonies provided a significant impetus for conducting the state-run trade in the first half of the nineteenth century.

3-2

As part of court rituals and ceremonies, the distribution of decorative coins was a common practice in nineteenth century Vietnam. For this purpose, the Nguyen dynasty issued special coins made from gold, silver, and copper. Although their unique appearance has made these special coins intriguing research subjects for numismatists since the French colonial period, little work has been done so far concerning their usage in ceremonies.

Among the special coins issued for use in rituals and ceremonies, gold and silver

⁶⁵ *DNTL*, II, vol. 212, 30a–b.

⁶⁶ *HDSL*, vol. 133, 20a–21b.

⁶⁷ *HDSL*, vol. 133, 37b–38b.

⁶⁸ *HDSL*, vol. 242, 8b–9a.

⁶⁹ On the procurement of foreign fabrics through the state-run trade or entrustment of purchase, the bulk of records were assembled in *HDSL*, vol. 64.

coins stand out for their distinct shape and frequent distribution. As was the case elsewhere in Asia, the traditional monetary usage of silver and gold in Vietnam was mainly in the form of ingots, except for the limited circulation of foreign silver coins. In line with this traditional practice, the first Emperor Gia Long issued his own silver and gold ingots bearing the royal title, but he never issued coins. Based on the dynastic record, the first silver and gold coins, “Flying Dragon coins of gold and silver” (Phi Long Kim Ngân Tiền 飛龍金銀錢), were issued in 1832 under initiative of the second Emperor Minh Mạng.⁷⁰ As the name of coins indicated, these silver and gold coins had a dragon figure on their obverse surface. On the reverse the four characters “Minh Mạng Thông Bảo” 明命通寶 were inscribed. What makes these coins all the more interesting is their weight. When the first Flying Dragon silver coins were minted, the weight of coins was fixed at 7 tiền (about 26 grams), which weighed nearly the same as the Spanish silver dollar circulating at that time in Asian markets. This fact suggests that the issuing of Flying Dragon silver coins was conducted under heavy influence of Spanish silver dollar.

Even before the appearance of Flying Dragon coins, the use of gold and silver as offerings or ceremonial gifts was not uncommon. As mentioned above, on the occasion of the Emperor’s or Empress Dowager’s birthdays and seasonal festivals, subjects were required to contribute silver ingots as part of the Silver Rite. In return, at an event like New Year’s Day, the Emperor distributed silver ingots at the royal banquets. Once the minting of Flying Dragon coins began, however, for ritual or ceremonial purposes, silver and gold ingots were swiftly substituted by the new silver and gold coins. On New Year’s Day, 1834, it was decided that the silver ingots distributed to participants of the New Year’s Day banquet were to be all replaced by Flying Dragon silver and gold coins.⁷¹ This time, the types and amounts of the coins were stipulated based on the rank of participants, as shown in Table 7. From that time, distribution of silver coins on New Year’s Day banquet became regularized.⁷²

No later than 1837, new coins were added to Flying Dragon silver and gold coins. These coins included the Dragon Pattern gold and silver coins (Long Văn Kim Ngân Tiền 龍文金銀錢), the gold coins of the Sun Moon Stars Clouds (Nhật Nguyệt Tinh Vân Kim Tiền 日月星雲金錢), and a small gold coin of the Auspicious Five Treasury and Eight Treasury (Cát Tường Ngũ Bảo Bát Bảo Tiểu Kim Tiền 吉祥五寶八寶小金錢). To facilitate circulation, the value of those coins was established by an edict issued in 1837.⁷³

It was in grand ceremonies that these gold and silver coins were distributed most lavishly. This practice began with the *thất tuần tết* grand ceremony of Empress Dowager

⁷⁰ *DNTL*, II, vol. 81, 3b.

⁷¹ *DNTL*, II, vol. 88, 1a.

⁷² Some examples can be seen in *HDSL*, vol. 242, 1a–17a.

⁷³ *DNTL*, II, vol. 181, 10a–b.

Table 7: Amount of Flying Dragon Silver Coins to Be Distributed at the Time of the New Year's Day Banquet (1834)

Rank	Type of coin	Amount
Prince and Dukes	Flying Dragon gold coin of small type	1
	Flying Dragon silver coin of large type	10
Officials serving in Hue (1a)	Flying Dragon silver coin of small type	10
	Flying Dragon silver coin of large type	10
Officials serving in Hue (1b)	Flying Dragon silver coin of large type	9
	Flying Dragon silver coin of small type	9
Officials serving in Hue (2a)	Flying Dragon silver coin of large type	8
	Flying Dragon silver coin of small type	8
Officials serving in Hue (2b)	Flying Dragon silver coin of large type	6
	Flying Dragon silver coin of small type	6
Officials serving in Hue (3a)	Flying Dragon silver coin of large type	5
	Flying Dragon silver coin of small type	5
Officials serving in Hue (3b)	Flying Dragon silver coin of large type	4
	Flying Dragon silver coin of small type	4
Officials serving in Hue (4a)	Flying Dragon silver coin of large type	3
	Flying Dragon silver coin of small type	3
Officials serving in Hue (4b)	Flying Dragon silver coin of large type	2
	Flying Dragon silver coin of small type	2
Officials serving in Hue (5a)	Flying Dragon silver coin of large type	2
	Flying Dragon silver coin of small type	2
Apprentice scholars serving in Grand Secretariat	Flying Dragon silver coin of large type	1
	Flying Dragon silver coin of small type	1

Source: *DNTL*, II, vol. 88, 1a.

Nhân Tuyên held in 1837. At that time, a few days before the ceremony, princes and officials in Hue and the outer provinces received both large and small types of Flying Dragon silver and gold coins.⁷⁴ After the ceremony, retired officials received large Flying Dragon silver coins whose amount varied according to the official's rank from two to seven pieces per person.⁷⁵ Finally, gold and silver coins were presented to the princess and local chiefs of Cambodia along with Chinese and Vietnamese silk.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ *DNTL*, II, vol. 186, 18a–b.

⁷⁵ *DNTL*, II, vol. 186, 29a.

⁷⁶ *DNTL*, II, vol. 186, 29b–30a.

In addition to the aforementioned gold and silver coins, the Nguyen dynasty minted large, elaborately decorated, copper coins known as “Mỹ Hiệu Đồng Tiền” 美號銅錢. In the Nguyen period, for fiscal administration and market exchange, Chinese-style coins in a round shape with a square hole in the center were minted as well as silver ingots. Compared to these ordinary copper coins, Mỹ Hiệu copper coin was quite idiosyncratic in appearance. Whereas ordinary copper coins weighted approximately 2.28 to 3.8 grams, the weight of Mỹ Hiệu copper coins ranged from 26 to 50 grams with a diameter of 50 mm. Unlike ordinary copper coins, the surface of which were merely inscribed with the title of the reign, a variety of Confucian maxims appeared on the surface of Mỹ Hiệu copper coins.

Minting of Mỹ Hiệu coins began in 1830 when 30 types of Mỹ Hiệu coins were minted with different Confucian messages inscribed on them [Thierry 2011: 367–368]. Mỹ Hiệu copper coins continued to be issued in successive reigns of Emperors Thiệu Trị and Tự Đức, with alterations of their size and message.⁷⁷

As was the case with the Flying Dragon silver coins, large-scale distribution of Mỹ Hiệu copper coins was inaugurated in the *thất tuần tết* grand ceremony of Empress Dowager Nhân Tuyên. On that occasion, “Mỹ Hiệu grandest coins” were given to princes and officials along with Flying Dragon gold coins. Immediately after the distribution, the value of the largest Mỹ Hiệu coin was set at 60 zinc coins. Those who dared to use this coin at below the official value were to be punished for violating the law.⁷⁸ From that time, Mỹ Hiệu copper coins were an indispensable item for distribution in court rituals and ceremonies of the Nguyen dynasty.

Conclusion

To achieve the social integration centered on the imperial capital of Hue, the Nguyen court developed a very elaborate system of court rituals and ceremonies. These rituals and ceremonies ranged from seasonal festivals to grand ceremonies that included foreign participants. In these rituals and ceremonies, the vertical movement of goods between ruler and subjects was indispensable to ascertain and strengthen social relationships between them in tangible form.

No later than the eighteenth century, the Vietnamese court maintained an idiosyncratic custom called the Silver Rite. That rite required subjects to contribute some amount of

⁷⁷ In his article, Thierry listed 55 types of Mỹ Hiệu coins issued in the successive reigns of Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, and Tự Đức, whose existence can be verified by credible evidence [Thierry 2011: 372–403].

⁷⁸ *DNTL*, II, vol. 186, 19a.

silver during the annual ritual and ceremony. Even after this custom was abolished in the 1820s, offering of local products such as fresh fruit was continued until the late nineteenth century. When a grand ceremony was staged, a more extensive economic exchange was done in the form of gifts provided by the Emperor. In this case, items such as foreign textiles and decorative special coins were lavishly used to display the Emperor's affluence and prestige. At the same time, the Emperor's subjects could participate by gathering and exhibiting rare products from the entire country that were on display in many pavilions constructed for that purpose.

As far as the aggregate value involved in these ceremonies was concerned, it is true that the goods exchanged at court rituals and ceremonies might be less than that transferred in regular market activity and the fiscal administration in nineteenth century Vietnam. Economic exchanges, however, that occurred in rituals and ceremonies took on a symbolic character indicating particular social relationships between ruler and subjects, capital and provinces, as well as "suzerain" and "vassalage". The goods used in rituals and ceremonies had to be carefully chosen so as to represent desirable social relationships, independent from their commodity value or practical use.

In this study, I discussed only those ceremonies held at Hue, and made only a few references to those staged in locations other than the capital. That focus does not mean that rituals and ceremonies organized outside Hue had little importance. For example, the Northern Tour and the ritual implemented in Hanoi for accepting the investiture of the Vietnamese King from the Qing dynasty's embassy was no less important than any other rituals practiced in Hue in terms of social integration and economic exchange. As for the general subject of ritual and ceremony in nineteenth century Vietnam, many unexplored problems are still awaiting future studies.

Abbreviations

CBTN: Châu Bản Triều Nguyễn

DNTL: Đại Nam Thực Lục

HDSL: Khâm Định Đại Nam Hội Điển Sự Lệ

PBTL: Phủ Biên Tập Lục

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