Vietnam and Korea are rarely compared per se in scholarly work, whether in the field of social sciences or that of area studies. Yet, obvious convergences in their recent histories are apparent: both are Asian countries where the Cold War was indeed hot, tragic and deadly; and both nations were situated at the core of the big divide of the 20th century between capitalism and socialism – Korea still divided, Vietnam reunified in 1975. A conference hosted in March 2016 in Hanoi at the Vietnam National University, and co-organized by IIAS, Seoul National University and EHESS, pioneered new attempts to compare Vietnam and Korea, with their similar tributary and colonial positions, as longue durée subjects of history.

Vietnam and Korea: longue durée convergence?

As great kingdoms in the pre-modern period, both countries developed strong political organizations and original civilizations, sometimes within and sometimes outside the Sinitic ‘tributary’ system. After the political fragmentation of the Antiquity, the first political unification by the Southern State of Silla (57 BC-668 AC) created the basis for a unified entity on the Korean peninsula: the Greater Silla (668-936). With the rise of the Koryŏ Kingdom (936-1492), the whole peninsula continued outside the Sinitic ‘tributary’ system. After the Nan Yue (Southern Viet) kingdom that covered parts of northern Vietnam and southern provinces of modern China, as Nan Yue increasingly fell under Han influence, northern Vietnam was annexed into the Han Empire. Meanwhile, in Central Vietnam, the independent states of Lin Yi (192-758), precursor of Champa (758-1832), and Funan (1st-7th century) endured. Independence was restored in North Vietnam in the early 10th century after a millennium of Chinese domination. Like the Korean counterparts, however, the successive dynasties of Independent Dai Viet (name of Vietnam for the periods from 1050 to 1400 and 1428 to 1800) carried out tributary relations with the Chinese Emperors and adopted various elements of Confucianism, such as the political structure, social order, education, and culture. Following the gradual territorial expansion of the Dai Viet Empire, which annexed a large part of Champa in 1471 and established Vietnamese control over the Mekong Delta in the first half of the 19th century, Confucianism was also cultivated in Central and South Vietnam.

As all countries in Asia, after the surge of the great Western powers in the region, and with the disruption of the Sinitic order, Korea and Vietnam experienced the vicissitudes of the modern and contemporary periods. They were confronted with colonial subjugation: Korea became a Japanese protectorate in 1905, and was a colony from 1910 to 1945. Vietnam was invaded by the French in 1858; but it took 26 years for the French to extend their control over the whole country. The unified Vietnam was then divided into three parts with different regimes: Tonkin (North Vietnam) and Annam (Central Vietnam) as French Protectorates, and Cochinchina (South Vietnam) as Proper Colony. These three regions were incorporated with Laos and Cambodia in the formation of French Indochina. The French colonial rule continued to exist in Vietnam until 1959.

International warfare and civil conflicts, resulting in the division of the two countries and triggering diasporic projections, initiated an array of connections and parallels between the two countries’ trajectories. Today, Vietnam and Korea continue to stand, albeit in divergent ways, at the edges of the two great ideological systems that shaped the 20th century: socialism and capitalism. Reunified Vietnam has entered post-communist-pre-capitalist State authoritarianism, which puts a strong emphasis on a socialist-oriented market economy. Korea remains divided between two models of state-hood and governance. On the one hand we have the DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or ‘North Korea’); on the other hand we have the ROK (Republic of Korea, or ‘South Korea’), an impoverished dictatorship banned from the international community for its nuclear development, which, after a profound crisis of its economic and social system, experiences again economic growth despite sanctions. On the other hand we have the ROK (Republic of Korea, or ‘South Korea’), a rich (post) industrial and capitalist country democratized since the early 1990s, which inundates the global scene with its cultural productions (from K-pop to K-beauty).

Continued on next page
Beyond contemporary politics, the virtue of the comparative gesture

In fact, most recent work taking Vietnam and Korea as common objects of comparison focuses on the contemporary era, analysing more particularly how the United States’ war in Vietnam and the war in Korea compare to conditions in Vietnam and Korea during the Cold War, or comparing both wars (the Korean war 1950-1953 and the Vietnam war 1959-1975). A few works, which situate the perspective within the global approach of, for example, a comparative colonial situation and more specifically the post-colonial wars, compare the Korean war, the Vietnam war and the tributary positions and diplomatic strategies by Vietnam and Korea themselves, from the Ming while looking at the problematic of cultural encounters that occurred during the tributary missions to China thanks to the use of classical Chinese (wenyan), but also by the Dutch East India Company. The Dutch opened a main period of China’s international relation with Vietnam and China at the time, by contrast the relations between the Northern and Southern Korean dynasties, and Korea in the sensitive context of the post-Japanese invasion of Korea (late 16th century).

The conference (3-4 March 2016), 65 scholars participated in it: from the Ming while looking at the problematic of cultural encounters that occurred during the tributary missions to China thanks to the use of classical Chinese (wenyan), but also by the Dutch East India Company. The Dutch opened a main period of China’s international relation with Vietnam and China at the time, by contrast the relations between the Northern and Southern Korean dynasties, and Korea in the sensitive context of the post-Japanese invasion of Korea (late 16th century).

The conference held in March 2016 attempted to initiate a deliberation by-passing of dominant paradigms, and put forward new articulations beyond established approaches of global history, contribute to understanding the social trajectories and parallel histories in Vietnam and Korea.

This instalment of the Focus section presents a selection of a few excellent papers presented at the conference. Nguyễn Nhật Linh (Vietnam National University), analyses Chosŏn’s understanding of Ming-Dai-Việt relations and shows how the comparison of tributary positions and diplomatic strategies were made by Vietnam and Korea themselves through the interface of the Ming tributary missions. The turn of the Han dynasty, the founders of the Chosŏn Kingdom secured their dynastic transition, and sought legitimation from the Ming while looking at the dynastic transition happening at the same time in Dai Viet, and the war with the Ming (1408-1407). The early Yi Kings’ diplomacy was thus oriented to avoid the same situation, and held Dai Viets’ example as a cautionary tale, which eventually led Chosŏn to a relatively peaceful and stable relationship with the Ming. Monta Oishi (Ritsuka University) reconsiders categories of land and taxation systems during the successive periods of the Korean (koryo) and Dai Viet. A fruitful comparison with the taxation system in Korea during the medieval Koryŏ period is certain field of commoners’ fields, which created in Vietnam a fractionation of arable land in the North. As for the regional orders. In the conference, the papers (five, that is about a third of the total number of panels (five, that is about a third of the total number of papers) focused on the colonial period and analysed various aspects of it: from land and territorial management, to political issues such as school systems, and more generally, the role of Chinese influence on the development of the city of Kaesŏng, from the Ming while looking at the problematic of cultural encounters that occurred during the tributary missions to China thanks to the use of classical Chinese (wenyan), but also by the Dutch East India Company. The Dutch opened a main period of China’s international relation with Vietnam and China at the time, by contrast the relations between the Northern and Southern Korean dynasties, and Korea in the sensitive context of the post-Japanese invasion of Korea (late 16th century).

How to trigger new connections and parallels between Vietnam and Korea? During the conference, the papers (five, that is about a third of the total number of papers) focused on the colonial period and analysed various aspects of it: from land and territorial management, to political issues such as school systems, and more generally, the role of Chinese influence on the development of the city of Kaesŏng, from the Ming while looking at the problematic of cultural encounters that occurred during the tributary missions to China thanks to the use of classical Chinese (wenyan), but also by the Dutch East India Company. The Dutch opened a main period of China’s international relation with Vietnam and China at the time, by contrast the relations between the Northern and Southern Korean dynasties, and Korea in the sensitive context of the post-Japanese invasion of Korea (late 16th century).

Notes
1 Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales.