

DOI: 10.31696/S086919080036391-7

VIETNAM – CHINA DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS IN THE 16TH – 17TH CENTURIES: ENVOY MISSIONS OF THE LÊ TRUNG HUNG DYNASTY TO THE MING DYNASTY¹

© 2026

Ngoc Huyen PHAN ^a, Thi Thu Thuy NGUYEN ^b^{a,b} – Faculty of History, Hanoi National University of Education, Hanoi, Vietnam^a – ORCID: 0000-0003-1285-8795; huyenpn@hnue.edu.vn^b – ORCID: 0009-0000-4522-0072; thuynt@hnue.edu.vn; Corresponding author

Abstract: *After the overthrow of the Mạc dynasty in 1592, the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty dispatched its first envoy mission to Ming China in 1597, carrying out the duties of paying tribute and requesting investiture, thereby re-establishing diplomatic relations. From this initial mission until 1646, the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty sent a total of 15 envoy missions to the Ming, performing various responsibilities, including requesting investiture, presenting tribute, expressing gratitude, and celebrating the Ming emperor's enthronement. Among these, requesting investiture and paying tribute were the most central and recurring objectives.*

Drawing upon Vietnamese historical manuscripts and the Ming Shilu (Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty), this article analyzes the envoy missions of the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty in terms of their number, duties, tribute goods, organizational structure, and the backgrounds of the envoys. It clarifies the frequency and purposes of these missions, the characteristics of the diplomatic personnel selected by the dynasty, and the political significance of envoy activities in the restoration and consolidation of the dynasty. It also shows that these missions were not merely routine diplomatic procedures but an important means through which the dynasty sought legitimacy in its relations with Ming China. Through these missions, the article examines Vietnam–China diplomatic relations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and contributes to a better understanding of tributary diplomacy under the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty.

Keywords: Lê Trung Hưng, Ming, envoy missions, Vietnam, China

For citation: Huyen P.N., Thuy N.T.T. Vietnam – China Diplomatic Relations in the 16th – 17th Centuries: Envoy Missions of the Lê Trung Hưng Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty. *Vostok (Oriens)*. 2026. No. 4. Pp. 37–47. DOI: 10.31696/S086919080036391-7

INTRODUCTION

During the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty, diplomatic relations between Đại Việt and Ming China took shape within a complex and volatile political context. In China, the Ming dynasty was entering a period of profound crisis, marked by economic decline, social instability, and the growing threat of the Manchus in the north. In Vietnam, after the overthrow of the Mạc dynasty in 1592, the Lê Trung Hưng court faced the considerable challenge of consolidating its political authority. At the same time, it had to contend both with the remaining Mạc forces in Cao Bằng and with the expanding power of the Nguyễn lords in the south.

¹ **Acknowledgements:** This research is funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED) under the grant number 601.01-2021.01 (Hanoi National University of Education is the host organization).

In this context, the restoration and maintenance of diplomatic relations with the Ming dynasty were of great importance for the Lê Trung Hưng court in affirming its political legitimacy and reinforcing its ruling authority. To secure recognition of its legitimate position, the dynasty proactively resumed diplomatic exchanges with the Ming court by dispatching regular tribute missions and seeking investiture for the Lê kings. Owing, however, to the unstable political circumstances on both sides, such diplomatic activities were not always conducted in a regular and uninterrupted manner. For this reason, an examination of the envoy missions sent by the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty to the Ming dynasty offers an important perspective for reconstructing the changing course of Vietnam – China diplomatic relations during this period.

Diplomatic relations between the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty and the Ming dynasty in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have attracted considerable scholarly attention. A number of studies have addressed various aspects of Đại Việt–Ming relations, and some works by scholars such as Ngô Thế Long [2005], Trần Văn Nguyên [2006], Nguyễn Thị Kiều Trang [2016], and Nguyễn Thị Thu Thủy [2025] have also referred to the missions and envoys dispatched by the Lê Trung Hưng court to the Ming dynasty. Nevertheless, these studies have tended to address the subject only in general terms. Important issues, including the functions and composition of these missions, the number of participating envoys, and the backgrounds of the envoys themselves, remain insufficiently studied.

Building on previous scholarship, this article examines the envoy missions sent by the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty to the Ming dynasty from 1597 to 1646. It focuses in particular on clarifying the number of missions, their functions, the tribute system and tribute goods, the organizational structure of the missions, and the backgrounds of the envoys.

NUMBER OF MISSIONS

With the power replacement by the Mạc dynasty, a group of the Lê dynasty's former mandarins allied to “phù Lê diệt Mạc” (supporting the Lê and destroying the Mạc). In 1533, Nguyễn Kim enthroned Lê Duy Ninh (son of King Lê Chiêu Tông) as king, marking the establishment of the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty. From this year onwards, the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty conducted a civil war with the Mạc dynasty to consolidate its position in ruling the country. The civil war ended in 1527 with victory belonging to the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty.

After overthrowing the Mạc dynasty, one of the most important tasks of the Lê Trung Hưng to consolidate its legitimate position was to restore traditional diplomatic relations with the Ming dynasty. This development confronted the Ming dynasty with a diplomatic dilemma in its relations with Đại Việt: either to support the Mạc dynasty, the recently overthrown vassal, or to recognize the Lê dynasty, the former vassal, which had just been restored.

The Ming dynasty sent people to investigate and gather information in Đại Việt. *Complete Annals of Đại Việt* mentioned: “At that time (in 1594 – editor's note), the Ming dynasty repeatedly dispatched people to gather information on the current situation daily” [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 227].

After being informed about the overthrow of the Mạc dynasty and the Lê dynasty's territorial annexation, with only limited remains of Mạc's remnants in the northern border area, the Ming dynasty finally recognized the establishment of the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty. However, the court did not abandon the Mạc dynasty by proposing that they take Cao Bằng as a refuge to preserve its sacrificial rituals [Trưởng Lê An, p. 16].

Reestablishing diplomatic relations between the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty and the Ming dynasty proved to be a complex undertaking, extending over nearly two years, from early 1596 to the end of 1597.

On January 29, 1596, King Lê Thế Tông dispatched Minister of Revenue Đỗ Uông and Chief Censor Nguyễn Văn Giai to Zhennan Gate to exchange proclamations and correspondence with Guangxi officials. At the same time, he also sent Lê Ngạnh, Lê Lựu, and Phùng Khắc Khoan to present the Commandant of An Nam seal, two documents bearing the “An Nam King” seal (bestowed initially by the Ming dynasty upon King Lê Thái Tông in 1436), together with 100 catties of gold, 1,000 taels of silver, and a delegation of senior court elders to Zhennan Gate, where they awaited formal verification [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 194].

However, the Ming court issued a proclamation requiring King Lê Thế Tông to appear in person at Zhennan Gate in order to arrange the formal verification [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 194]. This situation arose from the Mạc dynasty’s accusations to the Ming court, alleging that: “The so-called Lê forces were not the legitimate restoration army of the Lê royal lineage, but in fact the Trịnh clan seeking power, raising troops to kill the suzerain’s vassals as well as the descendants of the Mạc. For this reason, the Ming court repeatedly dispatched envoys through the Zhennan Gate, delivering proclamations to our country and summoning royal family members to the border gate for verification in order to determine whether they were truly descendants of the Lê dynasty” [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 194].

On February 5, 1596, King Lê Thế Tông, together with Right General Hoàng Đình Ái, Commandant Nguyễn Hoàng, Nguyễn Hữu Liên, and Grand Tutor Trịnh Đỗ, led more than 10,000 troops to Zhennan Gate to arrange the ascertainment [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 194]. However, “at that time, the Ming court continued to stall, demanding a gold effigy and a gold seal in accordance with former regulations. The Ming refused to carry out the verification, causing the deadline to lapse. In March, the King returned to the capital” [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 194].

Regarding this issue, ancient Chinese and Vietnamese manuscripts have given different explanations². However, the main reason for King Lê Thế Tông’s return was that the Lê court did not comply with the Ming dynasty’s request to submit a gold effigy, but instead intended to offer

² According to *Ming Shilu* (Veritable Records of the Ming dynasty), the Governor-General of Liangguang at that time, Trần Đại Khoa, reported to the Ming emperor: “Although the documents regarding affairs in An Nam claimed to be written under the name of Lê Duy Đàm, in fact, the dominant courtier Trịnh Tùng held real power. The Mạc lineage was weak while the Lê lineage grew strong; inevitably, certain factions of the Mạc joined the Lê. However, the mediocrity of the Lê and the cunning of Trịnh might one day lead to the collapse of the Lê at the hands of the Trịnh. According to the spy’s report, Duy Đàm’s return during rain and thunder occurred due to four cavalry pursuits ordered by Trịnh Tùng at night. Trịnh Tùng feared that if Đàm were conferred a new title by the Celestial Empire, he could conceal his reckless self-indulgence and usurpation plot; Duy Đàm, on the other hand, appeared to fall unwittingly into the plot” [Hồ Bạch Thảo, 2019(2), p. 257].

Thus, the Governor-General of Liangguang concluded that Lê Thế Tông returned to the capital due to Trịnh Tùng’s unwillingness to allow him to receive investiture from the Ming dynasty. However, this interpretation seems inaccurate. At this time, the power of the Lê dynasty was under the control of Trịnh Tùng; without his approval, King Lê Thế Tông could not attend the investiture. At the same time, the Trịnh also wished for the king to receive investiture to restore diplomatic relations with the Ming dynasty. Furthermore, if Trịnh Tùng had opposed the king’s coronation, he would not have allowed him to attend the ceremony afterward.

According to the *Annals of Đại Việt*, Lê Quý Đôn noted that after returning to the capital, King Lê sent a document to the Guangxi mandarins stating: “Regarding the settlement of the Mạc in Cao Bằng, we dare not act against the mandate, as the Son of Heaven bestowed the land to our ancestors. At present, the troops have entirely run out of provisions and are severely afflicted by disease. These difficulties arose along the way, and we cannot resolve them all at once. Therefore, we must temporarily relocate to a more convenient place to reorganize the forces; thereafter, we shall request to reopen the frontier gate” [Lê Quý Đôn, 2007, p. 465].

The official explanation sent to the Guangxi mandarins emphasized disagreement with the settlement of the Mạc in Cao Bằng and cited the lack of provisions and the outbreak of disease. This appears to have been a diplomatic expression, as King Lê Thế Tông was fully aware of the Ming’s prior request to grant Cao Bằng to the Mạc lineage before proceeding to Zhennan Gate for investiture. In practice, the Lê could not reject the Ming’s request, just as the Mạc had earlier been compelled to accept the Lê’s retention of four prefectures in Thanh Hóa. Subsequent events confirmed that the Lê dynasty did not object to this arrangement.

100 catties of gold. Since the Lê could not return the golden seal, the Ming persistently stalled and refused to carry out the verification. After a prolonged delay, King Lê Thế Tông returned to the capital in order to avoid potential troubles.

Lê Thế Tông's return to the capital without undergoing the verification placed the Ming dynasty in a difficult position. After receiving the report from the Guangxi officials, the Ming Ministry of War ordered them to "prepare troops, horses, and provisions in readiness for a conquest" [Lê Quý Đôn, 2007, p. 465]. However, Guangxi Censor Inspector Hoàng Kỳ Hiến opposed this order and submitted a memorial to the court, requesting an extension of time to continue urging the Lê to undergo the verification [Hồ Bạch Thảo, 2019, p. 258].

In fact, the Ming dynasty was facing a severe crisis at this time and was no longer capable of launching a conquest against Đại Việt. Consequently, the Ming court was compelled to continue negotiations with the Lê dynasty.

From the Lê perspective, after returning to the capital and being acknowledged, the Ming neither compromised nor conducted the verification due to the absence of a gold effigy and a gold seal. In August 1596, King Lê Thế Tông ordered craftsmen to cast both a gold effigy and a silver effigy, each measuring one *chi* (尺) and two *cun* (寸) in height and weighing ten taels, together with five small silver incense jars, local textiles, and other tributary gifts in preparation for a possible envoy mission to the North [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 195].

In December 1596, King Lê Thế Tông instructed Minister of Revenue and Academician of the Eastern Pavilion Đỗ Uông, together with the Duke of Quảng Trịnh Vĩnh Lộc, to bring the gold and silver effigies, as well as other tributary gifts, to Lạng Sơn to await the verification. However, the Longzhou chieftain, who had received many bribes from the Mạc, interfered and caused the Ming to reject the verification. Đỗ Uông and Vĩnh Lộc then returned to the capital [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 196].

Later, on February 19, 1597, King Lê Thế Tông once again dispatched Đỗ Uông and Nguyễn Văn Giai to Zhennan Gate to gather information from the Ming dynasty. While stationed in Lạng Sơn, Đỗ Uông's troops came under attack, and Đỗ Uông together with Nguyễn Văn Giai eventually escaped to the nearby hills [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 196].

In March 1597, the Ming dynasty dispatched a commissioner named Wang Jianli to Đại Việt to demand tribute and to press for the verification. On March 28, 1597, King Lê Thế Tông personally came to Zhennan Gate in Lạng Sơn with an escort composed of Right General Hoàng Đình Ái, Commandant Nguyễn Hoàng, Nguyễn Hữu Liêu, Grand Tutor Trịnh Đỗ, seven to eight additional left and right military commanders, and 50,000 soldiers, accompanied by the Ming commissioner Wang Jianli [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 196].

On April 10, 1597, both sides conducted the ascertainment. The *Complete Annals of Đại Việt* states: "The King reorganized the forces of soldiers and elephants, crossed the Zhennan Gate, and joined the Ming mandarins, including Circuit Inspector of the Left River cum Vice Juridical Commissioner Trần Đôn Lâm, along with other mandarins from the Siming, Taiping, Longzhou, and Pingxiang prefectures, to conduct the ascertainment. During the exchange ceremony, both sides celebrated and congratulated each other" [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 196].

Since then, diplomatic relations between the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty and the Ming dynasty were officially restored.

After this ascertainment, the Governor-General of Liangguang, Trần Đại Khoa, submitted a memorial to the Ming emperor, stating: "... As the Lê lineage has been acclaimed by the people and has submitted a fairly sincere memorial, we might grant them approval. The Mạc's land was lost long ago; only Mạc Kính Dụng and his band of remnants remain, possessing very little and struggling to find a place of settlement. Considering that they are descendants of a tribute-paying

vassal, we should show mercy by protecting them. Thus, we should carve out a place in the Cao Bằng prefecture and grant it to Kính Dụng for his settlement” [Lê Quý Đôn, 2007, p. 466–467].

Right after the ascertainment, the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty dispatched Phùng Khắc Khoan, Left Vice Minister of Works, as Chief Envoy, and Nguyễn Nhân Thiệm, Chief Minister of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, as Deputy Envoy to the Ming dynasty to present tribute and request investiture [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 196]. After conferring the investiture upon King Lê Thế Tông, the Ministry of War proposed to the Ming emperor: “Bestow a title upon Duy Đàm, order him to govern the land and care for the people of the Southern State; settle the Mạc lineage in Cao Bằng so that their descendants may continue to perform ancestral worship” [Hò Bạch Thảo, 2019, p. 259].

Agreeing with the proposal of the Governor-General of Liangguang and the Ministry of War, on October 17 in the 25th year of Wanli’s reign (1597), Emperor Ming Shenzong issued an edict as follows: “Lê Duy Đàm is hereby conferred the title of Commandant of An Nam. An edict is now composed and a seal issued, representing the authority to govern the land and permanently adhere to the emperor’s mandate” [Hò Bạch Thảo, 2019, p. 259].

After receiving the investiture edict from the Ming dynasty, Phùng Khắc Khoan submitted a memorial to the Ming emperor, stating: “My master, of the Lê lineage, is a descendant of the Kings of An Nam. Angered by the Mạc rebellion, which usurped the throne and seized the land, and unable to endure the enmity of a thousand years, he endured hardships and strove to restore and preserve the legacy of his ancestors. The Mạc were originally servants of the Lê of An Nam, yet they became true criminals against the suzerain when they committed the crime of regicide and usurpation. The Mạc even dared to request the title of Commandant in secret. Now, without having committed any crimes like the Mạc, why must my master be forced to accept the same position as they did? We therefore sincerely implore Your Majesty to reconsider this matter” [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 204].

The Ming emperor explained the reason for conferring upon King Lê the title of *Commandant of An Nam*: “Although your master is different from the Mạc, the Lê have only just regained the country, and the people’s hearts are not yet at peace. Therefore, let him first accept this position, and I shall later confer upon him the royal title. You should respect the order and not refuse” [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 204].

In December 1598, Phùng Khắc Khoan returned to Đông Đô. The Ming court dispatched Wang Jianli to deliver the investiture edict to King Lê Thế Tông, conferring upon him the title of *Commandant of An Nam*. This event marked the official re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty and the Ming dynasty. Although the king was granted only the title of *Commandant of An Nam*, it nevertheless reflected the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty’s effort to restore traditional diplomatic relations with the Ming. From this point onward, the diplomatic activities of the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty with the Ming gradually stabilized.

From the first envoy mission in 1597 to the last in 1646, the Lê Trung Hưng court sent a total of fifteen missions to the Ming dynasty. These took place in 1597, 1605, 1608, 1613, 1620, 1626, 1630, 1637, and 1646, including one mission in 1597, three in 1605, one in 1608, two in each of the years 1613, 1620, 1626, 1630, and 1637, and one final mission in 1646.

In 1597, Phùng Khắc Khoan and Nguyễn Nhân Thiệm were appointed Chief Envoy and Deputy Envoy, respectively, and sent to present tribute and seek investiture. In 1605, Lê Bật Tứ served as Chief Envoy, with Nguyễn Dụng and Phùng Khắc Khoan as Deputy Envoys; two further missions that year, headed by Ngô Trí Hòa and Nguyễn Thực, were likewise dispatched to present tribute. In 1608, tribute was offered for combined periods.

From 1613 onward, the dispatch of two tribute missions within the same year became more frequent. In 1613 and 1620, two missions were sent each year, headed respectively by Lưu Đình

Chất and Nguyễn Đăng, and by Nguyễn Thế Tiêu and Nguyễn Cung, with accompanying Deputy Envoys and separate tribute offerings. The same pattern continued in 1626, 1630, and 1637, when two missions were organized annually under different envoys, each presenting tribute. In 1646, Nguyễn Nhân Chính, with Phạm Vinh Miên, Trần Khải, and Nguyễn Côn as Deputy Envoys, was sent to Fujian to seek investiture, congratulate the Longwu emperor, and present tribute.

Taken together, these records suggest that, despite variations in frequency and form, tributary diplomacy remained an important and sustained feature of the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty throughout this period. However, the extant sources do not preserve all missions equally: some are recorded in both Vietnamese and Chinese sources, while others survive only in partial form. Particularly noteworthy is the final mission in 1646, which occurred amid the Ming court's defeat by the Qing and its retreat to the South. Recorded only in the *Records of the Administrative Systems of Successive Dynasties*, this mission underscores the exceptional character of the final phase of relations between the Lê Trung Hưng and Ming dynasties.

DUTIES OF THE MISSIONS

The available records indicate that envoy missions dispatched by the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty served different purposes, including beseeching investiture, presenting tribute, and expressing gratitude. Some missions had a single function, while others combined two, such as those led by Phùng Khắc Khoan and Nguyễn Nhân Thiêm in 1597, and by Nguyễn Duy Hiệu and Giang Văn Minh in 1637, both of which were tasked with presenting tribute and beseeching investiture for the Lê king. For statistical purposes, missions are classified as follows: those with two concurrent functions are counted as two missions, and those presenting tribute for two periods are likewise counted as two. On this basis, the purposes of envoy missions to the Ming dynasty included beseeching investiture, presenting tribute, expressing gratitude, and celebrating the enthronement of the Ming emperor.

Among these, presenting tribute and beseeching investiture remained the primary objectives, with tribute missions accounting for the largest number (15). Missions specifically dispatched to beseech investiture amounted to only four, namely in 1597 (King Lê Thế Tông), 1605 (King Lê Kính Tông), 1637 (King Lê Thần Tông), and 1646 (King Lê Chân Tông). Between 1592 and 1646, the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty was ruled by four successive kings – Lê Thế Tông (1573–1599), Lê Kính Tông (1599–1619), Lê Thần Tông (1619–1643), and Lê Chân Tông (1643–1649) – all of whom sent missions to beseech investiture, albeit at different times.

Although King Lê Kính Tông ascended the throne in 1599, it was not until 1605 that an envoy mission was dispatched to present tribute and seek investiture. The *Ming Shilu* records: “Lê Duy Tân, son of the Commandant of An Nam Lê Duy Đàm, presented local specialties as tribute and petitioned for a title” [Hồ Bạch Thảo, 2019, p. 262]. The delay is explained in the same source: “Two years after Duy Đàm passed away, his son Duy Tân neither reported the situation nor presented tribute...,” citing internal disorder and external conflict as obstacles [Hồ Bạch Thảo, 2019, p. 262]. In fact, according to the *Complete Annals of Đại Việt*, Phan Ngạn was killed in 1600 [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 209]. However, the outcome of this mission remains unclear in the available sources.

Similarly, although King Lê Thần Tông ascended the throne in 1619, it was not until 1637 that a mission was sent to beseech investiture. The *Records on Administrative Systems of Successive Dynasties* note that in 1637, “Nguyễn Duy Hiệu, Giang Văn Minh... were ordered to undertake a mission to the Ming dynasty to beseech investiture” [Phan Huy Chú, 2008, p. 562]. The delay was attributed to unresolved internal matters. The *Annals of Đại Việt* further record that the Ming court did not fully accept the explanation and issued only a nominal edict without formal recognition

[Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 338; Lê Quý Đôn, 2007, p. 485]. This was likely due to the severe instability of the Ming state at the time.

Likewise, although King Lê Chân Tông ascended the throne in 1643, it was not until 1646 that an envoy mission was dispatched to beseech investiture. This was also the final mission of the dynasty. The *Complete Annals of Đại Việt* records that in February 1646, Nguyễn Nhân Chính and his deputies traveled to Fujian to seek investiture [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 239]. At this time, the Ming dynasty was under attack by the Qing, and the situation was extremely unstable. Emperor Yongli subsequently appointed King Lê Chân Tông as King of An Nam [Ngô Sỹ Liên et al., 1998, p. 239].

These records suggest that the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty consistently sought to maintain traditional diplomatic relations with the Ming dynasty, primarily through tribute and investiture. However, among the four kings who ruled from 1597 to 1646, only Lê Thế Tông and Lê Chân Tông were formally granted the title of Commandant of An Nam. The delays in seeking investiture partly reflect both the dynasty's neglect of this duty and the weakening of the Ming state, as well as the complex political conditions in both Vietnam and China.

TRIBUTE SYSTEM AND TRIBUTE GOODS

Most of the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty's envoy missions to the Ming dynasty were dispatched to present tribute. From the first envoy mission in 1597 to the last in 1646, the dynasty sent a total of nine missions to pay tribute in the years 1597, 1605, 1608, 1613, 1620, 1626, 1630, 1637, and 1646, covering a total of fifteen tribute periods. The Lê Trung Hưng dynasty generally followed the three-year tribute cycle of previous dynasties, but did not strictly adhere to the prescribed tribute periods³. All of these tribute missions combined two tribute periods into a single mission⁴.

Tribute goods from vassal states and countries under the Ming dynasty were strictly regulated. According to the *Imperially Ordered Annotated Text Completely Reflecting the History of Việt*, the regulations on tribute goods were established in the 3rd year of Hongwu (1370) and recorded in the *Huidian* (Collected Regulations) of the Ming dynasty, including: "Articles made of gold and silver, rhinoceros horn, ivory, white silk, burning incense, padouk incense, agarwood incense, aloeswood incense, costus root, black coil incense, and paper fans" [Nguyen Dynasty's National Historian Office, 2007, p. 837].

The Lê Trung Hưng dynasty likely followed the same regulations.

The *Records on the Administrative Systems of Successive Dynasties* recorded a request from the Ming dynasty to pay tribute with a gold figure. However, this request was later canceled because the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty disagreed: "The regulation to pay tribute with gold figures from previous dynasties had been changed to other goods, but now it became a demand of the

³ According to *Ming Shilu*, this tribute system was established in 1375. On June 6th in the 8th year of Hongwu's reign (July 4, 1375), "on Jiawu day, An Nam King Trần Doan (i.e., Trần Duệ Tông – Editor's note) sent Grand Master for Thorough Counsel Nguyễn Nhữc Kim and his colleagues to the court to request the schedule of tributary periods. The Son of Heaven then ordered all mandarins to deliberate and proposed that vassals should submit minor betrothal gifts every year and major betrothal gifts every three years, while more distant states and countries should pay tribute once per generation. Accordingly, the Secretariat was instructed to notify An Nam, Goryeo, and Champa that they were to pay tribute every three years from that point onward" [Hồ Bạch Thảo, 2019(2), p. 100–101].

⁴ The combination of tributary periods may have begun in 1584 under the Mạc dynasty. As recorded, "Since Mạc Mậu Hợp inherited the title of Commandant of An Nam, tribute obligations were always fulfilled. Now, having reached the three-year tribute period and needing to fulfill tribute obligations for two periods at once, the Governor-General of Liangguang, Quách Ứng Sinh, was requested to submit a memorial and have the Ministry of War report accordingly" [Hồ Bạch Thảo, 2019(2), p. 254]. Phan Huy Chú also noted that, until 1584, Mạc Mậu Hợp dispatched two envoys, Nguyễn Doãn Khâm and Nguyễn Năng Thuận, on a tributary mission to the Ming dynasty, marking the beginning of the system of paying tribute every six years with two offerings [Phan Huy Chú, 2008, p. 604].

Ming dynasty. When the country was first restored, we had to compromise and comply with the regulations. Later, when we were defending ourselves, the Ming dynasty had no grounds for argument, so the regulations were subsequently canceled” [Phan Huy Chú, 2008, p. 604].

The *Ming Shilu* records concerning the envoy missions of the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty generally referred to the tribute goods as “*local specialties*” [Hồ Bạch Thảo, 2019, p. 262, 271, 275, 277].

It can be inferred that the tribute system and the types of tribute goods during the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty were likely similar to those of previous dynasties.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF MISSIONS
AND THE BACKGROUNDS OF ENVOYS

The number of participants in each envoy mission sent by the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty to the Ming dynasty varied depending on the mission’s duties. Ancient Vietnamese and Chinese sources did not provide the exact number for all envoy missions. The *Ming Shilu*, however, recorded the statistics for some of the missions. Specifically, the mission of Lưu Đình Chất in 1613 contained 38 participants [Hồ Bạch Thảo, 2019, p. 271], the mission of Nguyễn Thế Tiêu in 1620 contained 42 participants [Hồ Bạch Thảo, 2019, p. 275–276]. Thus, it can be seen that the number of participants in each mission under the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty was not fixed, but depended on factors such as the mission’s duties, the number of tribute gifts, and the specific political context of each envoy mission.

Regarding the composition of the missions, the *Complete Annals of Đại Việt* and the *Records on the Administrative Systems of Successive Dynasties* indicate the number of Chief Envoys and Deputy Envoys for each mission. Typically, each mission included one Chief Envoy, two Deputy Envoys, and accompanying escorts. However, the number of escorts was not clearly recorded.

Concerning the backgrounds of envoys sent to the Ming dynasty by the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty, existing documents do not provide sufficient information to determine the official positions of the Chief Envoys and Deputy Envoys during the missions. Below is information on some envoys of the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty who went to the Ming dynasty, serving as a basis for understanding their backgrounds.

Table 1. The list of envoys’ titles of envoys sent to the Ming dynasty
by Lê Trung Hưng dynasty [Ngô Đức Thọ, 2006]

Category	Representatives (selected)	Remarks
First-rank laureates	Giang Văn Minh, Nguyễn Thực	Only a few envoys attained First-rank laureate status in this period. Giang Văn Minh passed as First-rank laureate (third place) in 1628 and served as Chief Envoy in 1637; he died on the mission and was posthumously elevated to Vice Minister. Nguyễn Thực, who passed both provincial and imperial First-rank examinations in 1595, later became Grand Councilor, Minister of Personnel, Director of the Hanlin Academy cum Academician of the Eastern Pavilion.
Second-rank laureates	Phùng Khắc Khoan, Nguyễn Nhân Thiệm, Lê Bật Tứ, Nguyễn Dụng, Phạm Hồng Nho, Nguyễn Thế Tiêu, Nguyễn Duy Hiều, Đỗ Khắc Kính	A significant cohort of envoys held Second-rank laureate titles. Many advanced to high offices: Phùng Khắc Khoan became Minister of Revenue and Duke of Mai; Nguyễn Duy Thi became Grand Councilor, Head of the Six Ministries, and Duke of Tuyên; while Nguyễn Thế Tiêu and Đỗ Khắc Kính served as Vice Ministers. Second-rank laureates were frequently appointed as Chief Envoys.

Third-rank laureates	Ngô Trí Hòa, Nguyễn Danh Thế, Nguyễn Úc, Nguyễn Cung, Nguyễn Khuê, Trần Vĩ, Trần Hữu Lễ, Dương Trí Trạch, Nguyễn Nghi, Hoàng Công Phụ, Nguyễn Quang Minh, Trần Nghi, Nguyễn Bình, Thân Khuê, Nguyễn Nhân Chính, Phạm Vĩnh Miên, Trần Khải	The largest group, comprising the majority of envoys recorded in the early 17th century missions. Despite lower examination ranking, many rose to high positions such as Grand Councilor, Academician of the Eastern Pavilion, Minister of Personnel, Minister of Rites, or Junior Tutor. Notable examples include Dương Trí Trạch (Minister of Rites, Grand Councilor) and Nguyễn Danh Thế (Grand Tutor, Minister of Rites). Deputy Envoys were predominantly drawn from this group.
Scholarly affiliations	Nguyễn Thực, Dương Trí Trạch, Nguyễn Danh Thế	Several envoys held academic or scholarly posts at court. Some served within Vietnam’s Imperial Academy or classical scholarly hierarchy (e.g., Nguyễn Danh Thế and Dương Trí Trạch as Grand Councilors and Imperial Attendants for the Classics), while others were appointed to learned positions such as Director or Academician of the Hanlin Academy (e.g., Nguyễn Thực). These affiliations enhanced Vietnam’s diplomatic and literary standing in missions to China.
Envoys deceased on mission	Nguyễn Nhân Thiệm, Nguyễn Đức Trạch, Nguyễn Sư Khanh, Bùi Tất Thắng, Thân Khuê, Giang Văn Minh, Bùi Bình Quân	Several envoys died during service. Causes included illness, battlefield loss, or death after arrival at the Chinese court. Some were posthumously elevated in recognition of their diplomatic service – for example, Giang Văn Minh was granted the title Vice Minister, and Thân Khuê was granted Right Vice Minister of Works. Their deaths underscored both the hazards and political weight of diplomatic missions in the early 17 th century.

From the above table, it can be seen that most envoys dispatched by the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty to the Ming dynasty were scholarly officials who had passed the imperial examinations, many of whom achieved high distinctions. Among them, second- and third-rank laureates accounted for the majority, while first-rank laureates were relatively few. It can also be observed that many of these envoys either held, or later came to hold, important positions at court. This pattern indicates that the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty generally selected its envoys from among men of recognized scholarly achievement and established official status. Such a tendency suggests that diplomatic representation was regarded not merely as an administrative duty but as a political task requiring individuals with both intellectual credentials and courtly authority. The composition of these missions, therefore, reflects the close relationship among educational attainment, bureaucratic advancement, and diplomatic service in the political culture of the Lê Trung Hưng period.

During the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty, the Ming dynasty referred to the leaders of envoy missions as Subordinate Mandarins (meaning the vassal king’s mandarins), similar to the practice during the Trần and Early Lê dynasties. This contrasts with the treatment of envoys from the Mạc dynasty. The Ming dynasty called the leaders of Mạc envoys Pacification Commissioner, Pacification Associate Commissioner, Associate Commissioner, or other titles, rather than Subordinate Mandarin. The *Ming Shilu* explained this in the event of welcoming the Mạc envoys in 1543 as follows: “The Ministry of Rites believed that the land of An Nam had collapsed without a ruling king; therefore, envoys coming to pay tributes shall not be treated like previous Subordinate Mandarins, and the rewards shall also be restricted. The emperor then announced: ‘Considering Phúc Hải’s sincere heart in paying tributes, the rewards given will be the same as before, but

the banquet will be reduced to indicate that he is not a Subordinate Mandarin” [Hồ Bạch Thảo, 2019, p. 234].

The difference in the way envoys of the Mạc and the Lê Trung Hưng dynasties were addressed clearly reflected the diplomatic perspectives of the Ming dynasty toward Đại Việt from the 16th to 17th centuries. By using the title “Subordinate Mandarin” for the envoys of the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty, the Ming dynasty implicitly affirmed the legitimate succession of the Lê lineage within the “Emperor–Vassal order” framework, which had been established since the Early Lê dynasty. In contrast, by addressing the envoys of the Mạc dynasty with administrative titles such as Pacification Commissioner or Pacification Associate Commissioner, it is evident that the Ming dynasty maintained diplomatic relations and accepted tributes from the Mạc, but did not recognize their legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

It can be seen that the diplomatic relations between Vietnam and China in the 16th–17th centuries clearly reflected the shifts in power and the historical context of the Lê Trung Hưng and Ming dynasties.

Since the restoration of relations with the Ming dynasty, from 1597 to 1646, the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty made numerous efforts to maintain diplomatic ties with China despite facing significant political challenges. During this period, the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty dispatched a total of 15 envoy missions to the Ming dynasty, fulfilling various duties such as beseeching investiture, paying tributes, expressing gratitude, and celebrating the enthronement of Ming emperors. After King Lê Thế Tông was appointed Commandant of An Nam in 1598, envoy missions to China – primarily for paying tributes – became more frequent. The highest title granted by the Ming dynasty to a Lê king was An Nam King in 1646. Although the intervals between tributary missions were not fixed, the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty generally sought to maintain the practice of submitting tributes every three years by combining tribute periods. The tribute goods provided were essentially the same as those of previous dynasties.

The Lê Trung Hưng dynasty did not set strict standards for selecting envoys to the Ming dynasty, but each mission typically included one Chief Envoy and two Deputy Envoys. Both Chief and Deputy Envoys were civil mandarins who had passed high-level Confucian examinations, and many held official positions in the ministries.

Amid domestic difficulties, sending envoy missions to the Ming dynasty served as an important diplomatic strategy for the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty to secure formal recognition and maintain stable relations. However, while sustaining relations with the Ming, the dynasty also exercised initiative and limited dependence by delaying missions and combining tribute offerings. After the Ming dynasty was overthrown in 1644, interactions became more ambiguous, and the last mission in 1646 marked the end of official diplomatic relations between the two states. To some extent, these envoy missions allowed the Lê Trung Hưng dynasty to utilize diplomatic channels to stabilize its position and preserve peace with the Ming dynasty until its collapse.

REFERENCES

Hồ Bạch Thảo (Translated & annotated). *Ming Shilu: Sino–Vietnamese Relations in the 14th–17th Centuries*. Vol. 3. Hanoi: Hanoi Publishing House, 2019.

Lê Quý Đôn. *Annals of Đại Việt [Đại Việt thông sử]*. Hanoi: Culture & Information Publishing House, 2007.

Ngô Đức Thọ (Chief editor). *Vietnamese Doctors (1075–1919)*. Hanoi: Literature Publishing House, 2006.

Ngô Sỹ Liên et al. *Complete Annals of Đại Việt [Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư]*. Translated by Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. Vol. 3. Hanoi: Social Science Publishing House, 1998.

Nguyen Dynasty's National Historian Office. *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục [The Imperially Ordered Annotated Text Completely Reflecting the History of Việt]*. Vol. 2. Hanoi: Education Publishing House, 2007.

Nguyễn Thế Long. *Diplomatic Relations of Đại Việt: Lê, Mạc, and Lê Trung Hưng Dynasties*. Hanoi: Culture & Information Publishing House, 2005.

Nguyễn Thị Kiều Trang. *On the Investiture-Tribute Relation between the Ming Dynasty and Đại Việt*. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2016.

Nguyễn Thị Thu Thủy. “Diplomatic Relations between the Lê Trung Hưng Dynasty and the Ming Dynasty in the Late 16th and Early 17th Century and the Envoy Mission in 1637”. *Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*. 2025. No. 3 (324). Pp. 67–81.

Phan Huy Chú. *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí [Records on Administrative Systems of Successive Dynasties]*. Translated by Team of Institute of History. Vol. 2. Hanoi: Educational Publishing House, 2008.

Trần Văn Nguyên 陈文源. *Study on the Relations between the Ming Dynasty and An Nam [明朝与安南关系研究]*. PhD Dissertation. Jinan University, China, 2005.

Tưởng Lê An. *Collection on Rewarding the Lê and Preserving the Mạc [獎黎安莫集]*. The Institute of Hán-Nôm Studies. Code A.948.

ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРАХ / INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ФАН Нгок Хюен – доктор исторических наук, доцент, заместитель декана факультета истории Ханойского государственного педагогического университета (HNUE), Ханой, Вьетнам.

Ngoc Huyen PHAN, PhD (History), Associate Professor, Vice Dean, Faculty of History, Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE), Hanoi, Vietnam.

НГУЕН Тхи Тху Тхюи – доктор исторических наук, доцент факультета истории Ханойского государственного педагогического университета (HNUE), Ханой, Вьетнам.

Thi Thu Thuy NGUYEN, PhD (History), Associate Professor, Faculty of History, Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE), Hanoi, Vietnam.