

The background of the cover is a photograph of a mountainous landscape. The mountains are covered in lush green vegetation and are partially shrouded in a light mist or haze, creating a sense of depth and atmosphere. In the lower foreground, a small, simple house with a dark roof is visible, partially obscured by green foliage. The overall color palette is dominated by various shades of green and blue, with the mist adding a soft, ethereal quality to the scene.

# Ming China and Vietnam

Negotiating Borders  
in Early Modern Asia

Kathlene Baldanza

## Ming China and Vietnam

Studies of Sino-Viet relations have traditionally focused on Chinese aggression and Vietnamese resistance, or have assumed out-of-date ideas about Sinicization and the tributary system. They have limited themselves to national historical traditions, doing little to reach beyond the border. *Ming China and Vietnam*, by contrast, relies on sources and viewpoints from both sides of the border, for a truly transnational history of Sino-Viet relations. Kathlene Baldanza offers a detailed examination of geopolitical and cultural relations between Ming China (1368–1644) and Dai Viet, the state that would go on to become Vietnam. She highlights the internal debates and external alliances that characterized their diplomatic and military relations in the premodern period, showing especially that Vietnamese patronage of East Asian classical culture posed an ideological threat to Chinese states. Baldanza presents an analysis of seven linked biographies of Chinese and Vietnamese border-crossers whose lives illustrate the entangled histories of those countries.

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*Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University*

The Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute of Columbia University were inaugurated in 1962 to bring to a wider public the results of significant new research on modern and contemporary East Asia.

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*Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia*

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Kathlene Baldanza

*Pennsylvania State University*



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For my family



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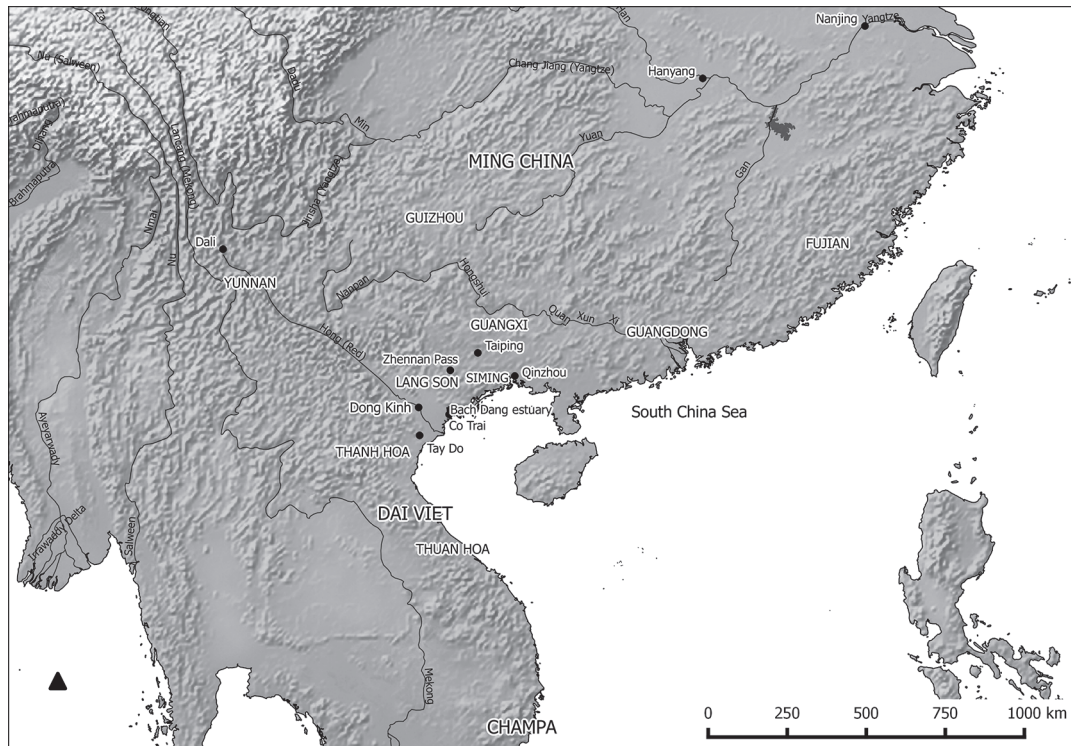
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Map 1 Ming China and Dai Viet.

## Introduction: The power of names

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The story of the adoption of the name “Vietnam” for the slender country along the east coast of mainland Southeast Asia reveals the give-and-take nature of that country’s relationship with Chinese states. It begins in the winter of 1802, when the Jiaqing emperor (r. 1796–1820) of the Qing dynasty received an unusual request. Nguyen Phuc Anh had recently ascended the throne of the newly established Nguyen dynasty of Vietnam as the Gia Long emperor (r. 1802–1820). As was customary, Nguyen Phuc Anh contacted the Qing court to inform it of the changes and receive formal recognition for the new state and emperor. Instead of seeking to be recognized by the traditional name Annam (Vietnamese: An Nam), however, Nguyen Phuc Anh asked that his country instead be called Nan Yue. Annam, literally the “Settled South,” was a name imposed on the region during the Tang dynasty (618–907). Nan Yue, or in its Vietnamese pronunciation, Nam Viet, was the name of a much older kingdom, and means literally “Southern Yue/Viet.” The Jiaqing emperor declined the request.

He had good reason. Nan Yue was a grand name with meaningful connotations. The ancient Nan Yue kingdom had spanned the borders of present-day China and Vietnam two millennia previously, encompassing what is now Guangdong and Guangxi provinces in China, as well as the Red River Delta region of northern Vietnam. Under the leadership of King Zhao Tuo (r. 203–137 BCE), the Nan Yue kingdom formed during the fall of the Qin dynasty, in 206 BCE. Although the territory nominally accepted the suzerainty of the Han dynasty in 196 BCE, it was only with a Han military campaign in 111 BCE that it became an official administrative colony.

It is fairly clear why Zhao Tuo had chosen Nan Yue as the name of his state in 204 BCE. Nan, “South,” indicates Nan Yue’s location south of the Han empire. Yue was an ancient eastern state situated on the coast of China, near present-day Shanghai and Hangzhou. The state of Yue was conquered and destroyed by the state of Chu in 333 BCE. The scattered Yue elites fled south and exerted control over inhabitants of southern

coastal regions, through Fujian, eastern Guangdong, and quite likely as far south as Vietnam. Northerners called these groups Bai Yue, “the Hundred Yue.” The term name Yue came to be applied by northerners to inhabitants of a large swathe of territory, comprising mainly present-day Guangdong, Guangxi, and northern Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> Zhao Tuo’s choice of Nan Yue gave a sense of the location and demographic identity of his state.

In 1802, Nguyen Phuc Anh’s reasons for selecting the name Nan Yue were threatening to the Jiaqing emperor of the Qing. According to the Nguyen annals, “the Qing emperor at first thought that ‘Nan Yue’ was similar to Guangdong and Guangxi provinces [*dongxi Yue*] and would not allow it.”<sup>2</sup> The Jiaqing emperor’s words are recorded in the Qing annals:

These two characters they wish to be bestowed, “Nan Yue,” absolutely will not do. The name “Nan Yue” is extremely broad. Examining prior histories shows that it includes the area that is now Guangdong and Guangxi. Nguyen Phuc Anh is a little Yi [foreigner] from a marginal area. Even if he possesses all of Annan, the country is still nothing more than the ancient territory of Jiaozhi [northern Vietnam]. How can he suddenly start calling it “Nan Yue”? How do we know that he does not want to build himself up to the outer Yi, and has for that reason requested to change the name of the country?<sup>3</sup>

By requesting the name Nan Yue, the Nguyen dynasty thus appeared to be equating itself with a powerful historic dynasty that resisted northern rule, *and* appeared to be asserting territorial claim over the Qing dynasty’s southernmost provinces, Guangdong and Guangxi. Nguyen Phuc Anh was not only overstepping his position. By altering his country’s relationship with the “outer Yi” – neighboring states and native chieftaincies (*tusi*) authorized to control marginal localities – he was potentially threatening the stability of the Sino-Viet borderlands.

The Jiaqing emperor must have thought the request for a change of name presumptuous and outlandish. He was familiar with “Jiaozhi” and “Annan,” small states that historically occupied the Red River Delta, and thought those names more appropriate for the new state despite its larger size. Moreover, the Jiaqing emperor went on to express his fear that the name change was a way to test the water. If the Qing government was too

<sup>1</sup> See Erica Brindley, “Representations and Uses of Yue Identity along the Southern Frontier of the Han, ~200–11 BCE,” *Early China*, Vol. 33–34 (2010–2011): 5–7; Erica Brindley, “Barbarians or Not? Ethnicity and Changing Conceptions of the Ancient Yue (Viet) Peoples (~400–50 BC),” *Asia Major*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2003): 10–15; Keith W. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Wen-Tang Shiu and Chi-Yi Hsieh, eds., *Dai Nan Shilu Qing-Yue Guanxi* (Taipei: Zhongyanyuan Dongnanya quyu yanjiu jihua, 2000), 37. Hereafter cited as DNTL.

<sup>3</sup> *Qing Shilu Yuenan Miandian Taiguo Laowo Shiliao* (Kunming: Yunnan Renmin Chubanshe, 1986), 282. Hereafter cited as QSL. This and all subsequent translations are mine, unless noted otherwise.

compliant and granted the name, there was no telling what Nguyen Phuc Anh would do next. When the alarmed emperor denied the request, he ordered Qing officials stationed at the Sino-Viet border to tighten security.<sup>4</sup>

Nguyen Phuc Anh did not back down. He insisted on using the name Nan Yue and, according to Nguyen annals, “sent three additional letters explaining and saying if [the Qing] does not allow it we would not accept investiture.”<sup>5</sup> That is to say, unless the Qing government recognized their use of “Nan Yue,” the Nguyen dynasty would cut off formal diplomatic ties with them. A subsequent Nguyen communication with the Qing court “detailed the circumstances of the founding of the country from beginning to end,”<sup>6</sup> explaining that the Nguyen state was larger than any previous Vietnamese state, stretching from its traditional border with China far into the south to incorporate the Mekong River Delta, formerly territory of the Champa kingdom. According to Nguyen Phuc Anh, this new state needed a name to reflect its enlarged circumstances while affirming its connection to the past. Simply using antiquated names such as Annan or Jiaozhi, names that moreover had been imposed by northern states, would not do.

In the words of the Qing annals, the Jiaqing emperor was impressed by the earnestness, sincerity, and deference of the subsequent Vietnamese requests. Perhaps he was worn down by their persistence. He remained unwilling to accede to the name Nan Yue, but realized he had to find some compromise. His solution was to rearrange the order of the words, to Yue Nan (VN: Viet Nam), or as we know it in English transliteration, Vietnam. As he explained, “We have taken the character ‘Yue/Viet’ and moved it to the front to show that it retains its historic territory. We put the character ‘Nan/Nam’ at the end, to express its newly bestowed status as a tributary state. It shows that the country is south of the Hundred Yue and of what used to be called Nan Yue. It will not cause confusion.”<sup>7</sup>

Nguyen Phuc Anh accepted this compromise. The Vietnamese annals accentuate the positive connotations of the name:

The Qing emperor feared losing our friendship, and then thought Viet Nam should be the name of our country . . . The Qing emperor decided to move the character “Viet” to the front, to show that our country extended the old territory and extended the glory of the past. He placed the character “Nam” at the end to show that our country extends southward and has a new mandate. The name is proper and great and its meaning auspicious. It is different from Liangyue [Guangdong and Guangxi].<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> QSL, 282. <sup>5</sup> DN TL, 37. <sup>6</sup> QSL, 283. <sup>7</sup> QSL, 283.

<sup>8</sup> DN TL, 37–38. A shorter account is recorded in Bửu-Câm, ed., *Bang Giao Khâm-Dịnh Đại-Nam Hội-Điện Sử-Lệ* (Saigon: Phủ Quốc-Vũ-Khanh Đặc Trách Văn-Hóa), 14–17.

In fact, the Qing continued to refer to the Nguyen state as Annam, and Gia Long's son and successor, the Minh Mang emperor, changed the name of the country to Dai Nam Quoc ("Great Southern Country") in 1839.<sup>9</sup> "Viet Nam," the result of a vexed exchange between the Nguyen and Qing monarchs, would come to stick only in the twentieth century,<sup>10</sup> giving its name to the current Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. When we speak of "Vietnam" or "Vietnamese" history, we are using the artful rearrangement first suggested by the Jiaqing emperor.

In his influential book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson cites the twentieth-century Vietnamese embrace of a name "scornfully invented by a nineteenth century Manchu dynast," the Jiaqing emperor, as a prime example of both the selective forgetfulness and imaginative power of nationalism.<sup>11</sup> He has a point. Anderson's work shows that the Vietnamese people, like those of other nations, construct their national past through their writings and commemorations. They forget and remember, fashion and reframe. But Anderson still fits the story into a nationalist box, presuming Vietnamese powerlessness in the face of aggressive northern intervention. Anderson's brief account likewise selectively forgets several important aspects of the story, aspects that highlight the threat Dai Viet (tenth- to nineteenth-century Vietnam) posed to the "Chinese world order."<sup>12</sup> "Vietnam" was not merely a hated name thrust upon an unwilling Vietnamese population by a contemptuous northern dynast. It was a compromise that resulted from bilateral negotiations. It replaced Annam, a name imposed by the Tang empire on the newly reconquered "settled south." It was a positive term whose two components, "Viet" and "Nam," had long been used as autonyms within the southern country and had accrued deep local significance.

In fact, Nguyen Phuc Anh imagined his community and invented tradition in a way that transgressed borders and challenged the Chinese world order.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Barton Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Nguyễn and Ch'ing Civil Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 121.

<sup>10</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), 144. Indeed, Patricia Pelley argues that the term took on its present inclusive meaning only in 1979, when Vietnam's fifty-four ethnic minority groups were inventoried by the state. Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, 144. His understanding of the issue is based on a short passage in Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, 120–121. See also Liam Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars* (Honolulu, HI: Hawai'i University Press, 2005), 114–115.

<sup>12</sup> The phrase is drawn from John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

<sup>13</sup> For invented traditions, see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

He did so by claiming a rebellious “Chinese” state, Nan Yue, as his state’s antecedent. Nguyen Phuc Anh and the Jiaqing emperor were engaged in a struggle about how to remember and understand the past and its connections to the present. The struggle was not a Qing victory, as Anderson intimates, but a draw.

This closer look at the adoption of the name “Vietnam” reveals two recurring themes in the history of Sino-Viet relations. Although the story of the adoption of the name is from the nineteenth century, these themes apply to the subject of this book, China’s relations with Dai Viet from the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries, during the Yuan (1272–1368) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties. The first and most obvious theme is the close relations between the two countries and their concomitant need to cooperate. The Gia Long emperor did not unilaterally declare the name of his state; he negotiated it with the Qing government. The Jiaqing emperor did not unilaterally refuse; he worked to find a compromise that would satisfy the Nguyen dynasty and preserve the relationship of the two states. The name, like many other outcomes in the history of Sino-Viet relations, was the result of negotiation and compromise.

Second, the two countries had conflicting understandings of history and of the transmission of culture. This led to contrasting assumptions about ownership of the past, and thus to differences in self-representation. Chinese cultural and political influence on Dai Viet is well known. The tensions and anxieties engendered within *China* by Dai Viet’s claims to this influence, what I call classical culture, have not yet been sufficiently recognized by scholars. Premodern Vietnamese students, like their Chinese counterparts, were initiated into the world of classical culture through education. Classical culture was based on the canon of texts in literary Sinitic (“classical Chinese”), including works of philosophy and history, that informed education throughout East Asia. This canon includes but is not limited to the Four Books and Five Classics selected by Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and subsequently made the basis of the civil service examinations in both countries. These texts are commonly subsumed in English under the label “Chinese classics,” a phrase that misleadingly suggests that their importance is contained within the borders of the Chinese state or limited to people of Chinese descent. This was not the case.

In addition to a shared heritage of classical culture, the governments of Dai Viet and late imperial China shared a language of diplomacy. Communicating in literary Sinitic, both sides readily adopted hierarchical language: Dai Viet was a “tributary state” of China, and offered “tribute” on a triennial basis. But this commensurability masks a fundamental difference in worldview. For Chinese subjects, China was the Central

Country (*Zhongguo*) and Dai Viet a land of Yi people located beyond the pale of civilization. In stark contrast, for Vietnamese subjects, Dai Viet was the Southern Country (*Nanguo/Nam Quoc*), forming a binary with the Northern Country (China).

Vietnamese elites engaged in a southern kind of self-representation,<sup>14</sup> positing themselves and their country as inheritors and preservers of the classical culture that they shared with what they called the Northern Country, while still rooted in their southern land. While seeming to confirm the centrality of China by sharing classical “Chinese” culture, Vietnamese governments and elites were actually decentering the Chinese world by positing a cultural hub beyond the borders of the Chinese state. In turn, Chinese observers were made profoundly uncomfortable by the intimation of a center of classical culture outside of the Central Country. During the Ming dynasty, as we shall see, it was a threat to the Ming’s very ideological coherence.

Nguyen Phuc Anh’s use of the name Nan Yue is a case in point for disagreement over ownership of the past. By calling his state Nan Yue, Nguyen Phuc Anh placed Vietnamese history on the same ancient territorial foundation as northern states such as the Qing. He claimed for Dai Viet the affiliation with a historical dynasty, Nan Yue; China viewed Nan Yue both as a rogue state occupying Chinese lands and as a historically Chinese state.

Scholars have long recognized the North’s cultural and institutional influence on Vietnam.<sup>15</sup> Few, if any, have examined the way China understood its influence. As the story of the adoption of the name Viet Nam shows, the appeals by Vietnamese to a shared past and use of imperial rhetoric – obvious instances of Chinese influence on its southern neighbor – alarmed and threatened Chinese governments. The classical culture that Vietnamese elites claimed as part of their history and culture, Chinese elites saw as their exclusive possession. In the episode of the Jiaqing emperor’s rejection of the name Nan Yue, the Qing state actively prevented Dai Viet from drawing on a shared past. The Jiaqing emperor made a point to exclude Nguyen Phuc Anh from the world of classical

<sup>14</sup> This is not dissimilar from what Stephen Greenblatt argues in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning, from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, reprinted 2005). Greenblatt observes that “in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process”: 2. Although his argument concerns individuals, the idea of self-fashioning can be applied as well to state making in Dai Viet in the same period, as Vietnamese elites deployed the language and symbols of classical culture to embody “a cultural system of meanings”: 3.

<sup>15</sup> For an excellent recent study, specifically on the topic of Vietnamese envoy poetry, see Liam Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars*.

culture as “a little Yi from a marginal area.” For Jiaqing, Vietnam’s history developed on a track distinct from that of northern states. This divergence in Vietnamese and Chinese understanding of the world order has long been present in Sino-Viet relations, but was rarely brought as explicitly to the fore as in the dispute over the name Nan Yue.

In addition to these two themes, this book will develop a third theme, one that is not well represented in the story of the 1802 naming dispute. Historical research on Sino-Viet relations often focuses on Chinese aggression and Vietnamese resistance. Less well understood are the internal debates and divisions underlying decisions about foreign relations in both countries.<sup>16</sup> In the case of the adoption of the name Vietnam, debate is elided by the official histories, in which both emperors appear as autocrats acting with little input from their officials. This was most likely not the case. As we shall see, in China during the Ming, heated debate preceded every decision regarding Dai Viet, and often slowed the wheels of government to a near standstill. Officialdom was divided over whether to treat Dai Viet as a lost colony in need of support or as a barbarian kingdom of little concern to the Ming state. Within Dai Viet, regionalism and civil war split the country for the better part of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sparking crises of loyalty for the civil and military leaders forced to choose sides.

This book is arranged in seven chronological chapters, stretching over three centuries from the late thirteenth through the late sixteenth centuries. Each chapter takes up the three themes elaborated above: negotiation and cooperation; differing underlying assumptions about shared culture; and internal debates and division. Rather than give a narrative overview of Sino-Viet history in this period, I have used the lives, letters, and poetry of individual scholars, officials, and emperors to guide us through particular moments when the cultural, historical, and political borders of the two countries were negotiated. These writers were themselves border-crossers, whether literally or figuratively, as in the case of emperors who, from within the palace, turned their attention to distant

<sup>16</sup> There are exceptions. Keith W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore’s recent research has transformed our understanding of Vietnamese history by drawing out regional conflict and “surface orientations.” Cheng Wing-sheung’s overview of Ming relations with Vietnam recognizes the role of debate within the Ming. See especially Keith Taylor, “Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Binary Histories of Nation and Region,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Nov. 1998): 949–978; Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); John K. Whitmore, “The Fate of the Ngô: Montane/Littoral Division in 15th to 16th Century Dai Viet,” *Asia Major*, Vol. 27, Part 2 (Nov. 2014); Cheng Wing-sheung, *Zhengzhan yu qishou: Ming dai Zhong-Yue Guanxi Yanjiu* (Tainan: Guoli Chenggong Daxue Chubanzu, 1998).

matters. All were caught up in the conflicts that periodically erupted between and within the two states. In their surviving writings, poetry emerges as an essential tool of self-representation.

Chapter 1, “A Brief History of Annan,” provides an overview of the long history of Sino-Viet relations before the Ming. It does so by adopting the perspective of an exiled Vietnamese scholar, Le Tac (c. 1260s–c. 1340s). Le Tac, an official of Dai Viet’s Tran dynasty, faced a crisis of loyalty during the turmoil of the Mongol invasion of Dai Viet in 1285, and ultimately surrendered to the Mongol Yuan dynasty. As a subject of the northern state, he wrote one of the earliest histories of Dai Viet, presenting it as an integral and historical part of the northern empire. He affirmed again and again Dai Viet’s connections to the classical past, fitting it neatly into an existing historical hierarchy that privileged only Chinese states. In this way, he imagined a place for Dai Viet that is difficult to reconcile with modern national histories and has therefore largely been ignored. By using his book, and in particular his narrative historical poem, as an entry point into the history of Sino-Viet relations, we can see more clearly the blurred and overlapping political and cultural boundaries of China and Vietnam in the premodern period.

The second chapter, “A Record of the Dreams of an Old Southerner,” tells the story of another prominent Vietnamese exile, Ho Nguyen Trung, a prince of the short-lived Ho dynasty of Vietnam who had a long career as an official of the Ming dynasty. Ho Nguyen Trung’s life was profoundly affected by the contradictory policy toward Dai Viet of the first and third Ming emperors. One made interference in Vietnamese affairs illegal, whereas the other deposed the Ho dynasty and occupied Dai Viet for twenty years. These contradictory precedents formed the basis of later debates over the direction of Ming policy toward Dai Viet, providing justification for both intervention and renunciation. Like Le Tac, Ho Nguyen Trung wrote Dai Viet into the northern canon, using poetry and the tales of virtuous elites to appeal to Chinese conventions.

The subject of Chapter 3, “The Northern Emperor and the Southern Emperor,” is the Ming emperor Zhu Houcong’s troubling encounter with his southern counterpart, Mac Dang Dung. Mac established his own dynasty in 1527, but civil war with his Le dynasty opponents stretched on for decades. This Vietnamese conflict caused a crisis in the Ming court, as Ming officials debated whether or not to intervene. As the Ming court learned more about the Mac dynasty, it grew increasingly anxious over Mac Dang Dung’s use of imperial rhetoric. The two countries’ shared political cosmology paradoxically complicated diplomacy, challenging the Ming’s monopoly on symbols of power. Zhu Houcong was alarmed by Mac’s appropriation of classical tools of political

legitimation, such as its claim to the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*). Ming officials responded by drawing a clear cultural and political boundary between Ming China and its former colony.

Lin Xiyuan (c. 1480–1550), a Ming official stationed in the Sino-Viet borderlands, guides us through Chapter 4, “An Official at Odds with the State.” Lin was perhaps the most ardent proponent of war, which he saw as an opportunity to annex Vietnamese territory. Lin drew upon the local history of his district as well as the history of China’s past empires to argue that Dai Viet was an intrinsic part of the Chinese empire. Lin’s story shows that Ming control of the southern borderlands was nominal at best, even as great nostalgia for Chinese control of the Red River Delta persisted into the late Ming. Although Lin’s activities brought him demotion and disgrace, he was successful in brokering an annexation of Dai Viet territory for the Ming state.

Chapter 5, “The Fearsome Panther,” tells the story of the surrender of the Mac Dang Dung to representatives of the Ming from a variety of perspectives. Although this event has long been understood as a humiliating defeat, it differs little from other ceremonies that marked the renewal of diplomatic relations between Chinese and Vietnamese states. By privileging the perspective of a relatively minor participant, the Ming official Jiang Yigui who, in contrast to Lin Xiyuan, worked hard to avert war, we see instead a relatively friendly meeting of Mac Dang Dung and Ming officials. By comparing Mac sources and Vietnamese and Chinese officials’ histories, private writings, and visual sources, we can see how each side made use of the event to increase their own political capital.

Chapter 6, “Ruler and Minister,” recounts the regional conflict that raged in Dai Viet throughout the second half of the sixteenth century. The southern Le regime fought the Dong Kinh- (present-day Hanoi) based Mac for dominance over all of Dai Viet. The Trinh lords, who would dominate northern Vietnamese politics until the late eighteenth century, emerged from these conflicts under the leadership of Trinh Kiem (1503–1570) and his son Trinh Tung (1550–1623). Although these decades of war devastated the countryside and claimed tens of thousands of lives, they have received relatively little scholarly attention. Vietnamese ministers were faced with a crisis of loyalty as they sought to navigate the political upheavals of the times. Ultimately, the Mac were expelled from Dong Kinh by the resurgent Le dynasty in 1592 and forced to flee to the northern border. The events of these decades are essential for understanding the fate of the Mac and the future course of Sino-Viet relations.

Chapter 7, “The Sparrow and the Bamboo,” picks up the story in 1597, when the newly established Le dynasty sent the envoy Phung Khac Khoan to Beijing to restore diplomatic relations. As in the later case of

Nguyen Phuc Anh, the Le dynasty desired Ming recognition and approval at the foundation of their state. Phung Khac Khoan's poetry and his friendship with a Korean envoy show southern self-representation at work, as Phung Khac Khoan fought to achieve recognition for his state as an heir to classical culture and peer of Korea. A later Vietnamese account of his embassy refashioned his story to demonstrate Vietnamese cultural superiority over China. Through the evolution of Phung Khac Khoan's story, we can see the emergence of a more assertive national identity in Dai Viet.

My goal is not to write Vietnamese history using Chinese sources, or Chinese history from a Vietnamese perspective. Rather, I have tried to write a Sino-Vietnamese history – one that takes up the sources, perspectives, and concerns of scholars and officials of both countries simultaneously. My goal has been to break out of the confines of the nationalist meta-narratives of history that have traditionally limited historical research on these two countries. During the three centuries covered in this study, as Nguyen Phuc Anh's explanatory letters to the Qing court already indicated, Dai Viet was transformed by violent conflict and expansion. From the time of Le Tac to the time of Phung Khac Khoan, Dai Viet asserted regional control and affirmed its independence, even as its government structure came increasingly to resemble that of northern states. At the same time, Chinese states came to abandon the fantasy of recolonizing northern Vietnam and reclaiming the southern border of the expansive Tang empire. In the process, Chinese scholars chose to ignore the similarities between Dai Viet and their country and coined or revived tropes describing the country and its people as barbaric and fundamentally different.

The profusion of names for Vietnam, ancient and modern, causes difficulty for the historian. Vietnamese and Chinese records use different terms to refer to themselves and each other, reflecting disputes over history and culture. I have mainly attempted to transliterate the terms various authors used.

The country name "Vietnam," as we have seen, is relatively recent and not an appropriate term for the Southern Country before 1803. I have chosen to use the most common term of the several used to refer to Vietnam by Vietnamese authors between the tenth and nineteenth centuries: Dai Viet (Great Yue/Viet). When writing about Chinese-authored texts, I have followed their use of the name "Annan." Just as Annan was an unpopular term in Vietnam, Chinese writers would have hesitated to use the preface "Great" to describe a country other than China. I use "Vietnam" to refer to the modern country, the ancient Red River plain and its environs, and the historiographical construct. To reflect the

perspective of Vietnamese sources, I refer to the ruler of Dai Viet as emperor, even though Chinese sources would call him king.

Likewise, “China” means different things in different periods, but is sometimes the best solution to a problem of translating stated and unstated terms while retaining clarity. When authors use the term “Zhongguo,” I translate it literally as Central Country. Where possible, I simply use the relevant Chinese and Vietnamese dynastic names.

For consistency, I refer to present-day Hanoi throughout as Dong Kinh, even though it was at times referred to as Dong Do or Thang Long.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, I use Beijing to designate the Chinese capital, though Vietnamese sources refer to that city by the older name Yanjing. Similarly, I use a single name for Vietnamese rulers, though they were often designated by different first names in Chinese records. Complete accuracy would introduce an unmanageable number of names, so at times I sacrifice it for consistency and clarity.

<sup>17</sup> I use Dong Kinh because it is the term used most frequently in my sources. Dong Kinh (東京), literally “eastern capital,” was later adopted by the French too for northern Vietnam, transliterated as “Tonkin.”



## Part I

### Southern scholars in the North

Extricating early Vietnamese history from Chinese history is an impossible task. The involvement of Chinese states in the Red River Delta region began as far back as 111 BCE, when a Han dynasty army conquered the southern kingdom of Nan Yue. For a millennium, Chinese states claimed parts of what is now northern Vietnam as their sovereign territory, creating enduring cultural links in the process. Even after Vietnam achieved independence in the tenth century, taking up the name Dai Co Viet (later shortened to Dai Viet), the two countries maintained close political and cultural relations.<sup>1</sup> Vietnamese scholars drew from the same wellspring of classical culture as their northern counterparts, and like them saw their state as an heir of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE).

Even as Vietnamese governments and people assimilated classical cultural influence, they actively resisted the political control of northern states. Vietnamese troops repelled northern armies of invasion and castigation time and again, most famously defeating Song troops in 981 and again in 1075, forcing back three Yuan campaigns in the thirteenth century, ending a twenty-year Ming occupation in 1427, and besting a Qing campaign of restoration in 1788. It is not surprising that studies of Sino-Viet relations, or of Vietnamese history in general, have tended to emphasize Vietnamese resistance to northern aggression.<sup>2</sup>

Just as we cannot understand Vietnamese history without understanding the impact of China, we can learn something crucial about China by studying its experience with its southern neighbor. Vietnam's millennium-long history of northern domination inspired fantasies of reconquest in some

<sup>1</sup> Dai Viet is a Han-Viet term meaning “Great Viet.” Co means “great” in vernacular Vietnamese. The name draws from both vernacular and literary registers and is thus redundant, hence the loss of the second syllable over time.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 8, 10–13; Haydon Cherry, “Digging Up the Past: Prehistory and the Weight of the Present in Vietnam,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter 2009): 108; Pham Quynh Phuong, *Hero and Deity: Tran Hung Dao and the Resurgence of Popular Religion in Vietnam* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Mekong Press, 2009), 20–21.

Chinese observers. Others found that, despite Dai Viet's small size relative to China, its continued use of classical rhetoric threatened China's monopoly on symbols of power. Northern governments found Dai Viet's self-representation to be problematic and troubling. During the nearly three centuries of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in particular, Dai Viet policy was the subject of furious debate within China. It swung between the two poles of intervention and renunciation. Both approaches were deeply rooted in historical precedent.

At the same time, deep divisions within Vietnamese society complicated relations with the North. Many histories of Vietnam posit a unitary Vietnamese historical narrative that inspires uncomplicated patriotism. These histories tend to promote teleological narratives of national identity, ones that account for Vietnam's constant and successful responses to foreign aggression. But this brand of history obscures the fact that, within Dai Viet, changing political tides often pitted region against region and family against family, each with their own perspectives on the best way to manage relations with China. Vietnamese historical actors had a complex range of overlapping loyalties: to region, to ruler, and to the classical culture they shared with their northern neighbors. We can understand Vietnam's history only through this plural, entangled, and outward-looking past.

Rather than privilege the perspective of one national meta-narrative of history, this study of Sino-Viet relations aims to study the two countries in tandem, paying attention to their internal tensions and external connections. The next three chapters examine the long and vexed history of Sino-Viet relations by following four figures who navigated these troubled waters: two southern scholars exiled to the North, and a northern emperor and his southern counterpart who uneasily observed one another from a distance. The first chapter tells the story of Le Tac, a Vietnamese scholar displaced by the rise of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) in China. It uses his *A Brief History of Annan* to situate and explain the early history of – and plethora of names for – what is now northern Vietnam. The second chapter follows the royal prince of the short-lived Ho dynasty (1400–1407), Ho Nguyen Trung, on whose life we can see the reflection of the early Ming dynasty's fluctuating Dai Viet policy. The third chapter tells the story of the Ming emperor Zhu Houcong's (1507–1567) discovery of, fury at, and eventual conditional acceptance of the southern emperor Mac Dang Dung and his newly established Mac dynasty (1527–1592). The lives of these men illustrate the external links between China and Dai Viet, internal divisions within the two countries, and the violence and dislocation that accompanied dynastic transitions.

# 1 A brief history of Annan

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Sometime in the 1330s, Le Tac (c. 1260s–c. 1340s), an elderly scholar living in exile in Hanyang, Hubei, in the Mongol-ruled Yuan empire, wrote a book about his native land, *Annan zhilue/An Nam chi luoc* (“A Brief History of Annan”). Le Tac had had an extraordinary political career: he served both the Tran dynasty of Dai Viet and, later, the Yuan dynasty of China. A career spent serving two dynasties often at war with one another was not without drama. As we shall see below, Le Tac, like others living through the turbulent late thirteenth century, faced a crisis of loyalty. We cannot be sure how he understood, or tried to resolve, the tension between opposed loyalties; Le Tac self-identifies as both a former subject of the Tran and a current subject of the Yuan, but does not comment on this dual identity. He treats as significant only a third self-identification: that of a participant in the larger world of classical culture. The preface to his book makes this clear:

This humble servant was born and grew up in Nan Yue. As undeserving as I am, I served the government [of the Tran dynasty]. In a period of ten years I travelled through most of the country, so I know a bit about its mountains and rivers. For more than fifty years I have been attached to the royal court [of the Yuan dynasty]. I am ashamed of my foolishness; all that I once studied is muddled and confused. In my twilight years I have delighted in books, regretting that it is too late: I will never be able to read all that I want from the past and present. I have collected histories of successive dynasties, atlases of Jiaozhi, and scattered classical allusions, and taking advantage of my leisure I have patched together *A Brief History of Annan* in twenty chapters, including a narrative of my personal experiences that I have appended at the end.<sup>1</sup>

Le Tac is ashamed neither of his work with the Tran, nor of his even longer service to the Yuan. Indeed, he is proud of both. He is ashamed only at his inability to recall all that he learned in his youth, in his classical education, and in his service to two regimes. For all his humble protestations, Le Tac’s book achieved his goal of organizing and transmitting

<sup>1</sup> Li Ze (Lê Tắc), *Annan Zhilue* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2000), 11. Hereafter cited as AZ.

most available information on Vietnam from the earliest times to his own lifetime, and thereby submitting his bid for Annan's inclusion in the northern canon. The great strength of *A Brief History* is that it drew on Le Tac's personal experience while synthesizing the most important Chinese materials. His book remained an influential source on Annan within China for centuries. It is therefore an ideal starting point for contextualizing the history of Sino-Viet relations, since it set the baseline of knowledge about Vietnam for future generations of readers in China.

Piecing together the history of his country was no easy task. One reason was the challenge simply in establishing *whose* history he meant to write. Within the single paragraph of the preface quoted above, Le Tac refers to his homeland by the name of a second-century-BCE kingdom (Nan Yue), a Han-era province (Jiaozhi), and a Tang-era protectorate (Annan). This multiplicity of names for early Vietnam reflects the region's shifting fortunes and borders, as the political control of northern states over the Red River Delta and its environs waxed and waned and weathered local resistance.<sup>2</sup> Each turn in fortune gave rise to a new name.

This chapter takes *A Brief History of Annan* as our guidebook and Le Tac as our guide to the entangled history of Sino-Viet relations up through the fourteenth century. I begin with Le Tac's personal experience of the Mongol invasions to explain how multiple demands on his loyalty led him to work for the Yuan government. Even though it is the best contemporary account of the Mongol wars in Dai Viet, *A Brief History of Annan's* liminal status as belonging fully neither to China nor to Vietnam has caused it to be overlooked as a source on the Mongol wars and their role in Sino-Viet relations. Indeed, despite the devastation caused by the Mongol invasions, and Dai Viet's remarkable success in maintaining its northern border against Mongol incursions, the Mongol campaigns in Vietnam have received little attention from historians of the Mongols.<sup>3</sup> The chapter's next section summarizes Le Tac's own account of the history of Sino-Viet relations. Unlike many modern historians, he did not attempt to extricate "Vietnamese" history from "Chinese" history. I use his historical poem to contextualize and explain the many names used in China for Vietnam, each differing in their descriptive and critical overtones, and all of which will recur in later chapters. The subsequent section turns to Le Tac's discussion of Vietnamese customs and their similarities to northern customs. This section of *A Brief History of Annan* had a riotous afterlife in quotations and misquotations by later Chinese

<sup>2</sup> For the classic study of this time period, see Keith W. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> A notable exception is Yamamoto Tatsuro, *Anmanshi kenkyu* (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1950).

and Korean literati, as we will also see in later chapters. I conclude the chapter by arguing that Le Tac's writing was in part motivated by a desire to prove that southern history was worthy of inclusion in the historical record and that southern scholars were the equals of their northern counterparts. Le Tac's life and life's work illustrate the intertwined nature of Vietnamese and Chinese elite culture and the crisis of loyalty faced by those caught between political forces as northern control of Dai Viet ebbed and flowed.

### Displaced by the Mongol wars

The armies of the Mongol empire attacked Dai Viet three times, in 1257, 1284, and 1287. These attacks, along with the Yuan conquest of what became Yunnan province, and Mongol-led campaigns against Burma and Champa, caused massive disruption throughout Southeast Asia. Relatively little attention has been paid to the Vietnam campaigns despite an abundance of written sources, primary among them Le Tac's *A Brief History of Annam*. In studies of China or of the Mongols, it is recognized that fighting in Vietnam did not go well for the Mongols. Nevertheless, the campaigns are often treated as a success because tributary relations with Dai Viet were eventually resumed.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Vietnamese historiography makes much of Dai Viet's military victories over the Mongols, which support the idea of a Vietnamese people united in their struggle against foreign aggression. *A Brief History of Annam* brings to the fore three noteworthy aspects of the Mongol wars. First, the Mongols were not merely seeking tributary relations with Dai Viet along the lines of the Song dynasty. Their demands on the Tran government were unprecedented and far more onerous than typical demands or tributary missions and gifts by northern states. Second, the Vietnamese people were bitterly divided over how best to confront the Mongols. Third, Song refugees fled into Dai Viet in great numbers and played an important role in the resistance.

Le Tac's tumultuous life illustrates all of these points. His story is buried in the back of *A Brief History of Annam*. Le Tac traces his ancestry to a northerner sent to the Red River Delta in the service of a Chinese dynasty: "I, Tac, am from Annam, a descendent of Nguyen Phu, the

<sup>4</sup> For example, Jack Weatherford writes, "Despite the extreme difficulty of the tropical heat and the unfamiliar landscape, the Mongol army had success in Burma, Annam in northern Vietnam, and Laos." Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: The Rivers Press, 2004), 212. A similar take on the campaigns is recorded in the sixteenth-century Chinese text by Luo Yuejiong, *Xian bin lu* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1983), 126.

Prefect of Jiaozhou for the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420 CE).<sup>5</sup> Le Tac's family lived in Ai Chau (in present-day Thanh Hoa province along the North Central Coast of Vietnam) for generations, producing a series of court officials. His father passed examinations and became the Director of the Library during the Tran dynasty (1225–1400). Le Tac studied the classics from an early age and took the children's examination before he was nine years old. He grew up, married a woman née Truong, and had every expectation of a life of scholarship and government service just like the long line of ancestors preceding him. This was not to be. Le Tac and his contemporaries were caught up in Dai Viet's decades-long struggle against the Mongols, whose armies invaded Dai Viet three times in his lifetime.

The purpose of the Mongols' first foray into Dai Viet, in 1257, was to open a southern front against the Southern Song dynasty of China. By this time, the Mongols had been fighting the Southern Song for more than two decades, and had already conquered parts of Sichuan and the kingdom of Dali in Yunnan in order to besiege the Southern Song from the west. A southern front, accessed through Dai Viet, would allow them to exert even more pressure on the Southern Song.<sup>6</sup> The Tran ruler Tran Du Tong opposed a foreign army crossing his territory, particularly to launch a military campaign against a Tran ally, the Southern Song. According to Le Tac, Tran Du Tong dispatched soldiers on elephants to chase the Mongol-led troops off. An eighteen-year-old Mongol general "directed sharpshooters to target the elephants. The terrified elephants turned and trampled them [the Tran army] and they were routed."<sup>7</sup> After a Tran prince and countless others were killed, and the capital Dong Kinh (present-day Hanoi) destroyed, Tran Du Tong submitted. The following year, the Tran commenced regular diplomatic relations with the Mongol court, sending an embassy with tributary gifts of local goods.<sup>8</sup> By opening

<sup>5</sup> AZ, 435.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen G. Haw, "The Deaths of Two Khaghans: A Comparison of Events in 1242 and 1260," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (Oct 2013): 364–365; James Anderson, "Man and Mongols: The Dali and Dai Viet Kingdoms in the Face of Northern Invasions," in Anderson and Whitmore, eds., *China's Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier over Two Millennia* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2015), 106–134.

<sup>7</sup> AZ, 85. Morris Rossabi describes a similar Mongol attack on elephant-mounted soldiers in the Pagan kingdom in Burma. Perhaps Mongol generals had learned this trick from their prior experience in Dai Viet. Morris Rossabi, "The Reign of Khubilai Khan," in Denis Twitchett and Herbert Franke, eds., *The Cambridge History of China, Alien Regimes and Border States, 710–1368*, Volume 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 485.

<sup>8</sup> Song Lian et al. (eds), *Yuan Shi, liezhuan* 96, *Scripta Sinica* database 新漢籍全文 (hereafter YS); AZ, 85. The account in the *Dai Viet su ky toan thu* characterizes the Tran as successful in resisting the Yuan. It also notes that a Tran general was dispatched as an

regular tributary relations with the Mongol court, the Tran treated the Mongols as equals to the embattled Southern Song dynasty without renouncing their ties to the Song.

This did not satisfy the Mongol ruler, Khubilai Khan. He did not wish to simply emulate the tributary relations between Dai Viet and the Song, which entailed receiving a tributary mission and gifts of local products from Dai Viet once every three years. He wanted instead a peaceful annexation of Dai Viet. This can be seen from the list of six demands he sent to the Tran in 1267. He demanded that the new Tran ruler, Tran Hoang, personally come to the Mongol court; that a son and younger brother or members of the younger generation of the royal family be sent as hostages; census records of Dai Viet's population; Vietnamese soldiers to join the Mongol military; taxes; and Tran acceptance of a *darughachi* (a local commissioner or governor) to be stationed in the capital Dong Kinh to oversee the government. According to Khubilai, only this would "demonstrate the sincerity of your adherence."<sup>9</sup> These demands outlined a relationship markedly different than that of Dai Viet and the Song dynasty or the later Ming dynasty.<sup>10</sup> Not only would Dai Viet be expected to pay taxes to the Mongols in both money and labor, to be checked against the census rolls, but they would have to accept direct oversight from a Mongol-appointed *darughachi*. Although Dai Viet was accustomed to sending tribute to the Song every three years, they received valuable gifts in return and the tribute missions were a lucrative trading opportunity. Khubilai Khan had a different vision, one more in line with Mongol customs than with Chinese tradition. He even submitted specific requests for the content of the tribute. He asked for "incense, gold, silver, cinnabar, agarwood, sandalwood, ivory, tortoiseshell, pearls, rhinoceros horn, silk floss, and porcelain cups." In addition, he wanted the Tran government to send its two most virtuous scholars, talented doctors, beautiful women, and skilled artisans every three years.<sup>11</sup> The Tran

ambassador to the Yuan in 1258. Chingho A. Chen, ed., *Daietsu Shiki Zensho/Dai Viet sù ký toàn thư* (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Toyo Bunka Kenkyujo Fuzoku Toyogaku Bunken Senta, 1984), 339–341. Hereafter cited as TT.

<sup>9</sup> AZ, 47. Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 128.

<sup>10</sup> Sun Laichen's study of this new relationship convincingly describes a Mongol court that interpreted the "ancient ideals of Chinese diplomatic protocol" much more literally and rigidly than had previous Chinese dynasties. Sun Laichen, "Imperial Ideal Compromised: Northern and Southern Courts across the New Frontier in the Early Yuan Era," in James Anderson and John Whitmore, eds. *China's Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier over Two Millennia* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2015), 193–231.

<sup>11</sup> YS, *juan* 209, *liezhuan* 96.

government demurred, and evaded outright conflict only while the Mongols were otherwise occupied fighting the Song in China.

In 1271, the Mongols established the Yuan dynasty. Within the decade, the Song dynasty fell. Thousands of Song refugees flooded into Dai Viet, some settling in Dong Kinh, others eventually swelling the ranks of the Tran armies.<sup>12</sup> It is likely that the Song refugees brought military technology with them, most notably a gunpowder “fire-lance” that shot arrows from an ironwood tube.<sup>13</sup> This weapon “was almost certainly the direct precursor of true firearms.”<sup>14</sup> Despite these ingenious weapons,<sup>15</sup> the Yuan dynasty overthrew the Southern Song dynasty in 1276, asserting Mongol control over all of China. Dai Viet now shared a border with Khubilai Khan’s Yuan dynasty.

Alarmed by the destruction of their neighbor and erstwhile ally, the Tran state warily watched the border. Khubilai Khan’s aggressive demands and the frequency of diplomatic contact was a new situation for Vietnamese rulers. Mongol penetration of the Sino-Viet borderlands brought the South into closer contact with the northern state. Even though parts of northern Vietnam had been loosely controlled by northern states in the past, the Tran state was suddenly in much more direct contact with the northern court than before.<sup>16</sup> Following their conquest of the Song, the Yuan court renewed their unprecedented demands on the Tran dynasty, and complained that Tran Hoang sent inferior tribute gifts and did not treat edicts from the Yuan with the proper decorum and respect. In turn, Tran Hoang complained that the tribute demands were burdensome and that Annan would be a laughingstock for having a *darughachi*, as if it were some kind of small border tribe rather than a state. In 1278, Tran Hoang retired and his son Tran Kham took the throne. The Mongol court demanded that Tran Kham personally visit Beijing. Moreover, they sent an edict to Tran Kham that threatened that if he did not at last obey the six demands and personally visit the Yuan court, then he had better “strengthen the city walls and put the military in order, to await the arrival of our army.” Tran Kham responded that he

<sup>12</sup> TT, 348–349; Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 129, 132; Hok-lam Chan, “Chinese Refugees in Annam and Champa at the End of the Sung Dynasty,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Sep. 1966): 1–10.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Needham, Ho Ping-yu, Lu Gwei-djen, and Wang Ling, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. 5, Part 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 312.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen G. Haw, “The Mongol Empire—The First Gunpowder Empire,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (July 2013): 442.

<sup>15</sup> The Mongols most likely also possessed these ingenious weapons. See Haw, “The Mongol Empire,” 463.

<sup>16</sup> James Anderson and John Whitmore, “Introduction,” in *China’s Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier over Two Millennia* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2015), 2.

had spent his life in the seclusion of the palace, was not used to riding a horse, and could not handle the hardships of the road. When he had still not complied two years later, the Yuan court sent him a letter that read, “If you cannot come in person, then send a gold statue to represent your person, with two pearls to represent your eyes, as well as virtuous scholars, doctors, children, artisans, two of each, to represent the local people. If not, repair your walls and moats, and await your trial and execution.”<sup>17</sup>

In 1283, Khubilai Khan sent word to Tran Kham that he intended to send Yuan armies across Tran territory in order to attack the Tran’s southern neighbor, the kingdom of Champa. Khubilai Khan was not requesting permission; he was demanding that the Tran contribute provisions and other support to the Yuan army. Tran Kham refused. Khubilai appointed his eleventh son, Toghan, to lead the offensive, granting him the title “King of the Suppressed South” (*Zhennan wang*). Toghan led troops overland while the Mongol general Sogetu led troops by sea through a southern route, from Champa. In the winter of 1284, Yuan armies crossed the border into Dai Viet and were attacked by Tran troops led by the royal prince Tran Hung Dao.<sup>18</sup> The Yuan troops overcame their resistance and progressed to Dong Kinh, occupying the abandoned palaces. According to the *History of the Yuan (Yuan shi)*, they killed many Tran subjects and captured others, including high officials of the fallen Southern Song dynasty.<sup>19</sup>

At this time, after several years of government service, a twenty-something Le Tac was assigned to assist the royal prince and military commander Tran Kien in the field. Tran Kien was a nephew of the senior emperor, Tran Hoang. Le Tac described Tran Kien as tall, studious, modest, generous, good with a bow and arrow, and interested in military books.<sup>20</sup> In 1285, Le Tac accompanied Tran Kien, along with tens of thousands of troops, to resist the Sogetu in Thanh Hoa. By this point, Tran Kham had fled, Dong Kinh had fallen, and several Tran generals had been killed by the Mongols. The fighting at Thanh Hoa did not go well for Tran Kien and his troops. Le Tac wrote that “our endurance was weakening and we were cut off from support.”<sup>21</sup> They did not know if

<sup>17</sup> AZ 134; YS, *juan* 209, *liezhuan* 96. This was the first instance of sending a golden man to indicate coming to accommodation, but it became a recurring practice. Samuel Baron, a merchant based in Dong Kinh, perhaps misunderstanding it to be a regular tribute item, wrote in 1685, “Among the [tribute] presents, they are to carry images of gold and silver, made in the posture of criminals, denoting that they are such to the *China* empire . . .” Olga Dror and K. W. Taylor, trans., *Views of Seventeenth Century Vietnam: Christoforo Borri on Cochinchina and Samuel Baron on Tonkin* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell, 2006), 239.

<sup>18</sup> TT, 357; YS, *juan* 209, *liezhuan* 96. <sup>19</sup> YS, *juan* 209, *liezhuan* 96. <sup>20</sup> AZ, 322.

<sup>21</sup> AZ, 88.

Tran Kham was alive or dead. Tran Kien assessed the situation and decided that facing danger day and night in such uncertain times would be “perverse.”<sup>22</sup> He said, “The small should not antagonize the large, the weak should not antagonize the strong. Weizi [of the Song state of the Eastern Zhou period] returned to Zhou, this was good and logical. I am the grandson of the ruler, how could I bear to see the country overturned and lose my life?” Then he surrendered to the Yuan. Le Tac and the rest of the soldiers joined him. Tran Kien was not alone in choosing to throw his lot in with the Yuan. Several other Tran princes surrendered as well, bringing their battalions with them, most notably Tran Ich Tac, the emperor’s younger brother.<sup>23</sup>

Several factors contributed to the large number of the people who capitulated to the Mongols. Since the time of Khubilai’s grandfather, Genghis Khan, the Mongol military juggernaut had reshaped the Eurasian world. Not confined to the north and northwest, the Mongols presided over unprecedented penetration into southwest China and Southeast Asia. Their recent conquest of the Southern Song would have had a profound effect on Vietnamese observers, as would have Mongol campaigns as far afield as Champa and Burma. In 1285, Mongol conquest must have looked inevitable to many, and surrender the only way to ensure survival.

It is also possible that Tran Kien and other high-ranking defectors were hoping to increase their own power, or even find a way to claim the throne of Dai Viet for themselves with Yuan support. For the historian Keith Taylor, Tran Kien’s surrender is indicative of the divisions and resentments within the Tran royal family. Tran Kien’s grandfather, though the eldest son, had been passed over in the line of kingship, removing his sons and grandsons, including Tran Kien, from direct succession. Due to a rift with Tran Kham’s son, Tran Kien had “used studying Zhuangzi and Laozi as a pretext to live in seclusion.” This was the very year he was called upon to fight the Yuan troops.<sup>24</sup> In Taylor’s view, a “disgruntled” Tran Kien, “unable to overcome the store of resentment he had been nursing for years,” opted to join the Mongols and even to serve them as a guide.<sup>25</sup> Le Tac gives indirect evidence for this tension within the royal family in his book, mentioning in a section on annual customs that “On the fourth day of the fourth month, the sons and younger brothers of the royal family

<sup>22</sup> AZ, 322.

<sup>23</sup> AZ, 88; Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 135; Lê Thành Khôi, *Le Viet-Nam: Histoire et Civilisations* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1955), 184; TT, 359; YS, *juan* 209, *liezhuan* 96. In *juan* 13, Le Tac tells the stories of several members of the Tran royal family who surrendered and received rewards, and even one who married his daughter to Toghan.

<sup>24</sup> AZ, 322. <sup>25</sup> Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 115; 131; 134.

and the palace eunuchs gather in the Mountain Spirit Temple to swear that they are not hatching revolutionary plots.”<sup>26</sup> The Tran rulers had good reason to fear internal threats to their power. These divisions were made clear when some chose resistance to the Yuan and others chose collaboration. Perhaps Le Tac hoped to replace the Tran emperor with a different member of the royal family and therefore viewed Tran Kien’s actions as justified. He wrote that Tran princes were motivated to surrender to the Yuan because they “admired justice.” Though this may be dismissed as the sort of praise demanded of a document submitted at the Yuan court, he also described the actions of the Tran ruler Tran Kham as selfish and cowardly, and may well have harbored resentment for the way Tran Kien’s troops – including himself – were stranded without backup forces: “The king [Tran Kham] fled to the ocean and hid himself in the forest, leaving the innocent to endure hardship for his crime.”<sup>27</sup> He describes Tran Kham as panicking and throwing Tran Kien into the fray, because he had no other plan for conducting the war.<sup>28</sup> After Tran Kien surrendered, Tran Kham sent messengers to sue for peace, but refused the Yuan request that he do so in person, a decision Le Tac presents in a negative light.<sup>29</sup> In this way, whether through fatalism, guile, or a sincere desire for a change of leadership within the Tran family, a great number of Tran subjects “failed the test of loyalty” during the Mongol invasions.<sup>30</sup>

Following his surrender, the Mongols rewarded Tran Kien and arranged for him to travel to Beijing for an audience with Khubilai. Tran Kien and his entourage had not made it as far as the border when some local chieftains allied with the Tran state launched a fierce and unexpected attack against the Yuan troops and their entourage.<sup>31</sup> Le Tac described how the two sides skirmished throughout the night. Tran Kien was killed in his saddle. Le Tac held the body of his deceased leader before him on his own horse and galloped away from the battle, burying Tran Kien tens of miles away at the border town of Khau On in Lang Son.<sup>32</sup> By the time the battle ended, according to Le Tac, half of Tran Kien’s subordinates had been killed.<sup>33</sup> Unable to return home, Le Tac

<sup>26</sup> AZ, 42.

<sup>27</sup> AZ, 432. In contrast, Tran Kham (Tran Nhan Tong) is remembered as a hero in Vietnam for his role in resisting the Mongol invasion.

<sup>28</sup> AZ, 322. <sup>29</sup> AZ, 88. <sup>30</sup> Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 119.

<sup>31</sup> This is the description in the TT, 358. The YS claims that they were attacked by Tran Hung Dao’s troops: *juan* 209, *liezhuan* 96. James Anderson has shown that Dai Viet’s strong ties with upland communities along the border was instrumental to rebuffing the Mongol onslaught. See Anderson, “Man and Mongols.”

<sup>32</sup> TT, 358. <sup>33</sup> AZ, 436.

joined the tattered Yuan battalion in their retreat and went north to Beijing. His period of wandering had begun.

The Yuan decided to deal with the uncooperative Tran Kham by appointing their own “King of Annan” from afar. They chose Tran Ich Tac, a younger brother of the Tran emperor, who had already surrendered and was willing to enter Dai Viet at the head of a massive Yuan army. This army was divided into three divisions led by the generals Omar, Zhang Wenhui, and Aoluchi, under the general command of Toghan. They would again attempt a pincer movement, attacking overland and by sea. The soldiers were drawn from Mongols, Han Chinese, Guangxi indigenes, and members of the Li tribe of Hainan island. The latter two groups would presumably have fared better in the humid and malarial conditions of northern Vietnam. In 1287, a massive navy advanced overseas from the southern port of Qinzhou, the other divisions advancing overland from Guangxi and Yunnan.<sup>34</sup> Le Tac joined the overland group, though illness detained him from the front lines and probably saved his life.

After initial successes, including once more occupying and looting the capital, Toghan made the decision to retreat with the forward troops. By this time, Le Tac had crossed the border into Dai Viet along with a column of nearly five thousand Yuan soldiers.<sup>35</sup> Le Tac recounted that the Yuan forces advanced to the Binh River and stood their ground against the Tran army. The battle raged all day and through the night. The Tran fought fiercely and rained poisoned arrows on their foes. The worn-out Yuan troops were routed. During the night, Toghan himself was struck with a poisoned arrow and several thousands of troops got lost in the unfamiliar terrain and were not heard from again, presumably picked off by hidden Tran soldiers. The remnants of the great army followed Le Tac, the only person familiar with the terrain, to safety in the north. Those who fell to the end of the retreating column were at risk of falling prey to the Tran troops. Le Tac, noticing that the nine-year-old son of Tran Ich Tac, Tran Duc, was nearly captured, gave him his own fresher horse. They raced along through the night, with Le Tac whipping the horses on from behind, evading a number of attacks. They reached safety at midnight on lunar New Year’s Day, 1289, congratulating one another on their narrow escape. Le Tac resigned himself to fate, telling his companions, “Whether I live or die is Heaven’s will.” Many of his companions were not so lucky; Le Tac claimed, surely hyperbolically, that ten thousand died between the mountain passes of the Sino-Viet borderlands.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> AZ, 90, 317; TT, 361–362. <sup>35</sup> AZ, 91.

<sup>36</sup> AZ, 436–437, TT, 362. The account in the TT is much less detailed. It merely notes that many Yuan soldiers were killed with poisoned arrows, causing them to retreat.

Prevented from going home, Le Tac accompanied Yuan soldiers on their patrols of the border for three months. When the troops were withdrawn in advance of the malarial season, Le Tac went north with them. As late as 1293, the Yuan government planned a fourth campaign to install Tran Ich Tac. When Khubilai died early in 1294, interest in the project died with him. Le Tac, now stranded in the North, was granted a sinecure by the Yuan government and appointed to the symbolic position of the Prefect of Pacified Siam (*tongzhi Anxianzhou*). After ten years in China, Le Tac remarried, noting that his “mother and father and family had been scattered by war” and were not traceable. This second wife was a descendent of the former Ly royal family of Dai Viet. Like Le Tac, members of the Ly family were displaced by the war in Dai Viet and relocated in China, surviving on land granted to them by the Yuan.<sup>37</sup> Tran Ich Tac also lived out the rest of his life in the community of Dai Viet exiles in Hanyang, Hubei province. In addition to Vietnamese exiles, some former subjects of the Southern Song who had fled into Dai Viet to avoid the Mongols, only to surrender or be captured along with Tran Kien, now lived in this exile community. Le Tac mentions two such friends, the Song scholar Mi Kai and the high-ranking Song official Seng Yuanzi. Mi Kai lived out the rest of his life with Le Tac in Hubei.<sup>38</sup>

Did Le Tac regret surrendering? Did he join the Yuan by choice or by necessity? He does not tell us. On the one hand, in the course of performing his duty to the Tran court, a chain of events pushed him irrevocably away from home and family. He attempted to return with the Yuan forces in 1287, but Tran resistance made it impossible. On the other hand, Le Tac may have truly wished to depose Tran Kham and replace him with a member of a different branch of the Tran family. Perhaps Le Tac felt that his country’s current disorder would be best resolved by this compromise: enthroning a Tran family member who already had the Yuan’s support. Though he surely adopted a northern perspective in his writing in part to fit the expectations and viewpoint of his patrons, he expressed genuine frustration that Tran Kham broke the Tran-Yuan détente by refusing passage to Champa through Dai Viet in 1284. Perhaps he saw the bloodshed and displacement that he witnessed as preventable. If so, the origin of Le Tac’s tragedy of dislocation was in his backing of the losing side of an internal dispute.

The three Mongol wars are now remembered within Vietnam and Vietnamese historiography as prime examples of Vietnamese resistance to foreign aggression. The third invasion was the scene of one of the most celebrated victories in Vietnamese history: the 1288 battle of Bach Dang

<sup>37</sup> AZ, 437.    <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

River near Ha Long Bay. First, unbeknownst to the Mongol troops already in Dai Viet, the Tran destroyed the Mongol supply fleet at sea. Toghan's land forces and Omar's navy waited in vain for the arrival of provisions before beginning their retreat from Dong Kinh. Then Tran forces led by the royal prince Tran Hung Dao ambushed the Mongol fleet at Bach Dang estuary. Tran Hung Dao's troops hid metal-tipped wooden stakes beneath the waterline and then set upon the Yuan fleet impaled on the stakes. The Yuan fleet was obliterated.<sup>39</sup> The land troops, including those that accompanied Le Tac, were unable to receive supplies and fled in disarray.

Tran Hung Dao is today commemorated on the 500 *dong* note of the Republic of Viet Nam, as well as in statues and street names across the country, and even venerated as Saint Tran.<sup>40</sup> If Tran Kien represents all those who saw a better future in surrendering to the Yuan, Tran Hung Dao is the most famous of the many who preferred to stand and fight. Tran Hung Dao was Tran Kien's uncle, with an even stronger claim to the throne than Tran Kien, a fact that makes his loyalty even more remarkable. Examples of resistance to northern invasions are immortalized in books as disparate as the fifteenth-century *Dai Viet su ky toan thu* ("Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet") and Tran Trong Kim's still-influential 1920 *Viet Nam su luoc* ("An Outline of Vietnamese History"). A recent book rightly notes, "The Vietnamese are to this day very proud of the fact that they found themselves among a very small number of people in the world to have been able to successfully resist the onslaught of the Mongols."<sup>41</sup> This sentiment, though entirely justified, overlooks the thousands of people who, like Le Tac, chose or were forced to surrender to the Yuan and even resettle in China.

*A Brief History of Annan* gives insight into the dilemma of those thousands. The book is undoubtedly the best account of the Mongol wars in Vietnam, but it is also problematic, written as it was by a Vietnamese exile beholden to the Yuan court. It highlights the difficulty of researching Vietnam in this time period; many surviving sources were written from a northern perspective, or else influenced by regional tensions within the expanding country of Dai Viet. Le Tac lived through the events and paid a

<sup>39</sup> AZ, 90–92; L. Arousseau, ed., *Ngan-nan tche yuan* (Hanoi: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1932), 8. Hereafter cited as ANZY. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 136.

<sup>40</sup> Pham Quynh Phuong, *Hero and Deity*.

<sup>41</sup> Truong Buu Lam, *A Story of Vietnam* (Parker, CO: Outskirts Press, 2010), 78. O. W. Wolters likewise notes that there were instances of "treachery" during the Mongol campaigns, but his main focus is Vietnamese victories, self-confidence, and expectation of an ever-improving future. O. W. Wolters, "On Telling a Story of Vietnam in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 26 (March 1995): 63–74.

high personal price. He knew intimately the loss of life and displacement and the deep divisions in Tran society that were exposed by the fighting. Although Le Tac wrote frankly of the death toll and dispersion caused by the Mongol campaigns in Annam, he still employed a triumphalist rhetoric that presumed the justice of Yuan actions. Likewise, Yuan sources or sources written from a perspective sympathetic to the Mongols, unsurprisingly, treat the Vietnam campaigns as a success.

In truth, the campaigns were an unmitigated disaster for the Yuan. Although Dong Kinh fell to the invaders three times, each time the occupiers discovered the royal family as having fled, the capital city evacuated, and food in short supply. Tran forces employed the tactics of guerrilla warfare, melting away as the Yuan troops advanced, and reappearing to harass the Yuan forces once they were tired, distracted, attenuated, or in retreat. In the words of the Persian historian Rashid al-Din, a contemporary of Le Tac, “there are forests and other places of difficult access . . . On one occasion, [Toghan] penetrated with an army to those towns on the coast, captured them, and sat for a week on the throne there. Then all at once their army sprang out from ambush in the sea, the forest, and the mountains and attacked Toghan’s army while they were busy plundering.”<sup>42</sup> The Tran emperor and his sons fled on boats and could not be found. During the second campaign, Sogetu died in battle, and of the men under his command, five or six out of ten drowned.<sup>43</sup>

Mongol troops struggled in the tropical climate, unused to heat and humidity and unseasoned to tropical diseases such as malaria. The dense forests of the South hindered the movement of their horses. The humidity caused their wooden crossbows to swell and fire off course. It was a miserable experience.<sup>44</sup> Although Mongols are famed today for their use of psychological warfare, the general Omar was disturbed by the boldness of captured Tran soldiers who tattooed “Kill the Tartars” (*sha Da*) on their arms.<sup>45</sup> This tactic may have been picked up from the refugee Song soldiers in their midst, for whom coerced military tattoos, sometimes containing military slogans, were part of life in the ranks.<sup>46</sup> Even after these costly campaigns in difficult conditions, the Yuan were

<sup>42</sup> Rasid al-Din and John Andrew Boyle, trans., *The Successors of Genghis Khan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 285.

<sup>43</sup> ANZY, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Morris Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 217–218; “The Reign of Khubilai Khan,” 484; Lê Thành Khôi, *Le Viet-Nam: Histoire et Civilisations*, 180.

<sup>45</sup> TT, p. 358.

<sup>46</sup> Elad Alyagon, “Not Just Patriots: Patriotic Tattoos and Tattooed Generals during the Song,” unpublished paper presented at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA, March 29, 2014.

able to neither extend their borders into Dai Viet nor place their puppet emperor on the throne.

Le Tac was aware that relations between the Yuan and Tran Dai Viet were normalized following Khubilai Khan's death in 1294, and yet he stayed in China.<sup>47</sup> It is likely that Le Tac did not return because the Tran dynasty was still in power and he feared being punished for treason. Perhaps he feared that his family had been killed. His clearest expression of regret and resignation comes at the end of his personal narrative: "Grieved that I could not go back, I purchased a gravesite on Phoenix Pavilion Mountain [in Hubei]."<sup>48</sup> His *Brief History of Annan* was his attempt to preserve his memories and historical research on Annan before they died with him.

### From Jiao to Annan

The early history of Vietnam was mainly recorded in literary Sinitic by northern authors, making it exceedingly difficult to uncover non-imperial points of view from textual sources. Le Tac's book is noteworthy because it is the earliest extant work on Dai Viet by a Vietnamese author.<sup>49</sup> Though written by a southerner, *A Brief History* had to be written from a northern, Yuan perspective to suit Le Tac's patrons. And not only did Le Tac write his history of Annan for Chinese (and Mongol) readers, but he also wrote it from Chinese sources. Le Tac drew on a range of classical texts, especially the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*, dated to the Warring States), *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji*, c. 109–91 BCE), *History of the Former Han* (*Han Shu*, 111 CE), and the *History of the Later Han* (*Hou Han Shu*, fifth century CE). Thus, while Le Tac's book stripped out some of the more exotic, far-fetched, or prejudicial views of Dai Viet,<sup>50</sup> it largely presents what information about Dai Viet was already available to northerners in the fourteenth century. Thanks to the enduring availability and interest in the book, *A Brief History* helped fix certain tropes of Dai Viet, even as that country was changing in unexpected ways, and served as the basis of knowledge about Dai Viet within China for centuries to come.

<sup>47</sup> AZ, 93. <sup>48</sup> AZ, 437.

<sup>49</sup> Other early works include Lê Văn Hưu's *Đại Việt sử ký* (1272), which now exists only in compilation with the later *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, the fourteenth-century *Linh Nam chích quái* (嶺南摭怪 "Selected Strange Tales from South of the Passes"), and the 1329 *Viet Điện u linh tập*.

<sup>50</sup> For the classic work on these views, see Edward H. Schafer, *The Vermilion Bird: T'ang Images of the South* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967).

Le Tac tells the history of his country in *A Brief History of Annan* in a variety of ways. The most exceptional is his poem “Verses on Geography,” consisting of one hundred seven-syllable rhyming lines. The poem is the only place in the book where Le Tac gives a narrative account of Vietnamese history. By limiting himself to one hundred lines, he allows us to see the events he deemed most important to Vietnamese history. The poem breaks into five topical sections: the early history of Vietnam; the rise and fall of the Nan Yue kingdom; the rebellion of the Trung sisters; the fall of the Tang and the rise of independent Vietnamese states; and the recent history of the Tran and Yuan.

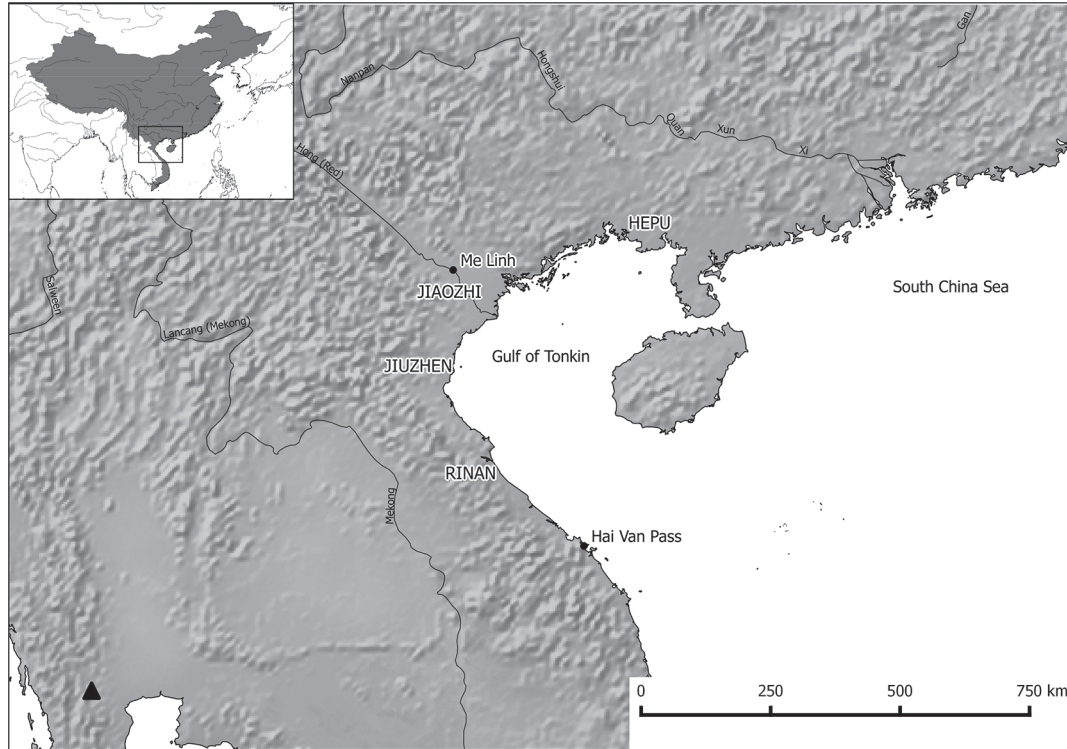
Below, I will use excerpts of “Verses on Geography” to outline Vietnamese history as mediated through Le Tac. Rather than explicating a complete history of early Vietnam, this section will establish the sum of textual knowledge about the Red River Delta region and its environs in Le Tac’s lifetime. This helps contextualize the ways in which Dai Viet was described in China at that time. In particular, Le Tac’s poem can help us to understand some of the most common names applied to Vietnam and the Vietnamese people by those writing in literary Sinitic, namely Man, Yi, Jiao, Nan Yue, and Annan.

First, Le Tac situates the early history of Vietnam. He introduces nine names for the South and its people and covers more than two thousand years in just eleven lines:

The map of Annan is several thousand li.<sup>51</sup>  
 The people are few, the mountains and streams are many.  
 The east is adjacent to Hepu [Guangdong] and the north to Xuanyong  
 [Guangxi].  
 The South extends to Champa and the west to Dali [Yunnan].  
 Those who came to the Five Passes in the past called the people there  
 Man and Yi.  
 Jiaozhi has existed since the time of the sage king Yao.  
 During the age of the Duke of Zhou it was known as Yuechang.  
 The southern wilds once offered a white pheasant as tribute.  
 In the Qin dynasty it was called Xiangjun and in the Han dynasty  
 Jiaozhou.  
 Cuu Chan and Nhat Nam were adjacent to it.<sup>52</sup>

Le Tac begins his poem by delineating the borders of Annan, defining it as the territory between Yunnan, Guangxi, and Guangdong to the north and the kingdom of Champa (in present-day southern Vietnam) to the south.

<sup>51</sup> One *li* is about a third of a mile.    <sup>52</sup> AZ, 431.



Map 2 The South during the Han dynasty.

*Jiaozhi, Yuechang, Xiangjun, Jiaozhou*

The most important function of these first lines, though, is to gather several names for early Vietnam within a single frame, and to assert their co-antiquity with the North. He does so by naming two of the North's cultural heroes, the legendary King Yao (third millennium BCE) and the Duke of Zhou (eleventh century BCE), a sage regent and Confucian hero. The *Hou Han Shu* records that during the early Zhou, a kingdom called Yuechang (VN: Viet Thuong) sent tribute to China. Later, this perhaps legendary kingdom came to be associated with northern Vietnam. When the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) unified the central states of the Yellow River plain, it also claimed control of parts of Vietnam under the evocative name Xiangjun (VN: Tuong quan), literally “elephant commandery.”<sup>53</sup> During the reign of the Han dynasty emperor Wudi (140–87 BCE), Jiaozhi (VN: Giao Chi) became one of the thirteen circuits of the Han empire, and included Guangdong, Guangxi, and northern Vietnam, all south of the Five Passes. In the Eastern Han (25–220 CE), the name Jiaozhi was changed to Jiaozhou.

*Man and Yi*

Le Tac also brings up two of the most contentious terms in all of Chinese history: Man and Yi. These terms, singly or together, are most often translated as “barbarian.” This translation is not without controversy, sparking academic debate and hurt feelings. Whether treated as two separate terms (Man and Yi) or as the compound Man Yi, this was a Chinese exonym rarely if ever adopted as an autonym. Although Le Tac here relegates the name to the past, in truth it had currency in China as a way to refer to southerners and foreigners even through the nineteenth century. For that reason alone, it is worth exploring the origin and connotations of Man and Yi.

Man and Yi were two of the four names that had been in common use since the Warring States (475–221 BCE) to refer to people beyond the borders of Chinese states. Man, Yi, Rong, and Di referred respectively to peoples of the South, East, West, and North. All contrast explicitly with *Hua*, literally “florescence,” an early term for the location and culture of what we now call China.

In using the terms Man and Yi to designate the inhabitants of the South, Le Tac invoked the earliest texts of the Sinitic canon. The *Book of Documents* (*Shang Shu*, possibly fifth century BCE) provides a spatial

<sup>53</sup> Most likely in the vicinity of Thua Thien province, along the North Central Coast. I am grateful to Keith Taylor for pointing this out.

understanding of the Sinic world, with the Man, Yi, Rong, and Di at the outer fringes. According to this “five-zone theory,” the central royal domain was surrounded by concentric rings of domains whose cultural and political connections to Hua decreased as one moved farther from the center. The central domain was encircled by the noble’s domain, followed by the pacified zone. The Man and the Yi lived in the fourth zone, the controlled zone, while the Rong and the Di were located in the outermost wild zone. From the Hua perspective, the farther a region was from the center, the less civilized its inhabitants were. The Warring States period *Book of Rites* further identifies the Yi and Man, their location, and their differences: “The Eastern region is called Yi. They wear their hair loose and tattoo their bodies. Some of them do not cook their food. The Southern region is called Man. They tattoo their faces and intertwine their feet (*jiaozhi*). Some of them do not cook their food.”<sup>54</sup> Although what the author meant by intertwining feet is unclear, the supposed Man trait of “*jiaozhi*” became a place name for the Red River Delta region.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, it is the Jiaozhi of Le Tac’s line “Jiaozhi has existed since the time of the sage king Yao.” Although ancient by the Ming, these lines were often invoked in Chinese texts that purported to introduce readers to Annan.<sup>56</sup>

In their most basic senses, then, the terms Man and Yi implied not only compass direction but also geographical distance and cultural difference. They implied political difference too: Man and Yi, not to mention Rong and Di, were outside of the authority of the Hua state. Because the terms Man and Yi had both locational and cultural-political dimensions, their connotations could range from the relatively neutral (non-Hua) to the outright pejorative (barbarian).<sup>57</sup> In this light, we can reassess the Jiaqing

<sup>54</sup> Over time, the term Man came to be more precisely defined and used less frequently to designate the Vietnamese. For example, the *Man Shu*, written in the 860s, was about Yunnan. Its author, Fan Chuo, delineated and named various kinds of Man living there.

<sup>55</sup> Keith Taylor surmises that “intertwining feet” refers to a custom of group sleeping in a circle, with the feet oriented to the inside of the circle. *Birth of Vietnam*, 26.

<sup>56</sup> For example, see ANZY, 4.

<sup>57</sup> Yi was widely used as a generic designation for Europeans during the Qing dynasty, demonstrating that it was used more as a neutral marker of foreignness than as a specific ethnic designation. A contemporary observer, Samuel Wells Williams, agreed. He noted in his 1848 history of China, *The Middle Kingdom*, that scholars disagreed whether Yi should be translated as “barbarian” or as “foreigner.” Williams was inclined to accept it as a benign term, and saw “savages,” like barbarian, as an over-translation. Williams, *The Middle Kingdom; a Survey of the Geography, Government, Education, Social Life, Arts, Religion, &c., of the Chinese Empire and Its Inhabitants*, Vol. 2 (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1848), 466–467. Indeed, John Dardess points out that it was less invidious than terms such as *wo* (dwarf) for the Japanese or *lu* (raider) for the Mongols. Dardess, *Ming China: A Concise History of a Resilient Empire 1368–1644* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 2. Lydia Liu traces the marriage of the terms Yi and barbarian to the

emperor's statement in 1802, as we saw in the Introduction, that his Vietnamese counterpart was just "a little Yi from a marginal area." Whether the term Yi implied that Nguyen Phuc Anh was a barbarian or just a foreigner, he clearly meant that the Nguyen state was too insignificant and too foreign to claim the ancient name Nan Yue.

Although Le Tac uses it here, Vietnamese writers generally used neither Man nor Yi as an autonym. This particularly applies to Man, which had a more pejorative tendency than Yi. Stark evidence for this is the Vietnamese adoption of the word Man as a negative term for highland (non-Vietnamese) people.<sup>58</sup> On the surface, then, it may seem surprising that Le Tac uses with no irony the potentially pejorative terms Man and Yi to describe the inhabitants of ancient Vietnam. This is perhaps explainable by an appeal to Le Tac's loyalties. Although he identifies himself as Annamese, Le Tac does not see the Man and Yi as constituting that, or his, identity. In fact, he traces his own origins not to southern indigenes but to northern elites, starting from the prefect Nguyen Phu of the northern Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420). Northern elites and their descendants, himself included, are the subject of his inquiry, not the highland dwellers both states labeled Man and Yi. When Man and Yi do make a rare appearance in Le Tac's book, they are relegated to Dai Viet's past or margins.

The word Jiao, originally used in the context of *jiaozhi* ("intertwining feet") in the *Book of Rites*, persisted as a Chinese term for Vietnamese people (*jiaoren*) throughout the late imperial period. Le Tac uses the term to refer to people from his region, the heartland of ancient Vietnam near

mid-nineteenth century, when British state agents reacted to their being designated as Yi with outrage. In defiance of Chinese insistence on the innocuousness of the term, the British had it written into Article 51 of the Anglo-Chinese Treaty of Tianjin of 1858 that Britain and British subjects were never again to be referred to as Yi. According to Liu, the power of the Yi/barbarian conflation that came about from the violent Chinese-British encounter of the nineteenth century continues to have its effect today, as scholars see Chinese chauvinism in a term that, sometimes, was simply a benign marker of non-Chineseness. See *Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 31–69. David G. Atwill writes that the term has "a strong oppositional nature . . . (i.e., not Han)," and he therefore mainly translates it as non-Han. See Atwill, "Blinkered Visions: Islamic Identity, Hui Ethnicity, and the Panthay Rebellion in Southwest China, 1856–1874," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (November 2003): 1081. The term should not be mistaken as a marker of ethnicity or even as an early designation for the Vietnamese people. The labels Man and Yi were ascribed indiscriminately to non-Hua groups in the South, both within and beyond the borders of the Chinese state. Their very force was to elide the political and linguistic differences of the diverse cultural landscape of the South. This in turn reflected the ambiguity and lack of specificity of much imperial Chinese writing about the South and its people.

<sup>58</sup> This term is preserved in modern Vietnamese (as it is in Chinese) as a pejorative term, for example, *man ro*, "savage."

present-day Hanoi. Late imperial Chinese texts used the term with less precision to refer to Vietnamese people in general, especially when they wished to highlight place of residence over political and cultural difference. When they wished to emphasize the latter, they would use terms such as Man or Yi.

*Jiuzhen and Rinan*

Le Tac makes clear that there were divisions between Jiao and the surrounding areas: *Cuu Chan and Nhat Nam were adjacent to it*. It is illuminating that Le Tac distinguishes *Cuu Chan* (Ch: Jiuzhen) and *Nhat Nam* (Ch: Rinan) from Jiaozhou. Jiuzhen and Rinan were south of Jiaozhou, in present-day central Vietnam. Jiuzhen corresponds to present-day Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces, and Rinan to the region just north of the Hai Van pass, including the city Hue. He shows in several parts of his book that he most identifies with the dwellers of the Red River Delta region, the area historically most linked to Chinese states. In Le Tac's time, regional differences and identity were strong.

The second section of "Verses on Geography" is devoted to the Nan Yue kingdom (204–111 BCE). Le Tac, like Nguyen Phuc Anh five centuries later, clearly saw Nan Yue as centrally important to the history of Annan.

At the beginning of the Han, Zhao Tuo mightily occupied the land,  
He was named king [by the Han emperor] and evaded execution or  
exile.

Empress Lu assumed the throne [of the Han] and restricted trade,  
Tuo revenged himself by arrogantly establishing his unlawful regime,  
He called himself emperor equal to the Central Country,  
Injuring the border people through strict military training.

At this time the Han raised troops and arms,  
At each battle they were unable to stop [Zhao Tuo's] powerful soldiers.  
Emperor Han Wendi practiced virtue, not war,

He pardoned Zhao Tuo from execution and enfeoffed the Zhao family,  
Tuo in gratitude called himself a vassal,

And sent [his grandson Zhao] Yingqi to wait upon the emperor.

Local products and precious goods were yearly sent as tribute,

The throne was passed on for five generations of descendents.

Then Lu Ban plotted rebellion and secretly gathered troops,

So he killed the king and the Han ambassador.

Emperor Han Wudi, enraged, roused his Heavenly Army,

His elite troops swept away evil across a thousand li.

Marquis Lu Bode<sup>59</sup> had a plan and was brave,

<sup>59</sup> A Han general appointed "wave-quelling general" who led campaign against Nan Yue and Hainan.

He broke Yue like he was breaking bamboo.  
 It was divided into nine commanderies and assigned officials  
 From this time forward the country of Nan Yue was no more.  
 The border people were transformed and came to allegiance to the  
 Central Florescence,  
 Distant people were gradually taught to follow propriety and duty (liyi).<sup>60</sup>

When the Han dynasty came to power in 206 BCE, it was not initially able to incorporate what had been the Qin's southernmost commandery. During the chaos of the Qin-Han transition, Zhao Tuo (240–137 BCE), an official posted to the South by the earlier regime, rose to prominence. Taking advantage of the weakness of the new Han state, Zhao Tuo declared himself king of the Nan Yue kingdom. The first Han emperor, Han Gaozu, opted to recognize Zhao Tuo's kingship, rather than imperil his fragile new state by declaring war with Nan Yue. Later, when Empress Lu imposed an embargo on trading iron to Nan Yue, Zhao Tuo declared himself the "Martial Emperor of Nan Yue," in defiance of the Han emperor's exclusive claim to the title emperor (*di*). Zhao Tuo extended his territory farther to the west, and began riding in a yellow carriage and issuing "edicts" in imitation of Han imperial practice. The Zhao family continued to rule Nan Yue after the death of Zhao Tuo, until internal unrest in Nan Yue attracted the attention of a newly expansive Han dynasty. In 111 BCE, the armies of the Han destroyed Nan Yue and incorporated its territory under Han rule, bringing parts of northern Vietnam under central Chinese rule for the first time.<sup>61</sup> The story of Nan Yue established enduring Chinese tropes about Vietnam: its rebelliousness; reliance on remoteness to oppose central control; usurpation of Chinese imperial prerogatives and symbols; and appeasement to avoid Chinese military intervention. Le Tac transmitted and confirmed these tropes by including them in his poem.

It is curious that in the first line of his preface, Le Tac identified himself as one born in "Nan Yue," a kingdom that had been defunct for more than a thousand years.<sup>62</sup> What can this mean? On a surface level, it

<sup>60</sup> AZ, 431.

<sup>61</sup> Sima Qian discussed Nan Yue in three places in the *Shiji*: in the "Basic Annals of Emperor Wen" (*juan* 10); in the "Biography of Lu Jia" (*juan* 97); and in the "Account of Nan Yue" (*juan* 113). *Shiji juan* 113, *Chinese Ancient Texts* database. For an excellent overview of the history of the Nan Yue kingdom, see Erica Brindley, "Representations and Uses of Yue Identity along the Southern Frontier of the Han, ~200–11 BCE," *Early China*, Vol. 33–34 (2010–2011): 1–36.

<sup>62</sup> Likewise, many of the Yuan subjects who wrote prefaces to the book referred to him as a native of Nan Yue 南粤, admittedly using a different character for "Yue," one most commonly associated with the provinces Guangdong and Guangxi, provinces that were themselves part of the Nan Yue kingdom. Even the term Yuenan 越南 makes an appearance in the book.

reflects the lack of precision and specificity of place names for the South that was still common in the fourteenth century. On a more significant level, it may signal Le Tac's hybrid identity, and his intellectual goal of uniting the South and North through a unified Sinitic history. He did so by affiliating himself with Nan Yue, a kingdom that crossed the border of both states.

Le Tac's recounting of the Nan Yue story, based on the *History of the Han* and the *Records of the Historian*, demonizes Zhao Tuo as a rogue minister and rebel. In Le Tac's telling, Han conquest had the positive result of transforming the Man and Yi of the borderlands to subjects of the northern state. "Central Florescence" refers to China, specifically the Han dynasty, the first official sponsor of what came to be classical culture. Here, Le Tac employs the standard rhetoric of a civilizing mission, dating the transformation of the Vietnamese people to the fall of Zhao Tuo's culturally hybrid Nan Yue state.

After accounting for the rise and fall of Nan Yue, Le Tac turns to the period of Vietnamese history commonly called "the period of northern domination" (*Thoi Bac thuoc*). He devoted a significant portion of this section to the 42 CE rebellion of the Trung sisters against the Han dynasty:

At the beginning of his reign, Emperor Guangwu (25–57 CE) eliminated the troubles caused by the Xin Dynasty (9–23 CE),  
He had not yet had time to select an ambassador to the South.  
Two women of Mê Linh, posing as heroes, schemed for high position.  
The elder was named Trung Trac and the younger Trung Nhi,  
They called together their gang and seized Nanjiao,  
They intimidated the Hundred Man, none could oppose them,  
They occupied and plundered sixty cities,  
One served as king and the other as commander.  
The formidable Han general Ma [Yuan] Queller of the Waves  
Often gnashed his teeth in the three years of bitter fighting,  
He divided the army and drove them to the Jin River,  
Once the bandit chiefs were beheaded all was brought to order.  
He opened up the Han border to southern heavenly pole,  
His achievement of erecting the bronze pillars is recorded in the history  
of the Han,  
Officials were sent there to contain the people,  
The virtuous government was pure and generous.  
Up through the time Shi Xie's (Si Nhiep) skillful soothing [of the  
region],  
The people of the region remembered him fondly.<sup>63</sup>

As with Zhao Tuo, Le Tac presents the Trung sisters in a negative light. The background information he provides follows the historical record

<sup>63</sup> AZ, 431–432.

closely: northern Vietnam entered the Han orbit more firmly when the Han general Ma Yuan, the “wave-quelling general,” put down the rebellion of the Trung sisters in 43 CE. The sisters, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, started their insurrection at the upper edge of the Red River plain in protest of the corrupt rule of their Han overlords. According to legend, after defeating and executing the sisters, Ma Yuan melted down enemy weapons, and with the metal erected bronze pillars to mark the southern limit of the Han empire.<sup>64</sup> These pillars, though quite possibly legendary, were of enduring interest to Dai Viet watchers. Indeed, in 1272, the Yuan ruler Khubilai Khan sent an ambassador to inquire about the location of the pillars, perhaps in an attempt to determine where the border lay. He was told that no traces of the pillars remained.<sup>65</sup>

As the first in a long line of heroic resisters to foreign aggression, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi have remained a heroic archetype of unity and resistance within Vietnam.<sup>66</sup> It is noteworthy that Le Tac devoted twelve lines of his poem to their rebellion. Although she does not make an appearance in the “Verses on Geography,” in chapter fifteen under the category “Rebels,” Le Tac tells the story of another female rebel, Lady Trieu. This is also the section where he first addresses the Trung sisters. Lady Trieu never married, and her breasts grew to the fantastic length of 3 *chi*, so she flung them over her back to keep them out of her way. She lived in the mountains, led a pack of bandits, and fought from the back of an elephant before she was caught and executed.<sup>67</sup> Le Tac’s treatment of Lady Trieu is not flattering, though some historians interpret her mere inclusion, along with that of the Trung sisters, as a subtle sign of his pride in Vietnamese resistance to northern aggressors.<sup>68</sup> In fact, he presents these women as subversive and unnatural. Lady Trieu was a physical freak. He notes that one of the Trung sisters was king and the other commander – a comment that should not be mistaken for praise coming from a male scholar of his time and place.

Once the rebellions of the Trung sisters and Lady Trieu were put down, Jiaozhi settled into a long period of relative peace. Local families like that of Si Nhiep exercised hereditary rule, with little direct interference from a progression of northern dynasties of which they were a nominal part.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Le Tac claims that bronze pillars were erected at the both northern and southern borders, AZ, 30.

<sup>65</sup> TT, 348. <sup>66</sup> Pelley, 143–144.

<sup>67</sup> One *chi* is roughly equivalent of one foot. AZ, 357.

<sup>68</sup> The introduction to a 2001 Vietnamese translation discusses the “new interpretation that he was recording the achievements of his homeland.” Chương Thái, “Lời Nói Đầu,” *An Nam Chí Lược* (Huế: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 2001), 8.

<sup>69</sup> For a more detailed account of this period, see Taylor, *Birth of Vietnam*, 70–249.

In the next section of the poem, condensed below, Le Tac narrates the dissolution of the great Tang dynasty and its province of Annan and the rise of independent Vietnamese states:

... Slowly, slowly the generations passed until we reached the Sui and  
Tang,  
They began to call it “Annan” and they still do today . . .  
At the beginning of the Song the Dinh family were enfeoffed as kings,  
When Dinh rule was cut short it passed on to the Le and then the Ly.  
The Ly held power for nine generations, a hundred years,<sup>70</sup>  
Until the Tran kings came and took the throne.  
Through this peaceful passage of time there has been a scholarly wind  
blowing,  
The rites, music, and robes and caps [of scholars] have begun to  
appear.<sup>71</sup>

After centuries of lax northern control, the powerful Tang dynasty (618–907) reasserted control of the South and renamed it “Annan,” literally “the secured South.” Although Le Tac uses Annan in the title of his book, the name was not commonly used within Dai Viet. It was very much a Chinese term for Dai Viet, popular up to the twentieth century. In the nineteenth century, French colonists adopted the Vietnamese pronunciation of the name, Annam, to refer specifically to central Vietnam, ensuring the persistence of this relic of Tang imperialism. After the dissolution of the Tang dynasty, Annan achieved outright political independence in 939 as the state of Dai Co Viet. Although Le Tac does not mention it, Dai Viet was reclassified at that time as a *fan*, or tributary state, rather than an administrative unit of China.

Le Tac ends his account of the rise of independent Vietnamese dynasties by noting the spread of classical culture. The shorthand of “rites, music, and robes and caps” would be invoked again and again by southern scholars who wish to demonstrate their affinity to their northern counterparts.

The longest section of the poem covers Le Tac’s own life and times, the Tran dynasty, its relations with the Yuan, and Le Tac’s current situation:

The august Yuan unified the world as never before,  
Their virtuous rule showers all states with favor.  
The Tran king swore allegiance for thirty years,  
But his descendants without reason disobeyed the emperor’s orders.  
In 1284, [the Yuan] asked to borrow the road to attack Champa,  
And demanded weapons and provisions.

<sup>70</sup> The Ly dynasty did have nine emperors, but it lasted for more than two hundred years.

<sup>71</sup> AZ, 432.

[The Tran] unexpectedly went against the orders and became  
 contentious,  
 Resisting the royal army while harboring treacherous thoughts.  
 Two or three sons and nephews of the Tran king  
 Admiring justice came to submit and received dispensation.  
 A [Yuan] army was raised as the crime became known,  
 Their banners sparkled like eagles' wings for a thousand li.  
 The advancing army converged upon Jiao by several routes,  
 The galloping of the innumerable cavalry was as powerful as lightning  
 and thunder.  
 The [Tran] king fled to the ocean and hid himself in the forest,  
 Leaving the innocent to endure hardship for his crime.  
 The general returns, pleads guilty, and submits a memorial,  
 Rhinoceros and elephant, seals and pearls arrive one after another.  
 The sagely heart cares broadly for the people,  
 It ceases war and retires soldiers to accord with Heaven's Will.  
 From this time the South was entirely at peace,  
 Millions upon millions of living things received protection.  
 If distant people cherish virtue then their hearts flock to it,  
 If all under heaven is a family then there will be prosperity;  
 [In Hanyang] by the Mian River I bow before the emperor's charity,  
 I feel ashamed for collecting a salary for food and clothing.  
 I have stitched together the bits and pieces I heard in the past,  
 And wrote it up as a record of Annan's local customs.<sup>72</sup>

Rather than focusing on it as a cause of war, death, and displacement, Le Tac presents the Yuan invasions as bringing a revival of classical culture (the hallmarks of a Confucian government: ritual, music, study). Enabled by his salary, Le Tac used his leisure to write *A Brief History of Annan*. This is where Le Tac's historical account ends. What he leaves out is telling: the continued existence of the Tran dynasty, and the Yuan defeat at their hands. The reason for the omission is clearly to fit the expectations of his readers who would not wish to be reminded of the losses suffered in Dai Viet. Despite its omissions, the poem is still useful for understanding Vietnamese history from a northern perspective, a perspective Le Tac largely shared. Le Tac took pains to show that Dai Viet shared roots in the mythological past and in the Confucian present more readily associated with the North. Whether viewed in a positive or negative light, rebels such as Zhao Tuo and the Trung sisters held an important place in Vietnamese history and could not be omitted from the narrative.

Le Tac's historical account, both in "Verses on Geography" and in the previous chapters of his book, relies on Sinitic sources and employs a northern point of view. These parts contain little information not readily

<sup>72</sup> AZ, 432.

available in older sources, and are distinctive mainly for his refusal to engage tropes of cultural difference. For that reason, historians of Vietnam often refer to *A Brief History of Annan* but rarely use it as a historical source. Perhaps as a consequence, the more original portions of *A Brief History*, particularly Le Tac's account of his personal experience of the Mongol invasions, have also been overlooked. This may be due to Le Tac's liminal status and the difficulty of co-opting his book for national projects. But we can uncover new information and a distinct perspective by reading parts of *A Brief History* such as the section on customs.

### Customs of the South

In addition to "Verses on Geography," *A Brief History of Annan* contains sections on geography, history, military campaigns, envoys, edicts and letters from both countries, biographies, descriptions of local products, and poetry. Le Tac had access to Chinese books and records and frequently quoted from classic Sinitic works that reference his homeland, including the standard histories, Tang poetry, as well as more recent memorials and communications from the Yuan. The most valuable aspect of his account, though, was his personal knowledge of Dai Viet. His Yuan dynasty audience prized this insider perspective: several of Le Tac's eleven preface writers attested that his account was "trustworthy and based on evidence" thanks to his firsthand experience.<sup>73</sup> In his section on customs, Le Tac asserts that Annan was not a barbarian country, but rather shared many customs and cultural traits with the North.

Le Tac's "Customs" section contains the mix of allusion, direct quotation, and personal observation that characterize his writing. In a book that is otherwise largely conventional, the customs chapter is remarkable in its assertion of cultural similarity between the North and the South. Le Tac began this section by fixing Annan in time and space, asserting that his homeland had shared in the classical culture since the mythical time of sage emperors of the third millennium BCE, predating even the legendary Xia dynasty:

Annan was called Jiaozhi in the past. During [the time of the sage emperors] Yao and Shun, and the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, the influence of the central states reached there;<sup>74</sup> since the Western Han it has been an inner prefecture.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> AZ, 3. One of these preface writers, Cheng Jufu, had like Le Tac surrendered to the Mongols.

<sup>74</sup> This line paraphrases the "Tribute of Yu" section of the *Book of Documents*.

<sup>75</sup> AZ, 40–41.

Modern readers would first note Le Tac's emphasis on Annan's subordination to northern states (since the Western Han, it has been an inner prefecture). Less obvious to us but more meaningful to his contemporary audience is his assertion of Annan's long exposure to classical culture, and therefore the worthiness of southern scholars. In the next few lines, Le Tac makes it clear that he is mainly concerned with dwellers of the coastal plain who practice agriculture and sericulture, like their neighbors in the North; he dismisses highlanders, those people less directly influenced by classical culture, as "foolish and simple." In this passage, he starts by giving his experience with dwellers of the agricultural lowlands of the Red River Delta region:

Men till the fields and engage in trade, women raise silkworms and weave. They are polite in language and have few desires. When people from distant lands drift to their kingdom, it is their habit to ask question after question.<sup>76</sup> People from Giao<sup>77</sup> and Ai<sup>78</sup> are elegant and thoughtful; those from Hoan and Dien<sup>79</sup> are refined and fond of studying; all the rest are foolish and simple.<sup>80</sup>

Le Tac then described Vietnamese customs, curiously drawing on a five-hundred-year-old poem for support:

The people tattoo their bodies, imitating the custom of Wu and Yue. A poem by Liu Zongyuan<sup>81</sup> says, "We have all come to the land of the tattooed Hundred Yue."

The poem Le Tac refers to here, Liu Zongyuan's "On Climbing the City Wall at Lianzhou, for the Prefects of Zhang, Ding, Feng, and Lian," was written in the early ninth century as a lament on being exiled to a post in Guangxi near the border with Annan. The description of the scenery and the tattooed people reflected Liu's loneliness and isolation from home and civilization. Though it seems at first glance like an odd addition to an otherwise firsthand account of Annan, Le Tac included many quotes and references to classical works and poems in his book, to demonstrate his erudition and appeal to his audience of fellow literati.

<sup>76</sup> The Italian priest Christopher Borri made a similar observation in his 1631 account of Cochinchina, noting that the locals ask European arrivals "a thousand questions." Dror and Taylor, trans. *Views of Seventeenth Century Vietnam*, 113.

<sup>77</sup> 交, short for 交趾, Giao Chi in Vietnamese. This is the area around Hanoi.

<sup>78</sup> Ai Chau, 愛州, Le Tac's home, in present-day Thanh Hoa province. During the Han, this was Cuu Chan, 九真.

<sup>79</sup> Hoan and Diên refer to parts of present-day Nghe An, just south of Giao and Ai. Le Tac is here referring to the Red River Delta and the coastal lowlands to its south, what to him is the heartland of the Southern Country. He excludes the highlands as occupied by "foolish" people.

<sup>80</sup> AZ, 41.

<sup>81</sup> Liu Zongyuan (773–819) was a Tang dynasty author famous for his poems and prose written about his exile in Guangxi.

Le Tac could not have known that the custom of tattooing had changed in his absence. After Le's exile, in 1299, King Tran Thuyen refused the customary dragon tattoo that Tran men wore on their thigh. By 1323, officers of the palace guard were forbidden tattoos. According to Keith Taylor, tattoos were now seen as "old fashioned and ugly."<sup>82</sup> Le Tac left Dai Viet while the state was undergoing important changes, changes he was not aware of from his new home in Hubei. Nonetheless, Le Tac's book reinforced and fixed the common Chinese perceptions of Annan.

He continued to describe the Vietnamese:

They like to bathe in the river during the summer heat, thus they are good at swimming and handling boats. They usually do not wear hats, stand with crossed arms, and sit cross-legged on mats. When visiting important families, they kneel on their knees and bow three times. When they receive guests they serve betel. They are addicted to salty, sour and seafood flavors, they drink too much, and are very thin and weak.<sup>83</sup>

Le Tac's recollections of the customs of his homeland is one of the most compelling sections of the book. He reminisced about holidays in the capital, describing the king within the palace watching his children and grandchildren play ball games as the common people set off firecrackers outside the gate. He described wrestling matches, kickball, polo, and songs set to Chinese tunes with Vietnamese lyrics. The festivals (Lunar New Year, the Cold Food Festival) were the same as those in China, and some customs, such as funerals, "are the same as in the Central Country." The section of the book is a nostalgic assertion of mutual heritage and celebration of small differences, written by an aging author who had spent most of his life in China.<sup>84</sup>

### A history for the Yuan court

Le Tac presented *A Brief History of Annan* at the Yuan court during the Tianli reign period (1328–1330), requesting that it be included in the compendium of government institutions and foreign relations, the *Jingshi Dadian*. It was.<sup>85</sup> Judging by the eleven appreciative prefaces to *A Brief History*, Le Tac's contemporaries greatly enjoyed his work. One went so far as to say, "The gentry and retired officials pass it around and read it out loud."<sup>86</sup>

Le Tac's book, and indeed his life, represents the complicated relationship of the northern and southern countries, inheritors of a shared classical tradition and yet frequent enemies. Le Tac adopted a northern perspective

<sup>82</sup> Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 139. <sup>83</sup> AZ, 41. <sup>84</sup> AZ, 40–41.

<sup>85</sup> AZ, 6, 11. <sup>86</sup> AZ, 3.

in his book, praising the Yuan state, vilifying Vietnamese resistance to northern interference, and downplaying Dai Viet's independence. He often referred to Dai Viet in a slippery way, implying that it was a part of the northern empire, or at least not asserting otherwise. But the political situation of his time was even more complex than this allows. Within Dai Viet, there was conflict among the Tran royal family over succession, as well as regional tensions. Le Tac was a regionalist too, clearly favoring his home district in the Red River Delta to upland regions. China itself was under foreign, Mongol rule. Le Tac's Chinese peers, notably the Song exile Mi Kai who found shelter with him, were, like him, dealing with the shifting tides of power and a crisis of loyalty. Le Tac lived in a world with more complex demands on his loyalties than simply patriotism to homeland. He served a Tran prince who was at odds with the Tran emperor. His regionalism meant that he may have felt that he had more in common with the Song leftover subject Mi Kai than with, for example, his "foolish and simple" compatriots from beyond the heartland districts of Dai Viet.

There is no doubt that Le Tac was constrained to write from a northern perspective. Some historians have combed through the book to find evidence of Le Tac's patriotism or nationalist inclinations. Wu Xiangqing, the editor of a 2000 Chinese edition of *A Brief History*, singled out Le Tac's inclusion of a letter from a southern king admonishing Han Wudi for attacking Nan Yue, and pointed to Le Tac's forthright assessment that the Song dynasty invasion of Dai Viet caused harm and suffering as proof of his patriotism.<sup>87</sup> Such claims are difficult to prove. What seems most significant is that Le Tac was asserting the cultural equality of the South with China, and insisting on its long exposure to classical culture to his northern audience.

Le Tac's book, finished in the 1330s, forms an instructive contrast with two other Vietnamese histories from the same era, *Linh Nam chich quai* (1380s)<sup>88</sup> and Le Van HUU's *Dai Viet su ky* (1272). The *Linh Nam chich quai* ("Strange Tales from South of the Passes") falls within the genre of tales of the strange, and deals mainly with legends, myths, and miracles. It differs from *A Brief History* in dating the beginnings of the Viet state back to the legendary Hung kings. Since these kings began their rule in the third millennium BCE, their existence would make the southern lineage predate the Zhou dynasty of the North. The final anecdote, "The Tale of the White Pheasant," elaborates the well-known story of an embassy from Yuechang that traveled to the Zhou dynasty to present tribute of a white pheasant. According to the version recorded in the *Linh Nam chich quai*, the Duke of Zhou said to the envoys, "Why do you people from Jiaozhi

<sup>87</sup> AZ, 5. <sup>88</sup> It was re-edited in 1492 to suit the needs of the Le court.

have short hair, tattoo your bodies, and go bareheaded and barefooted?” These were all common stereotypes of Vietnamese people, often repeated in Chinese writings, but not taken up by Le Tac. In contrast, the author of *Linh Nam chich quai* takes them head on, expressing cultural pride through the mouths of his envoys to the Zhou court: “Short hair is for convenience when traveling through the mountains and forests. We tattoo our bodies to look like dragons, so when we travel through the water the flood dragon will not dare to attack us. We go barefoot for convenience when climbing trees. We engage in slash and burn agriculture [and leave our heads bare] to beat the heat. We chew betel to get rid of filth, and therefore our teeth become black.” As in other versions of the story, the envoys get lost on the way home, so the Zhou dynasty grants them south-pointing carriages to guide the way.<sup>89</sup>

Le Van HUU’s *Dai Viet su ky* (“Annals of Dai Viet”) was modeled on Sima Qian’s *Shiji*. Le Van HUU finished this work and presented it to the Tran throne in 1272,<sup>90</sup> and Le Tac mentioned it in his own work. O. W. Wolters and Keith Taylor understand Le Van HUU’s work as a response to Mongol pressures. Compared with Le Tac, Le Van HUU was much more clearly concerned with elevating the Vietnamese polity to the same level as China.<sup>91</sup> Evoking the Nan Yue kingdom’s resistance to the northern Han dynasty, Le Van HUU cast the first post-Tang Vietnamese emperor Dinh Bo Linh (924–979 CE), the Le, the Ly, and the Tran as inheritors of Zhao Tuo’s mandate. One of the best examples of this effort to construct a Vietnamese identity is a poem by the general Ly Thuong Kiet, written on the occasion of fighting Song invaders in 1076, either cited or fabricated by Le Van HUU. This poem, according to Taylor, “expresses the idea of northern and southern imperial realms with a clear border defined by separate heavenly mandates.”<sup>92</sup> The poem is worth citing in full:

The Southern Emperor rules the Southern land.  
Our destiny is writ in Heaven’s Book.  
How dare you bandits trespass on our soil?  
You shall meet your undoing at our hands.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>89</sup> *Linh Nam chich quai liet truyen* (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1987), 54. <sup>90</sup> TT, 348.

<sup>91</sup> As Woodside puts it: “history writing became an important form of oppositional ‘boundary maintenance’ by Vietnamese and Korean state centers and their elites against Chinese hegemony.” Alexander Woodside, “Territorial Order and Collective-Identity Tensions in Confucian Asia: China, Vietnam, Korea,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 127, No. 3 (summer, 1998): 199.

<sup>92</sup> Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 129; O. W. Wolters, “Historians and Emperors in Vietnam and China: Comments Arising Out of Le Van HUU’s History, Presented to the Tran Court in 1272,” in Anthony Reid and David Marr, eds., *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books, 1979), 69–89.

<sup>93</sup> Huỳnh Sanh Thông, trans., *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 3.

This poem has served as a powerful tool for constructing a national past. Whether or not Ly Thuong Kiet truly uttered these words, the message is so clear and resonant that it is still often cited as a prime example of Vietnamese national consciousness and resistance to foreign aggression, and applied to times and circumstances as different as the American War in Vietnam (1955–1975) and the current tensions over the Spratly Islands.<sup>94</sup>

Le Van Huu and Le Tac both drew on classical sources including the *Book of Documents*, *Records of the Historian*, and *History of the Han* for their work. But from that commonality, the books diverged. Those Tran subjects who remained in Dai Viet through the Mongol incursions and, against all odds, prevailed, were galvanized against foreign threats. In contrast, Le Tac made no such overt statement of Vietnamese independence or claim to a separate heavenly mandate.

Le Van Huu's *Dai Viet su ky* was absorbed into the *Dai Viet su ky toan thu* ("Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet") by imperial request in 1479. Court historians continued to supplement this work through the seventeenth century.<sup>95</sup> The *Complete Chronicles* was not well known in China. In contrast, Le Tac's *Brief History of Annan* was available to Chinese readers during the Ming era, but likely unknown in Dai Viet. Qing dynasty (1644–1911) scholars rediscovered *A Brief History* and compiled extant manuscripts into an authoritative edition containing nineteen of the original twenty chapters (a final chapter of poems was lost). Scholars were still eager to consult *A Brief History of Annan* more than five hundred years after it first appeared; it was rushed to the press in 1885 when the Sino-French War caused a surge of interest in Vietnam. A French edition soon followed, translated by Camille Sainson as *Mémoires sur l'Annan* and published in Beijing in 1896.<sup>96</sup> French and Chinese scholarly interest in the text was no doubt bolstered by their colonial enterprise in Vietnam.

Just as Le Van Huu's *Dai Viet su ky* forms a useful counterpoint to Le Tac's work, a Tran ambassador named Mac Dinh Chi (c. 1280–1350)

<sup>94</sup> To give just a couple of examples, it is cited on the first page of Jayne S. Werner and Luu Doan Huynh, eds., *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1993). Trần Trọng Kim, *Việt Nam Sử Lược*, Vol. I (Fort Smith, Arkansas: Sông Mòi, 1978), 105. A Google search of the poem in Vietnamese links to patriotic YouTube clips and blogs that oppose Chinese claims to the Spratly and Paracel islands.

<sup>95</sup> The court historian Ngo Si Lien edited and extended the 1479 edition of the text. It was updated several more times, including a 1665 redaction by Pham Cong Tru and a 1697 redaction by Le Hy. The 1697 edition, called the Chinh Hoa edition after the reign date, covers events to 1675.

<sup>96</sup> Maurice Durand, "Revue de *An-nam chi-lược* 安南志略, en 19 quyển by Lê Tắc 黎嗣," *T'oung Pao*, Vol. 50, livr. 1/3 (1963): 345.

illuminates the path not taken by Le Tac. Mac Dinh Chi is mostly remembered today as the sixth-generation ancestor of the dynastic founder Mac Dang Dung (c. 1483–1541). He had an illustrious career serving the Tran dynasty, beginning with his first-place performance in the 1304 examinations held under the Tran. In 1308, Mac Dinh Chi traveled to Beijing as an envoy. Le Tac was living in Hubei at the time, but there is no indication that he would have met with or even known about Tran envoys. Mac Dinh Chi's visit is not recorded in Chinese sources, but the *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet* contains an unusually long passage describing his trip:

The [Tran] emperor sent Mac Dinh Chi to the Yuan. Dinh Chi was short and thin and the Yuan people disdained him. One day the steward summoned him for an audience and he was seated with the others. At that time it was the fifth month, and the courtyard had just a thin canopy. There was an embroidered image of a sparrow in the branches of a bamboo. Dinh Chi pretended that he thought it was real and rushed forward as if to catch it. The Yuan people all burst out laughing. Then Dinh Chi grabbed the canopy and rent it in two. Everyone was amazed and asked him why he did that. He answered, "I have heard that in ancient times there were paintings of sparrows in plum trees, but I have yet to hear of a painting of a sparrow in bamboo. Now inside the prime minister's tent there is an embroidered sparrow in bamboo. Bamboo represents the gentleman and the sparrow represents the petty person, and yet in this embroidered canopy the sparrow exceeds the bamboo. I am afraid the petty person's way will be strengthened and the gentleman's way will disappear. Therefore I have eliminated [the embroidery] for the imperial dynasty." Everyone admired his ability.

After this episode, Mac Dinh Chi had an audience with the Yuan emperor. The emperor asked him to inscribe a fan he had just received from another foreign ambassador. Dinh Chi picked up his writing brush and composed a poem without hesitation. His poem reflected on the moral charge of government officials by means of several classical allusions. According to the *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet*, it caused all the Yuan people to gasp in admiration.<sup>97</sup> Mac Dinh Chi was lauded for his success upon his return to Dai Viet and given the nickname "Valedictorian of Two Countries" (*luong Quoc trang Nguyen*). His triumph was well known as late as the nineteenth century.<sup>98</sup>

The anecdote shows an initially despised southern intellectual demonstrating that his erudition and moral sensibility exceeded that of his northern interlocutors. Mac Dinh Chi inverted a hierarchy of knowledge (Beijing

<sup>97</sup> TT, 390. A later version of this story is preserved in the nineteenth-century *Nhân Vật Chí* (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1986), 148.

<sup>98</sup> Alexander Barton Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Nguyen and Ch'ing Civil Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 115.

as a cultural center and Dong Kinh as an outpost) by demonstrating that the Yuan court had lost their sense of propriety. The southern valedictorian, by contrast, preserved his sense of right and instructed his grateful northern interlocutors. The story ends happily, with the Yuan people readily acknowledging his abilities. Like Le Tac, Mac Dinh Chi's goal (or the goal of the author of the *Complete Chronicles*) was not to show that Vietnamese culture was different though equal to that of China's, but rather that Dai Viet was as much an inheritor and preserver of classical learning as China was. In fact, in this case, Mac Dinh Chi had to instruct the Yuan people, who had lost touch with that past and its moral foundation. This is perhaps a commentary on the degrading influence of Mongol rule. Le Tac and Mac Dinh Chi thus both desired to demonstrate Vietnamese mastery of classical culture, but took different life paths: Le Tac as a minister of the Yuan, and Mac Dinh Chi as a minister of the Tran.

### The afterlife of *A Brief History of Annam*

Once French colonial rule of Vietnam came to an end, Vietnamese nationalists finally turned to Le Tac's *Brief History* for their own purposes. The Republic of Vietnam (RVN) sponsored the Committee for the Translation of Vietnamese Historical Documents to work on translation projects. Based at Hue University, these translation projects were meant to bring Vietnamese precolonial texts, all of which were written in literary Sinitic or the character-based demotic script Nom, to a readership literate only in the modern *quoc ngu* ("national language") script of romanized Vietnamese. According to the historian of Vietnam Nu-Anh Tran, the RVN sponsored historical research, performances of court rituals, and revival of traditional art forms in order to establish itself as "the inheritor of state power and cultural authenticity."<sup>99</sup> The committee chose *A Brief History of Annam* as its second translation, in 1961, illustrating its importance to the RVN historical narrative. At the same time, Le Tac confused modern readers because he failed to imagine himself into the community that twentieth-century nationalist meta-narratives would lead one to expect. Scholars dismissed the text through the 1930s, dismissing the author and book as "a historian who sold out the country, a work of history that is a humiliation."<sup>100</sup> Even the editors

<sup>99</sup> Nu-Anh Tran, "Contested Nationalism: Ethnic Identity and State Power in the Republic of Vietnam, 1954–1963" (UC Berkeley, Institute for the Study of Societal Issues Working Papers, 1-03/2012), 20.

<sup>100</sup> Trần Thanh Mại cited in Chương Thân. "Lời Nói Đầu," 8.

of the 1961 edition, no doubt sensitive to the RVN's then-fraught situation, labeled him a traitor.<sup>101</sup>

Is *A Brief History of Annan* a Vietnamese book, properly designated *An Nam chi luoc* in the romanized Vietnamese *quoc ngu* script? Should it be considered as such because it was written by a Dai Viet-born author, even though it was largely unknown in Vietnam before the twentieth century? Or should it be considered a Chinese work, romanized in Mandarin pinyin as *Annan zhilue*, acknowledging that it was primarily written for, and read by, a Chinese audience? Is Le Tac a traitor for surrendering to the Yuan and fleeing his country? Or is he a patriot who contributed to the history of Vietnam and recorded the stories of southern resisters to northern aggression for posterity?

The answer to these questions lies somewhere in between. Le Tac's book reflects the dual nature of Vietnamese history, its long and fruitful connection to classical culture, its educational system based on literacy in literary Sinitic and knowledge of the classics, paired with its centuries of hard-fought political independence. Le Tac, and others like him, had a complicated set of personal and literary allegiances that shifted over his lifetime. *A Brief History of Annan* has been adopted and put to work by a number of different stakeholders, from the Mongols to the RVN, but the circumstances of its creation are more complex than that which a restrictive binary of an opportunistically imperialist China or a patriotically rebellious Vietnam allows.

In the end, Le Tac had nothing left but to commit his memories and knowledge to print. He clearly wished his book to be read, preserved, and disseminated. Retired, no longer able to return home, Le Tac pored over books ranging from the classic *Book of Documents*, through Tang poetry, to recent Yuan edicts to compile his *Brief History*. As his friend Liu Bide reported, he "stays inside but his mind ranges all over the place."<sup>102</sup> His family and the country that he knew were lost, but he could still seek solace and claim his place in the familiar world of classical culture, the world he proudly shared with his father, grandfather, and ancestors, stretching all the way back to Prefect Nguyen Phu of the Eastern Jin.

<sup>101</sup> Noting that the cover of his copy of the book fell off almost immediately, Honey fretted that in publishing it, Hue University "has carried economy too far." The text included the original Sinitic text, a transliteration into *quoc ngu* script, and a translation into modern Vietnamese. P. J. Honey, "Review of Annan Chi-Lu'o'c by Lê Tắc," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 1963): 131–133. Pham Loc Quoc, *Translation in Vietnam and Vietnam in Translation: Language, Culture, and Identity* (PhD dissertation: University of Massachusetts—Amherst, 2011), 181–182, n. 49.

<sup>102</sup> AZ, 4.

## 2 A record of the dreams of an old southerner

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A century after Le Tac published *A Brief History of Annam*, another southerner displaced by war worked to carve out a place for Dai Viet in the northern literary world. Ho Nguyen Trung (1374–1446),<sup>1</sup> a former prince of Dai Viet living in exile in China and serving as an official in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) Board of Works, wrote *A Record of the Dreams of an Old Southerner* (*Nam weng meng lu/Nam ong mong luc*). “Old Southerner” was Ho Nguyen Trung’s chosen pen name, expressing nostalgia for his southern homeland after more than two decades in the North. His goal in writing the book was to affirm the place of southerners in the genre of biographies of moral exemplars. As he explained in his preface, dated 1438:

*The Analects* declares, “Even a town of ten dwellings must have one who has the loyalty and honesty of Confucius.” As for the people of Jiaonan [Dai Viet], they have been numerous since antiquity; how can we take a distant place and hastily declare that there are no [good] people there? In the past people said that when actions and talent were in accord, much could be achieved.<sup>2</sup>

The book goes on to detail the achievements of specific Tran-era rulers, doctors, poets, and exemplary women. Like Le Tac, Ho Nguyen Trung concluded his preface with a modest protestation: “Although this [book] is an insignificant contribution to literature, still it is of no little use to inspiring pleasant conversation.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, it is a trove of information about the fallen Tran dynasty (1225–1400).

Ho Nguyen Trung had started his government career as a minister to the same Tran dynasty that Le Tac had served.<sup>4</sup> Like Le Tac, he was caught up in political instability at home and war with the North. Ho Nguyen Trung’s father, Ho Quy Ly (also known as Le Quy Ly), had risen

<sup>1</sup> Hồ Nguyên Trừng 胡元澄 is also frequently referred to in the sources as Lê Trừng 黎澄 or Hồ Trừng 胡澄.

<sup>2</sup> Lê Trừng, *Nam Ông mộng lục* (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, 1987), 11. Hereafter cited as ML.

<sup>3</sup> ML, 11. <sup>4</sup> TT, 469.

from within the Tran government ranks. He amassed enough power to dethrone the last Tran ruler and declare his own dynasty, the Ho, in 1400. After just six years, the Ming intervened militarily to overthrow the Ho and rule Dai Viet outright as part of the Ming empire. The Ming military captured Ho Quy Ly and his sons and brought them to China for punishment. Ho Nguyen Trung evaded punishment and even prospered, rising to a high rank in the Ming officialdom, thanks in part to his specialized knowledge of the manufacture of gunpowder weapons.<sup>5</sup>

Ho Nguyen Trung's dramatic life story, from official, to prince, to war captive, and finally back to official, was due in part to the changes in Dai Viet unleashed by the violent end of the Tran and the unstable beginnings of the new state founded by his own father. But it was due no less to changes within Ming China. Ho Nguyen Trung's lifetime spanned the reigns of two forceful Ming emperors, Zhu Yuanzhang (r. 1368–1398) and his son Zhu Di (r. 1402–1424), whose vastly different policies toward Dai Viet would have a profound influence on his life. The founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, had attempted to freeze the border with Dai Viet and declare permanent neutrality. His strong-willed son Zhu Di, by contrast, initiated greater involvement in Southeast Asia, breaking the precedents set by his father. Both emperors worked within the same long-standing framework of diplomatic relations, but responded to the situation in Dai Viet flexibly, as they saw fit. This chapter will follow the stories of two dynastic founders, Zhu Yuanzhang and Ho Quy Ly, and their sons, Zhu Di and Ho Nguyen Trung. One son defied his father but strengthened the dynasty, while the other obeyed his father yet became an official of an enemy state. It shows that the diplomatic structures of late imperial China, traditionally characterized as rigid and out of touch, actually allowed for both Zhu Yuanzhang's bounded world order as well as Zhu Di's expansive world order. The impact of these policies can be seen in the life and career of Ho Nguyen Trung.

### Establishment of the Ming

The establishment of the Ming dynasty by Zhu Yuanzhang in 1368 reoriented the East Asian world. After a century of Mongol rule under the Yuan dynasty and decades of economic decline, famine, and instability, Zhu, reigning as the Hongwu emperor ("Floodlike Martiality"), worked to restore central control and stabilize society. During the first

<sup>5</sup> He was skilled at manufacturing firearms and made a "magic gun" for the Ming. Li Xu, *Jie'an Laoren Manbi* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1982), 219; Yan Congjian, *Shuyu zhouzhi lu* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1993), 183, 243. Hereafter cited as SZL.

few uncertain years of his reign, Zhu Yuanzhang could not have predicted that his state would last for nearly three centuries. The pressing concern of his new government was consolidation and management of this fragile new state.

Following the horrifying violence and depredation that marked the long fall of the Yuan, Zhu Yuanzhang was anxious to define, promulgate, and permanently institute his vision of an ideal government and society. He strove to build a government on a foundation of “self-governing rural communities”<sup>6</sup> mainly inhabited by Sinitic speakers.<sup>7</sup> To that end, he commissioned or wrote a slate of works in order to indoctrinate the bureaucratic staff and the people.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the *Great Ming Code* (*Da Ming lu*), Zhu Yuanzhang wrote two documents that allowed him to speak directly to two groups of people, his heirs (*The August Ming Ancestral Injunctions* (*Huang Ming zuxun*), discussed below) and the common people (*The Great Pronouncements*).

*The Great Pronouncements* (*Da Gao*) was an unusual and important book, unlike anything from previous dynasties. In 1385, frustrated by corruption and scandal among the bureaucratic corps, Zhu Yuanzhang was emboldened to present his own views rather than rely on the authority of the classics. The title *Great Pronouncements* was taken from the *Book of Documents*, from a section in which the Duke of Zhou admonishes his subjects. Zhu Yuanzhang titled his book to equate his literary and ideological powers with those of the ancient sage rulers. The text, issued in four installments, provided for the common people models of good behavior and examples of bad behavior. It promulgated new laws and revised old ones. Zhu Yuanzhang intended for it to be distributed widely, taught in schools, and followed in perpetuity without alteration. It was a way for the emperor to speak directly to the people and to empower them to enforce his vision of society from the grassroots level up.<sup>9</sup>

Not all consolidation, however, could be achieved through indoctrination alone. Another high priority of the Hongwu reign was to crush

<sup>6</sup> Siyen Fei, *Negotiating Urban Space: Urbanization and Late Ming Nanjing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard East Asia Monographs, 2010), 1.

<sup>7</sup> John Dardess, *Ming China*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> These include *The August Ming Ancestral Injunctions*, *The Great Ming Commandment*, *The Placard of People’s Instructions*, and the *Ming Code*. For a study and translation of these four works, see Edward L. Farmer, *Zhu Yuanzhang and Early Ming Legislation: The Reordering of Ming Society Following the Era of Mongol Rule* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Edward L. Farmer, *Zhu Yuanzhang and Early Ming Legislation*, 53–57; Sarah Schneewind, *Community Schools and the State in Ming China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 16–18; On-cho Ng and Q. Edward Wang, *Mirroring the Past: The Writing and Use of History in Imperial China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 203.

pockets of anti-Ming resistance and assert control over all territories claimed by the Ming empire. In areas of resistance that Zhu Yuanzhang deemed immediate security threats, he was willing to deploy the full force of the Ming military. A state-sponsored campaign of suppression and incorporation of the southwestern region encompassing Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi began during the Hongwu reign. During the Ming, this intensive, “uninterrupted campaign of state-sponsored violence” through the sixteenth century brought the southwest more fully under central control.<sup>10</sup> Zhu Yuanzhang judged Yunnan – with its Mongol princes and marooned Yuan armies – a particular risk, and thus incorporated it as a province fairly early in his reign, in 1382. He soon sent more than three quarters of a million Ming soldiers to populate the area, permanently affecting the ethnic make-up and language of the province.<sup>11</sup> Guizhou became a province in 1413. The border provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi (collectively known as Liang Guang) were more firmly incorporated by the centralizing state in the Ming, though their population remained largely non-Hua.<sup>12</sup> In areas that Zhu Yuanzhang did not deem intrinsic parts of the Chinese state, he exercised more caution.

### A bounded Ming

Upon ascending the throne, Zhu Yuanzhang moved quickly to contact foreign states. During the first year of his reign, in February 1369, Zhu formally announced his ascension to the throne and the new regime in China to Dai Viet and several other neighboring states. He hoped to establish friendly if distant relations with these states.

The Ming labeled any state that it had diplomatic relations with, including Dai Viet, Korea, Champa, and several dozen other polities, as *fan*, usually translated in English-language scholarship as “tributary state.” These tributary states would send “tributary missions” to the Ming capital and present “tribute” (*gong*) of local goods to the throne. The relationship between the Ming and its tributaries was predicated on a mutual recognition of hierarchy. Difference was embedded in the very words used to describe the relationship: the Ming ruler was “emperor”

<sup>10</sup> John Herman, *Amid the Clouds and Mist: China's Colonization of Guizhou, 1200–1700* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 13. F.W. Mote, *Imperial China, 900–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 703.

<sup>11</sup> Sun Laichen, “Assessing the Ming Role in China's Southern Expansion,” in Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen, eds., *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010), 68.

<sup>12</sup> Leo Kwok-yueh Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State: Ethnicity and Expansion on the Ming Borderlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

(*dì*) and the foreign rulers “kings” (*wáng*) or an even lower rank; the emperor “bestowed” or “granted” gifts, while tributaries “offered up” or “presented” tribute. The Ming granted tributary gifts such as an official calendar based on Ming reign dates, official seals, and robes. These gifts placed tributary states in Chinese time and space; years were numbered by the reign years of Ming rulers, and space was abstracted as inner (China) and outer (*fan*). In this way, tributary relations echoed the archaic five-zone model articulated in *The Book of Documents*. The rulers of Dai Viet readily abided by the customs of tributary relations, which were evidently useful in increasing their legitimacy at home. At the same time, Ming rulers were anxious to establish and maintain tributary relations with foreign states, both for security purposes and to bolster their position and prestige as regional hegemon, even though these relations were often financially expensive for the Ming.<sup>13</sup>

This stance of cordial but distant relations was enshrined in the *August Ming Ancestral Injunctions*, which served as something like dynastic law for the royal family and the court. Zhu Yuanzhang meant for this document to bind all future rulers alike, and he forbade its amendment, revision, or rejection. In the section of the *Ancestral Injunctions* on foreign states, Zhu Yuanzhang wrote with some prescience:

The Yi of the four directions are all screened by mountains and separated from us by oceans, sequestered in distant corners. Should we acquire their land, it would not be sufficient to provide for us. Should we acquire their people, they would not be capable of serving us. If they do not understand the limit of their strength and come to harass our borders, then it will be unlucky for them. Yet if we raise troops and send them out without careful consideration, it will likewise be unlucky for us. I am afraid that future generations of my descendants will rely on the Central Country's wealth and strength and become greedy for transient military triumphs, raising troops for no reason to the extent that they harm people and cause loss of life. Record that this cannot be done. The Hu and Rong of the Northwest are near to one another and continually at war. We must select generals to train troops so that they are ready when the time comes.

He went on to list the states that were not to be attacked by the Ming: Korea, Japan, Greater Ryukyus, Lesser Ryukyus, Annan (Dai Viet), Cambodia, Siam, Champa, Sumatra, Ceylon,<sup>14</sup> Java, Pahang,

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of tributary relations as it relates to the Ming and its southern *tusi* or native chieftaincies, see Leo Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State*, chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup> I take 西洋 (*xīyáng* “western ocean”) here to be a reference to Ceylon. But it could instead be Chola, a Tamil dynasty of southern India, although it was no longer in existence when Hongwu ascended the throne. Farmer translates it as “Western Ocean Country,” 120. More specifically, Xiyang referred to the Indian Ocean.

Pajajaran,<sup>15</sup> Srivijaya, and Brunei. The text specified that Annan should send tribute triennially.<sup>16</sup>

In the *Ancestral Injunctions*, Zhu Yuanzhang prescribed his vision of the Ming world order, drawing a distinction between the relatively friendly countries of Southeast Asia, Japan, and Korea on the one hand and northwestern states or groups that potentially posed a threat to Chinese sovereignty, such as the Mongols (the Hu and Rong). He noted that war with the northwest was inevitable, a constant of Chinese history. The Hongwu emperor's stance was part of a larger worldview that located Dai Viet, as well as Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asian states, in the category of nonthreatening tributary states. As the founding emperor of a hard-won dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang was cautious about the scope of imperial expansion. Perhaps he had taken note of the disastrous Mongol campaigns in Japan, Dai Viet, and throughout Southeast Asia and wished to chart a safer course.

As evidenced by the *Ancestral Injunctions*, Dai Viet and Korea were among the Ming's closest tributary states. The relationship entailed mutual obligations. The Ming government occasionally asked Dai Viet to provide troops, elephants, and provisions to assist them in putting down rebellions in the southern borderlands. At times throughout the dynasty, the Ming requested personnel such as eunuchs or monks.<sup>17</sup> After the Ming overthrow of the Ho dynasty in 1407, seven thousand seven hundred Vietnamese artisans of various kinds were sent to Nanjing.<sup>18</sup> Toward the end of the dynasty, the Ming frequently asked Dai Viet for help in apprehending pirates or other criminals along the southeastern coast. In return, the king of Dai Viet could expect Ming support against rivals to the throne or external threats. During the Ming dynasty, as we will see below, the Chinese government intervened or at least seriously considered intervening after the existing Dai Viet dynasty was overthrown in 1400 and later in 1527 and 1547. Though these interventions post-dated the Hongwu reign, the Hongwu emperor's interpretation of the tributary model – namely as entailing regular communication and tribute missions but avoidance of military involvement – was still carefully considered.

Much ink has been spilled over defining, contesting, and redefining the “tributary system,” or, as it is sometimes called, “the Chinese world

<sup>15</sup> Following Geoff Wade's translation of Penheng 湓亨 and Baihua Guo 白花國 in *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu*, [www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/](http://www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/)

<sup>16</sup> Ming Taizu, Emperor of China, *Huang Ming Zixun/Zhu Yuanzhang Zhuan* (Beijing: Beijing Tushuguan Chubanshe, 2002), 5–7; See also Edward Farmer, 120; Leo Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State*, 57.

<sup>17</sup> See for example TT, 470. <sup>18</sup> MSL, 129.

order.”<sup>19</sup> Both terms imply a systematized practice of highly orchestrated rules and procedures for conducting foreign relations. This kind of research extends nineteenth-century Eurocentric views that posited a blindly Sinocentric China incapable of entering the modern world of diplomacy between equal states. In fact, as scholars such as John Wills have shown, the Ming system was flexible and not at all systematized.<sup>20</sup> Brantley Womack plausibly argues that the so-called tributary system provided not a rigid doctrine meant only to project imperial might, but a mutually useful framework for managing asymmetric relations between a small state, Dai Viet, and its dominant neighbor, China. Womack shows that in relations between countries such as China and Vietnam, in which one state is more powerful in terms of land and resources, state-to-state interaction happens within a framework of acknowledged asymmetry. To maintain equilibrium, the smaller state must show deference while the larger state must respect the autonomy of the smaller state. This asymmetrical relationship demands constant negotiation to avoid misunderstanding, accomplished through “ritualized interaction” in which, in this case, China shows acknowledgment and Vietnam shows deference. The difficult part of the balance is that the Chinese side must feel deference in order to acknowledge Vietnam, and the Vietnamese side must trust that its autonomy will be respected before it can show deference.<sup>21</sup> My work builds on this theoretical foundation to show that a flexible foreign policy was predicated on mutual acknowledgment of asymmetry. Since the sources do not speak of a “tributary system,” I will call it a tributary model of foreign relations. In the pages below, I will honor the vocabulary used in contemporary sources, like *fan* and *gong*. My hope is that my case studies of Sino-Viet relations show the capacity of the tributary model of foreign relations to allow for a range of actions, from ethical intervention to robust border-making, preceded always by negotiation.

### Cultural borders

The Tran state of Dai Viet was the first foreign state to offer its official congratulations and allegiance to the newly established Ming dynasty,

<sup>19</sup> John King Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968.

<sup>20</sup> John Wills, “Functional, Not Fossilized: Qing Tribute Relations with Dai Viet (Vietnam) and Siam (Thailand), 1700–1820,” *T'oung Pao*, Vol. 98 (2012): 439–478.

<sup>21</sup> Brantley Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), especially 396; Womack, “Asymmetric Structure and Culture in China's Relations with Its Southern Neighbors,” in John K. Whitmore and James A. Anderson, eds., *China's Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier over Two Millennia* (Boston: Brill, 2015), 395–403.

sending a diplomatic mission that arrived in the capital Nanjing on July 23, 1369. This recognition was meaningful; the Koryo dynasty (918–1388) of Korea, unlike Dai Viet, did not initially recognize the Ming and continued to maintain close relations with the Yuan. The problem of establishing relations with the new Chinese state while not alienating the Mongol forces still in power near Korea's borders ultimately proved so intractable that it contributed to the fall of Koryo and the establishment of a new dynasty on the Korean Peninsula under the rule of the general Yi Songgye. Yi quickly moved to contact the Ming emperor, who granted the new dynasty the old name of Choson ("land of the morning calm").<sup>22</sup> Dai Viet could not but be held in a favorable light compared with decades of tension and mistrust with Koryo. Ming officials never forgot and often referenced this early recognition by the Tran state, even to the end of the Ming. Zhu Yuanzhang responded to Dai Viet's initial embassy by sending two Hanlin scholars, Zhang Yining and Niu Liang, to formally recognize and confirm Tran Hien as king and to present him with the calendar, silk gauze, and a silver seal in the shape of a camel.<sup>23</sup> Inscribed on this seal was a message which confirmed the Tran ruler as the "King of Annan" (*Annan guowang*).<sup>24</sup>

Zhu Yuanzhang's descriptions of Dai Viet worked to establish clear political and cultural borders between the two states. When the ambassadors returned in 1371, Zhu Yuanzhang expressed surprise and pleasure that they made it back safely despite the hazards of the journey. His words on that occasion evoked well-established tropes of Dai Viet as an exotic, dangerous, and barbarian place, the very tropes Le Tac had so scrupulously avoided in his own work. The memorial submitted by Zhang Yining and Niu Liang delighted the emperor, as recorded in the text *Shuyu Zhouzi lu*:

I read it over and over with irrepressible happiness. I had thought that Annan was a distant place of Yi people, with an extremely foul climate, a place that the ancients thought of as remote, where wise men would not travel to because they were afraid that the poisonous air would not suit their constitutions.

And yet it seems that the emperor had not completely changed his mind about Annan, as he then composed a poem replete with stereotypes of the untamed South, praising his envoys for braving the arduous journey. The

<sup>22</sup> Relations remained strained throughout the Hongwu reign. Donald N. Clark, "Sino-Korean Tributary Relations under the Ming," in Twitchett and Mote, eds., *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 8: The Ming Dynasty, Part 2: 1368–1644*, 274–276.

<sup>23</sup> Also recorded in Wang Shizhen, *Annan Zhuan* (Taibei: Guangwen Shuju, 1969), 6. This source describes the seal as turtle-shaped; Luo Yuejiang, *Xian bin lu*, 126.

<sup>24</sup> Zhang Tingyu et al., *Ming Shi*, juan 321, accessed through *Scripta Sinica*. Hereafter cited as MS. Also Li Wenfeng, *Yue Jiao Shu* (Tainan: Zhuang Yan, 1996), 162–690a.

poem evoked the hardships and cultural differences experienced by the envoys, such as “the snakes and insects of the dense jungle,” “miasmic clouds burying the trees in layers of mist,” people going about barefoot, “monkeys howling at the moon.” Annan, he concluded, was a place where the rites and music had yet to be established.<sup>25</sup> This is directly opposed to Le Tac’s “Verses on Geography,” which asserted that “The rites, music, and scholarly robes and caps had begun to appear” by the Tran dynasty.<sup>26</sup> Zhu Yuanzhang’s characterization of Dai Viet, in contrast, confirms its location beyond the pale of classical civilization. For Zhu Yuanzhang, Dai Viet did not warrant violent incorporation, unlike the southwestern provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou, because it was beyond the pale of civilization and did not represent a security threat. Friendly diplomatic relations were desired with exotic Dai Viet, but nothing more.

Sino-Viet relations became strained toward the end of the Hongwu reign, but the Ming state preserved its renunciation of intervention. From the 1370s, Dai Viet defended itself against a series of attacks from the kingdom of Champa. Both Champa and Dai Viet sent official communications to the Ming, complaining of the situation and requesting help. This put Ming China in a bind, unhappily mediating between the two tributary states by demanding – ineffectually – that they cease fighting. To make matters worse, in 1397, the Tran occupied more than one hundred *li* of Siming Prefecture in Guangxi, claiming it as ancient territory of Dai Viet. Some Ming officials advocated using force to expel them, but Zhu Yuanzhang reportedly responded, “Since ancient times, the Man and Yi have always fought among themselves. They presume upon their foolish obstinacy, but in the end they are courting disaster. Therefore we should just wait it out.”<sup>27</sup> His very word choice here reveals that he viewed the Vietnamese as “Yi”, not as the Jiao people often incorporated into northern states. While Le Tac had relegated the Man and Yi to the distant past, the Ming emperor perceived them as continuing their ancient and intractable ways in the present day.

At the same time, the Tran dynasty was becoming frustrated with the demands of the Ming court. In 1395, the Ming sent a messenger to the Tran court demanding fifty thousand troops and fifty elephants to aid the Ming in fighting rebellions in the southern borderlands. The Tran made excuses and found a way to contribute a smaller number. That

<sup>25</sup> SZL, 171–172. <sup>26</sup> AZ, 432.

<sup>27</sup> MS, *juan* 321; SZL, 174–176; ANZY, 9. This could mean the Yi (Vietnamese) fighting with Guangxi residents (Man). For a discussion of this conflict, see Leo Shin, “Ming China and Its Border with Annan,” in Diana Lary, ed., *The Chinese State at the Borders* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 91–104.

same year, the Ming made an additional request for eunuchs, monks, and massage girls, a request received with considerable irritation and mainly ignored.<sup>28</sup> By that year, the Tran minister Ho Quy Ly had virtual control of the country, and he proved willing to resist Ming demands.

Ho Quy Ly's refusal to acquiesce to Ming demands worked so long as Zhu Yuanzhang remained on the throne. Zhu Yuanzhang viewed the Vietnamese as Yi with exotic customs, internally contentious, and to be held at arm's length, even when its rulers were behaving in a way that the North viewed as recalcitrant. For Zhu, the Vietnamese were not co-inheritors of classical tradition, but a state that existed beyond the borders of China and even outside of time. He drew a clear political and cultural border between the Ming and Dai Viet and enshrined that border in *The Ancestral Injunctions*. That line would be transgressed during the reign of the third emperor of the Ming, Zhu Di, the Yongle emperor.

### An expansive Ming

Zhu Di (1360–1424), the fourth son of the Hongwu emperor, rejected his father's vision of the Ming world order. A usurper and violator of the *Ancestral Injunctions*, Zhu Di, who reigned as the Yongle emperor ("Perpetual Happiness"), was willing to use military force to gain his objectives and to expand the influence and territory of the Ming state. Zhu Yuanzhang, following the rule of primogeniture, had selected Zhu Biao, his eldest son by his empress, as crown prince. When Zhu Biao died, the position was inherited in turn by Zhu Biao's eldest son, Zhu Yunwen. After Zhu Yuanzhang's death in 1398, Zhu Yunwen made moves to purge the imperial princes from their frontier principedoms. In response, Zhu Di left his base in Beijing and led his private troops against his nephew, Zhu Yunwen. By 1402, Zhu Di had put a brutal end to the four-year reign of Zhu Yunwen and ascended the throne himself. The trajectory of the Ming changed dramatically, not least because of the 1420 relocation of the capital from Nanjing to Beijing. During his twenty-two-year reign, Zhu Di led several offensive wars against the Mongols, annexed parts of Manchuria, extended Ming control of the Tarim Basin, and created the Translators' Institute (*siyi guan*) to improve

<sup>28</sup> TT, 470. The glowing reports of Vietnamese eunuchs in the Ming court about their homeland helped spur Zhu Yuanzhang's interest in the South. See John K. Whitmore, "Keeping the Emperor Out: Trieu Da and Ming Taizu in the Vietnamese Chronicle," in Sarah Schneewind, ed., *Long Live the Emperor! Uses of the Ming Founder across Six Centuries of East Asian History* (Minneapolis, MN: Society for Ming Studies, 2008), 350–352.

foreign relations.<sup>29</sup> In the words of a recent biographer, “he never lost a day.”<sup>30</sup> His ideal state diverged sharply from Zhu Yuanzhang’s vision of agrarian self-sufficiency. Zhu Di looked instead to the sprawling Han and Tang empires, and to the more recent model of Khubilai’s vigorous expansion.<sup>31</sup>

Zhu Di also had a marked interest in Southeast Asia, as seen in his sponsorship of the Zheng He voyages. That project demonstrates that Zhu Di had a different and grander vision of China’s place in the world than any other Ming emperor. Between 1405 and 1433, the Ming government sent the admiral Zheng He on eight voyages, outfitted with massive fleets consisting of giant “treasure ships” and hundreds of smaller vessels, and accompanied by upward of twenty thousand crew members. Zhu Di designed these eight sea voyages to project Ming power to the states of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, showcase the strength of the Ming navy, and extend the geographical range of the Ming’s diplomatic relations.<sup>32</sup> The historian Sun Laichen has argued that the Zheng He age represents the height of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia, yet to be surpassed.<sup>33</sup>

Having already broken the rules of succession of the *Ancestral Injunctions* by waging war on his nephew, in 1406 Yongle again committed a major infringement when he invaded and eventually annexed Dai Viet. The official reason for the campaign was to destroy Ho Quy Ly’s state and restore the Tran dynasty to control of the country. Ultimately, however, the Ming state ended up directly ruling Dai Viet as a province, renamed Jiaozhi like the Han dynasty protectorate. Although Zhu Di and

<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the Translators’ Institute, see Baldanza, “The Ambiguous Border: Sino-Viet Relations in the Early Modern World” (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2010), chapter 2.

<sup>30</sup> Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *Perpetual Happiness: The Ming Emperor Yongle* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>31</sup> David M. Robinson, “The Ming Court of the Legacy of the Yuan Mongols,” in Robinson, ed. *Culture, Courtiers, and Competition: the Ming Court (1368–1644)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 369, n. 16.

<sup>32</sup> See Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007). Geoff Wade goes even farther, demonstrating that the voyages were military in nature, and an extension of the Ming’s colonial projects in Yunnan and Dai Viet. He likens them to “gunboat diplomacy.” He writes that there were eight voyages, not seven as usually thought. Geoff Wade, “The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (2005): 37–58. Zhu Di did not restrict his efforts to Southeast Asia. He also projected Ming power through temple building at the northern and western frontiers of the empire, from Yongningsi on the Amur River to Qutansi in present-day Qinghai. See Aurelia Campbell, forthcoming, *Architecture and Empire in the Reign of the Emperor Yongle*.

<sup>33</sup> He writes that as the “first gunpowder empire anywhere in the world” the Ming exerted “direct political influence” in Southeast Asia. Sun Laichen, “Assessing the Ming Role,” 57–61.

his generals hoped to reincorporate Jiaozhi into an invigorated Ming empire in perpetuity, the conquest lasted only twenty years. Those two decades profoundly affected the lives of countless Vietnamese, among them Ho Quy Ly's son Ho Nguyen Trung.

### The beginnings of the Ho dynasty

By the late fourteenth century, Champa-launched invasions, natural disaster, and poor leadership weakened the Tran state. The minister Ho Quy Ly rose to a position of power within the Tran dynasty even as Tran fortunes were declining. Ho Quy Ly was a maternal cousin of Tran Phu, who briefly served as emperor (1370–1372) and remained an important Tran leader until his death in 1394. Ho Quy Ly became more closely linked to the royal family through strategic marriages between the two families. By 1395, Ho Quy Ly was promoted to Grand Tutor, with jurisdiction over civil and military affairs, and was granted the aristocratic title Great Prince, normally reserved for members of the royal family. Had Mac Dinh Chi been alive to comment, he surely would have labeled Ho Quy Ly's rise a case of the sparrow perching on top of the bamboo. However, Ho Quy Ly had the support, or at least resigned acceptance, of Tran Phu. This proved crucial.<sup>34</sup> From that time forward, even before the official end of the Tran dynasty, Ho introduced the sweeping reforms that would characterize his brief dynasty.<sup>35</sup> These late-Tran-era reforms touched many aspects of society, from coinage and the system for examinations to the width of officials' sleeves, color of their clothing, and style of their hats.<sup>36</sup> It was a taste of what would come once Ho Quy Ly established his own state.

When Ho Quy Ly was contemplating overthrowing the Tran, he consulted with his eldest son Ho Nguyen Trung (later to become our "Old Southerner"). Unlike the scrupulously traditional Zhu Yuanzhang, Ho Quy Ly considered placing his second son, Ho Han Thuong, on the throne. Ho Han Thuong, unlike his older brother Ho Nguyen Trung, had a Tran mother and therefore descended directly from the Tran royal house. If Ho Han Thuong became emperor, Ho Quy Ly could claim continuity with the Tran state. Ho Quy Ly wanted to discover how Ho Nguyen Trung would react to being passed over. To gauge his eldest son's ambitions, Ho Quy Ly composed a poem about an inkstone:

This marvelous stone  
is sometimes a cloud and sometimes rain,  
it nurtures the people.

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 155–164. <sup>35</sup> TT, 470. <sup>36</sup> TT, 470–471.

He then asked Ho Nguyen Trung to match lines with him. Ho Nguyen Trung understood that the inkstone was a metaphor for himself. Instead of accepting his father's praise and responding in kind, his poem was a modest disavowal:

This little three-inch tall pine,  
some day could be the ridgepole and beam  
that supports the country.

This poetic response expressed Ho Nguyen Trung's willingness to fill a supporting role. Ridgepole and beam are often used as metaphors for a supporter of the state, but never for the emperor. Only then did Ho Quy Ly act, declaring himself emperor and his second son heir apparent.<sup>37</sup>

Years later, Ho Nguyen Trung recorded a similar story in his *A Record of the Dreams of an Old Southerner*, but Tran Phu and his father Tran Manh were the protagonists in this version of the story. According to this version of events, when Tran Phu was a child of eight or nine years old, his father the emperor ordered him to write a poem about a bamboo doll on his bed. Tran Phu immediately responded:

There is something extraordinary about you.  
Your interior is hollow and your exterior is strong.  
You were carved in the form of a slave,  
I fear it goes against your heavenly nature.

The emperor marveled at this but hid his admiration with a stern admonishment. He said, "This cannot be taken seriously, do not record it." Then he warned the teacher not to allow him to write poems.<sup>38</sup>

Why did Tran Manh reject his son's poem? The bamboo doll represented Tran Phu himself. Perhaps Tran Manh wanted to discourage ambition in Tran Phu, who as his third son was not a candidate for the throne. Yet, as Ho Nguyen Trung commented, no one can resist an omen from Heaven. Indeed, Tran Phu later ascended the throne. Did Ho Nguyen Trung mean to contrast this story with his own more modest poem on the inkstone? When he composed his poem at his father's request, perhaps they were both thinking of the earlier poetry exchange of that other father-and-son pair.

Despite their different poetic responses, Ho Nguyen Trung admired Tran Phu. His biography in *A Record of the Dreams of an Old Southerner* praises him: "His nature was sincere and unaffected, filial and fraternal. He was respectful, frugal, upright, and resolute. He studied the classics and histories broadly and did not take pleasure in the superficial."<sup>39</sup> For Ho Nguyen Trung, Tran Phu was the guiding light of the dissipated Tran

<sup>37</sup> TT, 477. <sup>38</sup> ML, 14. <sup>39</sup> ML, 13–14.

royal family as it reached its end. This is not surprising given Tran Phu's tacit support of Ho Quy Ly. Indeed, the very first story contained in *A Record of the Dreams of an Old Southerner* is about Tran Phu and his rise to power. While official Vietnamese histories such as the *Dai Viet su ky toan thu* give Tran Phu short shrift, he takes center stage in Ho Nguyen Trung's alternative history. Though Ho cautiously avoids all mention of his own family, he legitimates the people who enabled their rise to power.

Once on the throne, Ho Quy Ly changed the name of the country to Dai Ngu (Chinese: Dai Yu). He established a new capital in Thanh Hoa called Tay Do ("Western Capital"). It was at this point that he changed his surname from Le to Ho and made the latter the name of the dynasty.<sup>40</sup> Like many of Dai Viet's elites, including Le Tac, Ho Quy Ly traced his ancestry to a Chinese official,<sup>41</sup> in this case to a man who served in Dien Chau in the tenth century, during the Later Han dynasty (947–979). In the thirteenth century, an ancestor named Ho Liem immigrated to Thanh Hoa. Ho Liem was adopted by Le Huan, the emperor of Dai Co Viet, and took his surname as his own.<sup>42</sup> Ho Quy Ly's name change, from Le to Ho, may have been for the reason he explained. It is also possible that connecting his family to an elite Chinese official family was a way to increase his family's legitimacy and claim to the throne. In the same fashion, the name "Dai Ngu" referred to the mythological sage king Yu who received his position due to his merit, even though he was not the descendent of the previous ruler, Shun. The *meritorious* sparrow could ascend to the top of the bamboo.

Ho Nguyen Trung served as Left Grand Councilor for the Ho dynasty. His younger brother Ho Han Thuong became emperor in 1401, and Ho Quy Ly retired. This was in keeping with the "senior emperor" system of abdicating in favor of a son, first established by the founding emperor of the Tran dynasty. It remained a common way to ensure a smooth transition in Dai Viet politics. The senior emperor, in this case Ho Quy Ly, would officially retire, but continue to make all important decisions. Having two emperors helped stabilize society and was a way to avoid destructive infighting over the selection of a successor following the death of the emperor. As Ho Nguyen Trung described it "once a son comes of age, he is made to assume the throne at once, and the father retires to the northern palace. The father is respectfully called Father of the King and serves as co-ruler. In actuality, he only passed on the rank in order to settle things for later and prepare in case of his sudden death. Matters are all

<sup>40</sup> TT, 477.

<sup>41</sup> Leo Shin discusses a similar phenomenon among the *tusi*: *Making of the Chinese State*, 70.

<sup>42</sup> ML, 3; John K. Whitmore, *Vietnam, Ho Quy Ly, and the Ming* (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, Council on Southeast Asia Studies, 1985), 13.

decided by the father, and the heir is no different from the other sons of his generation.”<sup>43</sup>

Ho Nguyen Trung’s assertion that the heir was no different from his brothers suggests that, despite his modest poem likening himself to the ridgepole of the state, he may in fact have had some hope to eventually rule the country. Indeed, the *Complete Chronicles* reveals tension between the two brothers. Ho Quy Ly, ever fond of expressing himself through poetry, admonished his sons in lyrical form:

On the same earth and under the sky above  
Why will these two brothers not act with love?  
Sadly, fervently, this is what I sing of.<sup>44</sup>

Whatever tension may have existed between the brothers, it never came to the surface. The bigger threat was dealing with the Ming state.

### Dai Viet reenters the map of empire

Once the dynasty was firmly established, Ho Quy Ly and his sons made moves to gain Ming acceptance. In 1403, Ho Han Thuong contacted the Ming and requested recognition of his government. He explained that the Tran line had died out, but because his mother was Tran royalty, he was actually cousin to the last Tran king. The people, knowing this, wished him to lead the country. Therefore, he concluded, the Ming should grant him and his state official recognition.<sup>45</sup> Zhu Di and his closest advisers had their doubts about these claims, but all the same granted Ho recognition within a year. For a period of several years, it seemed that the Ming-Dai Viet relationship could smoothly weather the Tran-Ho transition. Nonetheless, in 1404, Ho Quy Ly and Ho Han Thuong began traveling around the country to shoring up defenses in anticipation of a Ming attack. Ho Han Thuong held a meeting to assess his advisers’ attitudes toward war. Ho Nguyen Trung said, “I am not afraid of war, but I fear that the people’s hearts are not with us.”<sup>46</sup>

War came after Tran Thien Binh, a claimant to the Tran throne, arrived in Nanjing in the fall of 1404. He reported that Ho Quy Ly had actually killed the Tran king and set up his own dynasty and reign title. Tran Thien Binh hoped to convince the Ming court to help restore the Tran dynasty, their tributary, by installing him as king. But his claims, if true, also meant that Zhu Di, in recognizing Ho Han Thuong as king,

<sup>43</sup> ML, 13.

<sup>44</sup> TT, 485. Since this poem is from a later source, it is impossible to know whether Ho Quy Ly truly wrote it. It may reflect the bias, or hindsight, of the author.

<sup>45</sup> Taizong Ming Shilu, *juan* 19, 337, accessed through *Scripta Sinica*. <sup>46</sup> TT, 487.

acted as an unwitting pawn in internal Vietnamese political struggles.<sup>47</sup> Zhu Di would not have appreciated this manipulation. And this new offense was piled on top of a growing stack of offenses: the ongoing border dispute between the Ming and Dai Viet over Siming Prefecture in Guangxi, as well as several embassies from the kingdom of Champa contending that Dai Viet continued to attack them despite the Ming order that they cease hostilities. These were not minor matters. The border incursions were a serious annoyance to local government and a threat to Ming sovereignty in the borderlands, and Vietnamese actions against Champa, and in particular the seizure of gifts awarded to the king by the Ming court, threatened both regional stability and the Ming's position of regional hegemon.

In a series of communications between the two countries, Ho Quy Ly agreed to welcome Tran Thien Binh, allow him to reclaim the throne, and in exchange be allowed to set up his own state in the south of Dai Viet with full Ming support. When Tran Thien Binh and his retinue of five thousand Chinese soldiers arrived at Khau On on the Sino-Viet border in April 1406, representatives of the Ho warmly welcomed them with alcohol and beef. Although Ho Quy Ly was absent, there seemed to be no cause for alarm. Then Tran Thien Binh, accompanied by a Ming general and a small detachment of soldiers, ventured more deeply into Dai Viet territory. They were ambushed and routed by Ho soldiers in the driving rain, in a dense section of the jungle where the troops could not form columns.<sup>48</sup> Tran Thien Binh, taken prisoner, was identified as a former servant of the Tran family impersonating a royal family member and was executed. Upon receiving this news, the Yongle emperor was infuriated at Ho Quy Ly. The *Veritable Records* quotes him as saying, "That little wretch! His evil crimes inundate Heaven, and he still has the nerve to harbor wicked plots and unbridled maliciousness like this! I have been sincere and accommodating and he took advantage of me. If I do not kill him, what is the use of having a military?"<sup>49</sup> In an imperial proclamation issued in July 1407, he enumerated the many crimes of Ho Quy Ly and his son, laying out the justification for military action. In addition to the crime of usurpation, the Ho were

<sup>47</sup> See Wang Gungwu, "Ming Foreign Relations: Southeast Asia," in Twitchett and Mote, eds., *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 8, The Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644, Part 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 315.

<sup>48</sup> MSL, Vol 1, 94. SZL, 177; ANZY, 10; *Xian bin lu*, 127. Whitmore, *Vietnam, Ho Quy Ly and the Ming*, 81-86.

<sup>49</sup> MSL, Vol. 1, 95. See also Shih-shan Henry Tsai's translation: "This little clown has committed such a malicious crime that even heaven would not forgive him . . ." and Whitmore's translation: "I treat him with tolerance and sincerity, yet he pays me back with deceit. If we do not destroy him, what are armies for?" *Perpetual Happiness*, 179, and *Vietnam, Ho Quy Ly and the Ming*, 88.

charged with “imitating the [Ming] court’s ritual,” an indication that their practices were too close to those of the Ming for comfort.<sup>50</sup> Zhu Di promptly mobilized a massive army and navy, reputedly two hundred and fifteen thousand strong.<sup>51</sup>

The Ho-Ming conflict marks a profound transformation in warfare. Although the Mongol campaigns had devastated Vietnam, military technology had been less advanced. Mongol armies had possibly employed the primitive “fire-lance”: projectiles fired from a tube with a gunpowder charge. The Tran advantage during the Mongol campaigns was knowledge of the terrain and guerrilla-style attacks on the depleted Mongol ranks. Avoiding siege warfare altogether, the Vietnamese simply abandoned Dong Kinh when the Mongols advanced, leaving the Mongols to loot what they could, and then starve.

The Ho-Ming conflict, in contrast, was a gunpowder conflict. Ming troops armed with cannons, large handheld guns, and grenades encountered Dai Viet troops with firearms. The first recorded use of firearms in Dai Viet was 1390, used against Champa.<sup>52</sup> Gunpowder weapons were in use in China even earlier. There is ongoing debate among historians about a confusing line of text from *The History of the Ming*. It may indicate that the Ming learned advanced gunpowder technologies (the “magic gun” and cannon) from the Vietnamese during Zhu Di’s war of conquest. It is also grammatically possible that the passage says that the Ming used new gunpowder technologies against the Vietnamese. The fact that the Ming were eager to co-opt Ho Nguyen Trung and other Vietnamese experts and put them to use in manufacturing guns would suggest the former interpretation. However, recent work tends to credit China with having more advanced weapons<sup>53</sup> that were then copied in Dai Viet.<sup>54</sup> It is also possible, as Sun Laichen argues, that the technological exchange went both ways. What is important for our purposes here is that the nature of warfare, in both Dai Viet and the Ming, was changing and becoming more deadly. Sun argues that, thanks to the Ming occupation, early Le

<sup>50</sup> MSL, Vol. 1, 97.

<sup>51</sup> Dardess, 4; Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 174. The *Veritable Records of the Ming* claims that 800,000 soldiers were sent, MSL, 487. See also Gu Yingtai, *Mingshi Jishi Benmo* (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1994), p. 92 (j.22).

<sup>52</sup> Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 161.

<sup>53</sup> The authors suspect that the technology went from China to Annan: *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. 5, Part 7, “Military Technology: The Gunpowder Epic,” 313.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Lorge, *The Asian Military Revolution: From Gunpowder to the Bomb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 88. See also Kenneth Swope, “Gunsmoke: The Ming Invasion of Dai Viet and the Role of Firearms in Forging the Southern Frontier,” in James A. Anderson and John K. Whitmore, eds., *China’s Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier over Two Millennia* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2015), 156–168.

Vietnam had become a “gunpowder state” if not a “gunpowder empire.”<sup>55</sup>

Although the Ho dynasty were expecting the invasion and were well prepared, their defeat was swift and decisive. By June 1407, Ming troops had captured Ho Quy Ly, some of his most important advisers, his sons Ho Nguyen Trung and Ho Han Thuong, several grandsons (including two of Ho Nguyen Trung’s sons), and other relatives.<sup>56</sup> All were sent as prisoners to Nanjing. When asked to explain his rebellious behavior, Ho Quy Ly remained silent. The *Veritable Records of the Ming* claims that Ho Quy Ly and Ho Han Thuong were sent to prison and the rest were pardoned. Accounts differ as to whether Ho Quy Ly was ultimately executed or sent to be a foot soldier in Guangxi.<sup>57</sup>

The Ming’s purported reason for invading Dai Viet was to restore the Tran throne and depose the Ho usurpers. As a usurper himself, perhaps Zhu Di welcomed the opportunity to show his subjects that he would not tolerate illegitimate power grabs, as a way to shift attention from his own questionable rise to power. It could also serve as a warning to neighboring states.<sup>58</sup> According to Ming accounts, when no Tran heirs materialized, Dai Viet was incorporated as a prefecture of the Ming. When Tran heirs did appear and challenge Ming control of Dai Viet, they were either ignored or even hunted down by the Ming military and killed.

For example, a Tran royal family member, Tran Quy Khoang, attempted to make contact with the Ming and gain their recognition as heir to the throne. The two envoys he sent were killed by Zhu Di. Next, in 1411, he sent envoys to Beijing with a letter, local products, and two statues made of silver and gold to substitute for a personal visit. This time, Zhu Di asked Ho Nguyen Trung to meet with the Vietnamese envoys, in order to suss out the their thoughts and intentions, strengths and weaknesses, and “the true situation” in Dai Viet. One of the envoys poured out his heart and told Ho Nguyen Trung “everything.” The other envoy remained stalwartly silent. The Ming agreed to recognize Tran Quy Khoang as the Provincial Administration commissioner of Jiaozhi and

<sup>55</sup> Sun Laichen, “Chinese Gunpowder Technology in Dai Viet, 1390–1497”, in Nhung Tuyet Tran and Anthony J. S. Reid, eds. *Viet Nam: Borderless Histories* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2006), 98.

<sup>56</sup> MSL, 115–116; 149.

<sup>57</sup> MSL, 127; TT, 496; *Xian bin lu*, 128; Tsai, 181; YJS maintains that he was executed, 183. It seems unlikely to me that the Yongle emperor would send such a dangerous man to an area bordering his home turf.

<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the message got out – the circumstances of the Ho dynasty and the Ming annexation were recorded in great detail in Korea in the *Veritable Records of the Choson Dynasty*. William Pore, “The Inquiring Literatus: Yi Sugwang’s ‘Brush-Talks’ with Phung Khac Khoan in Beijing in 1598,” *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society—Korea Branch*, Vol. 83 (2008): 10.

the loose-lipped envoy as magistrate of Nghe An. When the envoys returned, Tran Quy Khoang had the more talkative envoy executed for revealing state secrets to the Ming and for accepting the diminished title on his behalf.<sup>59</sup> The episode suggests that the Ming were not actually interested in restoring the Tran to power. Tran Quy Khoang fled and was eventually captured by Ming troops in Laos in 1414 and beheaded.<sup>60</sup>

In annexing Dai Viet, Zhu Di was not acting merely on his own authority. Military and civil officials, especially those on the scene in Dai Viet, had power to persuade the emperor or set policy. The scholar Henry Tsai argues that he may have been preoccupied with concerns about a resurgent Mongol threat, and was therefore willing to believe the partial or distorted reports sent to him by officials in Dai Viet.<sup>61</sup> John K. Whitmore, the author of the most thorough study of the Ho dynasty, *Dai Viet, Ho Quy Ly and the Ming*, suggests that Zhu Di's decision to annex Annam was actually a violation of his own vision of the Ming world order. Zhu Di may have instead acted on the advice of Zhang Fu (1375–1449), one of the three Ming generals who led the invasion. Whitmore suggests that Zhang Fu was unwilling simply to give up the land that his soldiers had fought so hard to win for the seemingly defunct Tran royal line. Zhu Di's acceptance was won through a document sent to him by Zhang Fu, claiming that one thousand one hundred members of the Vietnamese elite had requested that they once more be absorbed into the Chinese state as they had been before the tenth century. This claim is repeated in the *History of the Ming*, which records that more than one thousand one hundred and twenty people approached the military headquarters and said, "The Tran family has been completely wiped out by the rebels. It is not possible for their line to continue. Annam was originally territory of the Central Country, we request to once again to be under your jurisdiction, in the same manner as inner prefectures."<sup>62</sup> The *Veritable Records of the Ming* preserves a longer version of this letter, presented by the prominent Vietnamese scholar Mac Thuy, descendent of the Tran literatus and ambassador Mac Dinh Chi.

In the past Annam was the territory of the Central Country, later it fell into abandonment, and sank into Yi customs, we did not hear the teaching of propriety and duty (*liyi*). Fortunately a sagely dynasty has come along to sweep away this insidious evil. Soldiers, common people, young and old can see the magnificence of the Central Florescence's robes and caps and cannot contain their rejoicing. They are all counting on returning to the old ways of being [incorporated as] regions and counties, if only to gradually remove the Yi customs and be perpetually moistened by sagely transformation. I [Mac] Thuy along with other elders

<sup>59</sup> TT, 503. <sup>60</sup> MSL, 195; ANZY, 12. <sup>61</sup> Tsai, 185. <sup>62</sup> MS, *juan* 321.

have composed this document together. Please present it at court to communicate the feelings of the people.<sup>63</sup>

Given the deep divisions in Vietnamese society, it is probable that this claim of elite Vietnamese support was based on fact. Prominent Vietnamese officials who had served the Tran, most notably Mac Thuy and his two brothers, sided with the Ming.<sup>64</sup> In addition, the descendents of the large population of Song refugees who had flooded into Dai Viet during the Mongol wars now looked hopefully to the new Ming regime and likely played an important role in establishing local support. The Ming certainly could not have retained Annan for as long as they did without some degree of local assistance. Zhang Fu had actively sought this kind of support, through tactics such as widely propagating a list of Ho Quy Ly's crimes in the hopes of winning the people of Dai Viet to the Ming cause.<sup>65</sup> Zhu Di had reason to trust Zhang Fu's advice: not only had Zhang fought for the emperor during his campaign to depose his nephew, but his sister was Zhu Di's consort. Indeed, Zhang remained one of the emperor's "most intimate advisors" for the rest of his life.<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, Zhang Fu's counsel, combined with local support, proved persuasive. What Zhang and the emperor did not yet know was that the Vietnamese insurgency would persist and prove insurmountable.

For Zhang Fu, Dai Viet was not a foreign (*fan*) country, but a historical part of northern empires. In that way, he argued for *reclaiming* Dai Viet as lost territory, and restoring the borders of the Han and Tang empires. In his victory report, Zhang Fu referred to Dai Viet as "Annan," a loosely controlled region of China, perpetually rebellious – not as an independent state. Zhang appealed to history to argue that Annan had always been rebellious and could only be tamed through military incorporation and cultural transformation. He wrote:

Your servant Zhang Fu has reviewed the annals. Annan was once Jiaozhou. In the Han and Tang it could only be loosely-reined, and in the Song and Yuan it was again raided and humiliated. Exceeding their rightful place, [the Vietnamese] are set in their evil ways of usurpation and revolt. Although we sent troops to punish them, they alternately rebel and come to allegiance. It is intolerable to heaven and

<sup>63</sup> MSL, 113.

<sup>64</sup> Whitmore, *Vietnam, Ho Quy Ly, and the Ming*, 97–98; MSL, 112–3. Mac Thuy was richly rewarded for his support. By the fall of 1408, he was promoted to Vice Commissioner of the Right of the Jiaozhi Provincial Administration, and awarded silver, paper money, and silk, and rewarded again in 1411. It appears that he even traveled to the Ming capital. MSL, 146; 148; 173.

<sup>65</sup> TT, 489; Tsai, 180.

<sup>66</sup> Wang Gungwu, "Zhang Fu," in L. Carrington Goodrich and L. Chaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, Vol. I, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 65–67.

earth, infuriating to humans and spirits . . . Several hundred kinds of tattoo-faced and shriek-tongued people have ascended to an earthly paradise. Several thousand *li* of fish and salt producing land have all entered the map [of empire]. We have recovered our ancient territory and propagated the Central Florescence's [*Zhonghua*] system of propriety.<sup>67</sup>

Whether or not Zhu Di initially agreed with Zhang Fu's views, he ended up following his suggestions by adopting an aggressive policy of colonization.<sup>68</sup> Future generations would remember this result, not the decision-making process or initial ambivalence of some members of the Ming outer court.

Despite the relative ease of the initial colonization, newly incorporated Jiaozhi was never able to provide enough rice to support the large occupying force of eighty-seven thousand Ming troops, with the consequence that it continued to be a drain on resources rather than a source of revenue throughout the Yongle reign.<sup>69</sup> During the first ten years of the occupation, the Ming military was still fully engaged in putting down armed resistance. Resistance grew as the Ming state imposed an onerous tax burden on the people of Jiaozhi. Although a civil administration was nominally in control of local government, the military was involved in upholding order at every level. In 1518, a charismatic leader, Le Loi, emerged from the southern frontier region of Thanh Hoa and began to organize a more effective campaign of resistance. Nonetheless, Zhu Di, perhaps at the urging of his adviser Zhang Fu, insisted on maintaining Jiaozhi as a province rather than removing his troops.

During this period, the occupying forces intentionally destroyed Vietnamese historical works and dynastic records, fearing that they would fuel Vietnamese claims to independence.<sup>70</sup> Ho Nguyen Trung would later mourn this loss. At the same time, Ming administrators oversaw the opening of schools in Jiaozhi, meant to bind the new province more tightly to the center by standardizing education. As can be expected, colonization opened the floodgates of movement between the two states, now joined as one. Talented Vietnamese moved from Jiaozhi to China

<sup>67</sup> SZL, 184–185.

<sup>68</sup> Wang Gungwu suggests that Vietnam's similarities to China (use of Chinese script, Confucian rhetoric, and state institutions) and history as a colony persuaded the Yongle emperor that colonization would be a sensible course of action, "Ming Foreign Relations," 316.

<sup>69</sup> Whitmore, 99; Dardess, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, 125; Alexander Ong, "Contextualizing the Book-Burning Episode during the Ming Invasion and Occupation of Vietnam," in Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen, eds., *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010).

proper, just as Chinese administrators were sent to work in the newly attached province.<sup>71</sup>

After the Yongle emperor's death in 1424, his grandson the Xuande emperor Zhu Zhanji (r. 1425–1435) eventually inherited the Dai Viet problem. To get the region under control, he sent fifteen thousand troops and three thousand bowmen to Dai Viet, and warned the ruler of Laos that he must not harbor Le Loi and his men. Desperate, Zhu Zhanji even tried economic sanctions. None of these tactics was successful. The *History of the Ming* blames the loss of Dai Viet on a cowardly general, Wang Tong. Wang Tong surrendered to Le Loi without first receiving the approval of the Ming court. Whether or not Wang Tong was at fault or merely a scapegoat, Zhu Zhanji had had enough. He abandoned the Ming's claims to Dai Viet in 1427. Eighty-six thousand Ming troops retreated overseas through the southern port of Qinzhou, but the number that were killed or stayed behind in Dai Viet could not be counted.<sup>72</sup>

After the Ming loss on battlefield and shameful retreat, there was a need to smooth the way to renewing peaceful relations. Le Loi wrote his thanks the Ming court, diplomatically informing them that the Tran line had died out and that the people of Annam pushed him to take control of the country, but that he would await directions from the Ming. Even though Zhu Zhanji distrusted this account, he had little choice but to accept it. He supposedly sent ambassadors to look again for Tran relatives. They failed, but did bring back to Beijing local products and a gold statue meant to stand in for a personal visit from Le Loi. Le Loi politely asserted that all under heaven was subject to the Chinese throne; the Ming emperor graciously pardoned him.<sup>73</sup> In fact, Le Loi's surrender occurred only after he had decisively defeated Ming troops on the battlefield. It was the necessary first step toward normalizing relations. The Ming dynasty duly enfeoffed the Le dynasty by 1430, sending an official seal to finalize the inauguration of diplomatic relations. Le Loi died two years later.

The Tran-Le transition should not be mistaken for a return to the status quo in Dai Viet. John Whitmore suggests that Le Loi and his highland followers were “anti-Ming, anti-Ngo [Chinese], anti-Tran, and anti-coastal.” The rise of the Le represented a split in Dai Viet politics, pitting the southern mountainous region and Sino-Viet coastal communities against one another.<sup>74</sup> These tensions were held in control

<sup>71</sup> Li Tana, “The Ming Factor and the Emergence of the Viet in the 15th Century,” in Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen, eds., *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010), 95.

<sup>72</sup> MS, *juan* 321. <sup>73</sup> MSL, 305.

<sup>74</sup> John K. Whitmore, “The Fate of the Ngô: Montane/Littoral Division in 15th–16th Century Dai Viet,” *Asia Major* (Nov. 2014): 58.

during the first decades of the Le dynasty, but would break into war that persisted through much of the sixteenth century.

The drastic change in policy between the Hongwu reign and the Yongle reign left vastly differing precedents for future Ming decision-makers. As we shall see, those who favored the bounded Ming of the Hongwu era would appeal to the *Ancestral Injunctions*, cultural differences, and the failed colonization of the Yongle period to argue against intervening in Vietnamese affairs. Those who favored intervention, or even harbored dreams of recolonization, referred to Dai Viet as a historical part of the Chinese empire, populated by people who already followed the same customs as the North, and to the Ming's ethical obligation to intervene in times of crisis.

### Dreams of family, loyalty, and poetry

As a young man in the service of the Tran state, Ho Nguyen Trung and his countrymen benefited from Zhu Yuanzhang's vision of a bounded China and hands-off approach to Dai Viet. Zhu Di's expansive approach to Dai Viet in the early fifteenth century led to the destruction of the Ho state and Ho Nguyen Trung's capture. Ultimately, much of Ho Nguyen Trung's professional career was in the service of the Ming state. Throughout the twenty-year occupation and the rise of the Le dynasty, Ho Nguyen Trung lived out his days as a Ming official, working for the Ministry of Works. When he died at the age of 73, his son inherited his position, a rare privilege in the Ming bureaucratic system.<sup>75</sup> Ho Nguyen Trung was treated gently by the Ming state; he was specially pardoned for a small transgression of his official duties in 1426 by the Xuande emperor, who noted that his father, the Yongle emperor, had pardoned him for much bigger crimes. Later, when eunuchs reported to the throne that Ho Nguyen Trung was living in poverty, he was promoted and given a salary paid in rice.<sup>76</sup> Unlike his father and brother, Ho Nguyen Trung had fared well in Ming China. His expertise in weapons manufacture was so valued that he even accompanied Zhu Di on a campaign against the Mongols, mining Vietnamese expertise in weapons technology for an edge over the Mongols.

As with Le Tac, Ho Nguyen Trung would barely be remembered today if not for his book. *A Record of the Dreams of an Old Southerner* contains thirty-one brief anecdotes. Five of the earlier anecdotes are related to succession crises. The moral that he draws seems to be that good people and fated people cannot be kept from the throne, though that does not

<sup>75</sup> Sun, 91–92. <sup>76</sup> MSL, 274.

prevent bad or inappropriate rulers from temporarily gaining control. Eight anecdotes from the middle of the text deal with the supernatural, with miraculous cures, and with talented healers. Ho put special emphasis on poetry. The final section contains fifteen anecdotes about talented poet-officials and samples of noteworthy poetry.

All the poems contained in *Dreams of an Old Southerner* are written in the regulated verse style that became common in the Tang dynasty and remained so throughout the late imperial period. Ten of the poems are heptasyllabic regulated verse and two are in pentasyllabic regulated verse. For example, the final anecdote, number thirty-one, concerns a Vietnamese official escorting a Yuan envoy back to the border sometime between 1333 and 1335. The two men spent ten pleasurable days together on a boat, whiling away the time by composing poetry. Ho ends his book with this scene of cross-border amity, expressed through “brush talks” in the form of classical poetry. The importance of poetry for Ho Nguyen Trung cannot be overstated. For all literati of his time and place, poetry was a tool for displaying one’s erudition and even for advancing in one’s career. But for Ho, one poem in particular seems to have had personal import. In anecdote number twenty-eight, called “A Poem Portends Unexpected Blessings,” Ho claims that a poem of his great-grandfather’s grandfather ensured good fortune and high position for his descendents. The poem in question expressed sympathy for birds in trees and ants in nests, not yet disrupted by the woodcutter’s ax or farmer’s plow. Ho Nguyen Trung’s repeated reference to his own good fortune in this anecdote is the closest he comes to meditating on his lot in life. He seems to be saying that his ancestor’s sensitivity and compassion for sentient beings is directly related to his descendents’ good fortune, a surprising interpretation given the fate of the Ho dynasty. Like Le Tac, Ho Nguyen Trung would have exercised self-censorship to avoid offending his former foes and current patrons, in this case the Ming government. But it would not be surprising if he did indeed feel fortunate for escaping execution, pursuing a government career, and providing a solid foundation for his sons.

Although Ho Nguyen Trung rarely mentions his family directly, and does not mention his father and brother at all, his anecdotes create an alternative history of the Tran that rationalizes his family’s rise to power and creates hagiographies for its supporters and members. For example, his fifth anecdote, entitled “A Woman’s Chaste, Virtuous Luminosity,” praises his cousin, the wife of the ninth emperor of the Tran, though without mentioning the family connection. He explicitly praises another relative who was a good doctor (anecdote number eight) and the aforementioned relative who crafted remarkably efficacious poetry (anecdote twenty-eight).

Loyalty to the Vietnamese king is another thread that links the disparate sections of the text. Perhaps the most curious anecdote is the tenth, “Husband and Wife Martyrs.” In this story, Ho Nguyen Trung heaps praise upon a Vietnamese leader and his wife, both of whom committed suicide during the advance of Zhu Di’s army in 1407. Ho Nguyen Trung boldly claims that suicide in the face of the invading Ming army was a righteous action. This is puzzling, since Ho Nguyen Trung was also a Vietnamese leader, but made a very different choice. His own crisis of loyalty can only be guessed at; at most, we see that he admired those who took a different route, even as he dedicated his own life in service to the Ming. Ho Nguyen Trung’s writing shows that he was terribly concerned with the question of loyalty. Several of the stories in *A Record of the Dreams of an Old Southerner* concern rulers who inherited the throne thanks to their personal merit rather than primogeniture. Did he write these stories to rationalize either his father’s or Zhu Di’s usurpation of the throne? It is impossible to know for sure. Perhaps he wrote them to understand his own remarkable crisis of loyalty, as a servant of three states.

Like Le Tac’s *A Brief History of Annan*, *A Record of the Dreams of an Old Southerner* recounts the Tran dynasty (1225–1400), but it has a different focus. While Le Tac recorded military history of the period up to his own firsthand experience, Ho restricted himself to tales of the supernatural and the deeds of moral exemplars of the Tran and preceding Ly dynasties. Despite their differences, Le Tac’s and Ho Nguyen Trung’s most important goal was to inscribe southerners in the Chinese pantheon of virtue. Loyalty and poetic skill were valued among Ho’s interlocutors, and he provides many Vietnamese examples to show that lofty heights were achieved in his native country. A marked contrast with *A Brief History of Annan* is that *A Record of the Dreams of an Old Southerner* does not mention China at all (except several references to envoys sent to or from Beijing). While Le Tac blurred the boundaries of the two countries, it is clear from Ho’s account that Dai Viet is a separate state. This may reflect the changes in Vietnamese consciousness over a century.

The middle section of the book, which deals with healing and the supernatural, shows that *A Record of the Dreams of an Old Southerner* has more in common with the *Linh Nam chich quai* (“Selected Strange Tales from South of the Passes”) than it does with *A Brief History of Annan*. The two former texts both contain anecdotal accounts of magical phenomenon, a topic Le Tac was not interested in. Temporally, *Dreams of an Old Southerner* picks up where the *Linh Nam chich quai* leaves off. *Dreams of an Old Southerner* also features efficacious medical treatments and powerful monks, nuns, and Daoist priests. The message is that Vietnamese scholars and religious figures were the equals of their northern counterparts.

Zhu Di, Ho Quy Ly, and Ho Nguyen Trung all adhered to a Confucian value system that emphasized loyalty to the ruler and filial piety above all else. Nonetheless, this did not prevent them from behaving in disloyal and unfilial ways. Zhu Di's ambitions led him to defy his father, first by usurping the throne, and later by violating the *Ancestral Injunctions* and invading Dai Viet. Zhu Di attempted to reclaim legitimacy by erasing the history of his nephew's reign and justifying his actions abroad. Ho Quy Ly was also a usurper. He sought to affirm his loyalty by insisting that his state was a continuation of the Tran. Ho Nguyen Trung became a loyal servant of the state that executed his father and brother, but wrote a book extolling the loyalty of Vietnamese ministers. None of these three men actually challenged or questioned the centrality of the virtues of loyalty and filial piety, and still sought to explain their actions from within this framework.

Ho Nguyen Trung's homeland changed in his absence, and he looked to record a more ideal past. As with Le Tac, Ho was determined to record his memories of his homeland before they disappeared with him. A motivation for writing the book, mentioned only obliquely, was the loss of Vietnamese records during the Ming invasion of Dai Viet and subsequent burning of books:

In the midst of the flames of war, books were turned to cinders, causing them to vanish completely and become unknown. Is it not a shame? When I start to think about this, and search for a continuous link to things past, I saw that nearly all has been driven away or lost, such that of one hundred I can still get one or two. I gathered these articles together as my book, and named it "A Record of the Dreams of an Old Southerner" for my readers.<sup>77</sup>

Compared with *A Brief History of Annam*, *Dreams of an Old Southerner* is more episodic and less comprehensive. Ho Nguyen Trung stayed far away from the topic of the Ho dynasty, not mentioning it at all. Nor did he record his feelings about the end of the Ming occupation after twenty years and the rise of a new regime under Le Loi. He simply sought to write Vietnamese exemplars of moral virtue into the Sinitic record, to preserve their stories and prove that they were active participants in the world of classical culture. He may have had some success.

The parallels to *A Brief History of Annam* that do exist are perhaps most clearly seen in the comments appended as an afterword by Ho's contemporaries. As with the prefaces written for *A Brief History*, the afterword is written by an exemplary reader who shows other readers how to understand the text. An afterword written by Song Zhang in 1442 first affirmed

<sup>77</sup> ML, 11.

that Ho Nguyen Trung was an authority worth listening to, as “he has long been steeped in luminous transformation (*qinghua*) and is an elderly virtuous talent whose behavior is based on the sages.” Like Le Tac before him, Ho dedicates all his spare time to recording the history of his country:

Whenever he has a spare moment he reminisces about the good deeds of kings and ministers, the diligent works of good people, and the virtuous acts of women, the miracles of Buddhist monks of yore. He has recorded it for posterity in *A Record of the Dreams of an Old Southerner* in gorgeous sentences and profound sayings.

Song Zhang asserts that Ho proves that Dai Viet, and in particular the learning and virtue of its people, should not be overlooked:

When we talk of the vastness of the empire, Jiaonan is a small and distant place, so we do not dare mention it with the Central Country. But using this record to talk about it, those who cultivated their bodies and actions, their hearts and actions, how could it be different from the gentlemen of the Central Country!

Song concludes by affirming that is only because Ho Nguyen Trung recorded these things “before they fell into oblivion” that the world can reap the benefit of these moral examples.<sup>78</sup>

Another friend, Piling Huying, an official in the Board of Rites, wrote in a preface:

As the brilliant array of the sun and stars and the shimmering magnificence of the clouds is the pattern of heaven; the flowing and lofty erectness of streams and mountains and the luster and fruitfulness of grass and trees is the pattern of the earth; the laws and systems of names and things and the civilizing effect of the rites and music are the pattern of humanity. In the whole world, with countries arrayed like stars in the sky or chess pieces on a board, there is none that does not entirely possess this pattern.<sup>79</sup>

Even the people of Dai Viet belonged in the patterned world of classical culture. Piling Huying then praised the Ming for saving Ho Nguyen Trung and allowing his story to be told: “Had he not been employed by the wise Ming and favored by its ministers, then that which is recorded in the book would have vanished without a trace in distant and remote places and never be heard of again. Now these life experiences can at last be transmitted and not disintegrate. How could this not be great good luck in terms of preservation?”<sup>80</sup>

But the preservation was only partial. By Ho Nguyen Trung’s own account, he had no wish to remember the more negative aspects of the past. His book recorded only positive things, emphasizing conventional

<sup>78</sup> ML, 29. <sup>79</sup> ML, 9. <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

virtues such as loyalty, benevolence, diligence, and honesty. In response to hypothetical critics of this approach, Ho wrote:

Some asked me, “You have only written about good people. In ordinary life do you not hear about people who are not good?” I responded, “Those that I enjoy hearing about are good people, therefore I can remember them; it not that there are no people who are not good, I just do not remember them.”

His imaginary interlocutors next asked about the name of his book:

They said, “Your record takes ‘dream’ as its title – what is the meaning?” Answer, “The people in it once flourished, but when times and affairs changed, they left virtually no traces. I alone knew and spoke of them. If not a dream, what then?”<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, the Dai Viet that Ho Nguyen Trung had known was gone. The Ming occupation, though it would ultimately last only twenty years, changed Dai Viet irrevocably.

<sup>81</sup> ML, 11.

### 3 The northern emperor and the southern emperor

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An imperial prince was born to the Ming royal family in the winter of 1536.<sup>1</sup> Following custom, Zhu Houcong, the infant's father and the Jiajing emperor, wished to send a celebratory announcement to China's tributaries, including Dai Viet. But there was a problem. The roads to Dai Viet were blocked, and, besides, it was unclear to whom to address the letter. More than twenty years had passed since Dai Viet last sent a tribute mission to the capital, Beijing, missions meant to occur triennially. Who ruled Dai Viet? Based on the intelligence gathered by the Ming court, the Grand Secretary Xia Yan (1482–1548) suggested three possibilities: the country could still be ruled by the Le dynasty, under either Le Y or his younger brother Le Xuan; it could be controlled by the rebel Tran Cao; or it could be in the hands of Mac Dang Dung, a military leader. Xia Yan informed the emperor that the Ming had not confirmed the two Le claimants as proper heirs of the Le family. He branded both Tran Cao and Mac Dang Dung as “rebellious ministers.”<sup>2</sup> None of these men was an appropriate recipient of the imperial announcement.

Xia Yan, like the rest of the Ming court, did not yet know that three of these four men were dead. As they would discover later, Tran Cao, after briefly declaring his own dynasty, became a monk in 1516 and disappeared from view forever.<sup>3</sup> To reward him for his role in stabilizing the country, the young emperor Le Y allowed Mac Dang Dung unprecedented control of the military and granted him aristocratic rank. By 1522,

<sup>1</sup> This was his second son, Zhu Zaihuo; his first son had died in infancy. Zhu Zaihuo also died young, shortly after his capping ceremony ushering him into adulthood in 1549. James Geiss, “The Chia-Ching Reign, 1522–1566,” in Frederick Mote and Denis Twitchett, eds., *Cambridge History of China: Volume 7, The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, Part I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 462.

<sup>2</sup> In the Chinese text, Le Y (黎椅) and Le Xuan (黎樞) are referred to as 諱 and 應. Secondary sources in most languages refer to the two monarchs by their posthumous names, Le Chieu Tong and Le Cung Hoang, respectively. I have translated their names as Le Y and Le Xuan in each case to maintain consistency. MS, *juan* 321; MSL, 495.

<sup>3</sup> TT, 813.

Le Y had come to regret these favors and fled the capital. Unfazed, Mac Dang Dung promoted Le Xuan to emperor in his brother's stead. In 1526, Mac Dang Dung sent an assassin to kill Le Y.<sup>4</sup> The following year, Le Xuan and his mother were forced to commit suicide by Mac and his supporters.<sup>5</sup> By 1527, the way was clear for Mac Dang Dung to wield power in his own name as emperor of the Mac dynasty.

Nearly a decade after the establishment of the Mac dynasty, the Ming court struggled to make sense of the changed circumstances of their southern neighbor. The current impasse caused the Ming to scrutinize Dai Viet much more closely than they had in the past century. They were dismayed by what they discovered. In the emperor Zhu Houcong's assessment, were Mac Dang Dung indeed in power, he was clearly a usurper and thus illegitimate. Celebration over the birth of an heir soon turned to discussion of war. Zhu Houcong recommended intervening to overthrow the Mac dynasty. Ming writers began almost immediately referring to the diplomatic crisis with Dai Viet as the "Grand Celebration" (*daqing*) affair, referencing the happy event that brought Dai Viet to the emperor's attention in the first place.

The conflict between the northern emperor and the southern emperor would raise uncomfortable questions for the Ming about its role in the world and its relationship with its neighbors. In the winter of 1536, the Ming court was uncertain how to proceed, but all agreed that the Ming had a Dai Viet problem. Zhu Houcong dispatched officials to investigate the situation in Dai Viet and name the principal troublemakers. He also ordered the Ministry of War to determine whether a punitive expedition was appropriate. In the meantime, defense officials posted along the border with Dai Viet were ordered to organize their troops and gather provisions in the event of war.

The Jiajing emperor Zhu Houcong was faced with a predicament not dissimilar to that of his ancestor, the Yongle emperor Zhu Di. As in 1404, the usurpation of the Vietnamese throne seemed to call for Ming intervention to restore a deposed ally and tributary state. Yet, in the intervening century, Dai Viet itself had transformed in surprising ways that would challenge the self-perception of the Ming court. Since the end of the Ming occupation in 1427, Dai Viet had grown in size and military strength. More significantly for the Ming, it had transformed into a state that was both adamantly independent from China *and* more confident in its deployment of the classical culture and imperial rhetoric that the Ming claimed as its exclusive right. In some ways, these changes were the unintended consequences of the Yongle-era occupation.

<sup>4</sup> TT, 834.    <sup>5</sup> TT, 835.

Despite Zhu Houcong's initial ardor for war, a substantial bloc of his officials looked to history and wished to avoid repeating the Yongle-era debacle. Debate about the war veered between two poles: renunciation, the cautious approach of the Hongwu era, or intervention, the expansive approach of the Yongle era.

The impasse brought into conflict two remarkable and complicated rulers: Zhu Houcong, a man who serenely chose the reign name "Admirable Tranquillity" (Jiajing) even as he was whipping officialdom into a suicidal frenzy over his violations of ritual precedent, and Mac Dang Dung, a man who chose the reign name "Shining Virtue" (Minh Duc) between ordering the murders of two Le emperors.<sup>6</sup>

### Unintended consequences of empire

The roots of the Jiajing-era Dai Viet problem lay a century earlier, in the Yongle conquest of Dai Viet and its unintended aftermath. As the colonized province of Jiaozhi, Dai Viet was meant to assimilate to the culture of the North. But when Yongle and his proxies launched the colonial project, they did not expect that Dai Viet would regain independence a mere generation later. Following independence in 1427, Dai Viet came to resemble its northern neighbor more, not only in terms of education and statecraft, but also in military technology and imperial positioning. The Le founder Le Loi and his successor Le Tu Thanh brought Dai Viet in even closer alignment with the Ming. Instead of achieving its goal of a creating a well-integrated Jiaozhi province, the colonization accidentally helped to spawn the southern mirror state of Le dynasty Dai Viet.

During the Ming occupation (1407–1427), Ming administrators worked to knit the distant colony more closely to the imperial center in order to counter persistent resistance. To this end, they opened clinics, established 126 schools to bring Vietnamese education in line with that of the Ming, and recruited talented students for the National University.<sup>7</sup> This served to create a generation of scholars and teachers sympathetic to contemporary Ming education and statecraft, especially in the region around Dong Kinh.<sup>8</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Le state that rose from the

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Nola Cooke, "Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Confucianization in Historical Perspective: Evidence from the Palace Examinations (1463–1883)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 25 (1994): 279; Tsai, *Perpetual Happiness*, 184.

<sup>8</sup> John K. Whitmore, "Literati Culture and Integration in Dai Viet, C. 1430–C. 1840," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (1997): 667. In this section, I am relying in part on the research of John K. Whitmore. From his 1968 dissertation, to his seminal article "Literati Culture and Integration in Dai Viet," to his recent compilation of primary documents in *The Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, Whitmore has done more than any

ashes of Ming occupation had government institutions that mirrored those of the North more closely than had those of previous Vietnamese dynasties. To northern observers, however, this new Dai Viet would have seemed to be usurping the prerogatives of the Ming throne by modeling some institutions and imperial rhetoric too closely, especially in its designation of its rulers as “emperor” granted the Mandate of Heaven.<sup>9</sup>

Once his forces had expelled Ming troops, Le Loi set about stabilizing society, assessing and distributing land, and strengthening the economy after years of turmoil and warfare. Even as Le Loi rejected Ming colonization, he affirmed Dai Viet’s inheritance of classical culture. Upon ascending the throne and pacifying the Ming invaders in 1427, Le Loi issued *Grand Pronouncements* to “all under Heaven” in the style of the Hongwu emperor. The text was written by Nguyen Trai, one of the most celebrated literati of Dai Viet and close advisor to the Le emperor. The opening lines are a direct challenge to Ming claims of exclusivity and sovereignty over Dai Viet:

To promote kindness and justice, the people must be at peace. But in withdrawing or advancing an army, neither side will first discard violence. Only our country of Dai Viet is truly a domain of manifest civility (*wenming zhi bang*). The mountains and rivers within our borders are distinctive, and the customs of the North and South are different. Since Zhao [Tuo], Dinh, Ly, and Tran established our country, along with Han, Tang, Song, Yuan, each emperor [North and South] has had his place.<sup>10</sup>

First, Le Loi (speaking through Nguyen Trai) acknowledges and laments the limitations of achieving a just society in wartime, and the difficulty of ending hostilities. Next, he asserts that Dai Viet alone is a “domain of manifest civility.” Liam Kelley coined this translation of this common phrase, one that indicates that Dai Viet belonged to a cultural sphere of classical learning that extended beyond the borders of Chinese

scholar to delineate the changes to Vietnamese society in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The arguments that Ming colonization played a role in sparking the Confucian reorganization of the Le Thanh Tong era and that the young emperor used strengthened government institutions in order to break free of the influence of Thanh Hoa advisors are his.

<sup>9</sup> These terms were commonly used in Vietnamese Han texts. In the TT, the Viet emperor is called *di* (帝) and the Ming emperor *Ming di* (明帝). For an example of Le Loi using the imperial I (*tram* 朕) and claiming the Mandate of Heaven (*thien-menh* 天命), see TT, 554. Historians generally ignore or gloss over the tension inherent in the Vietnamese use of these terms. For example, the historian Le Thanh Khoi explains that in Asia, as opposed to Europe, rulers are understood as the Son of Heaven with the Mandate of Heaven. See Lê Thành Khôi, *Le Viet-Nam: Histoire et Civilisations*, 231–232. It is clear that he means that this system applies equally to China and Vietnam, but he does not explain the inherent contradiction of a double mandate.

<sup>10</sup> TT, 546.

states.<sup>11</sup> Here, Le Loi decenters the Chinese world order by excluding the Ming from the world of manifest civility. In Le Loi's words, it was Dai Viet that was actualized as a true domain of manifest civility. Moreover, Le Loi stressed that Dai Viet and China had different natural environments and customs. He links Dai Viet back to Zhao Tuo, the founder of the Nan Yue kingdom, as well as to the independent Vietnamese dynasties that preceded the Le: Dinh, Ly, and Tran. The Ho dynasty does not deserve a place in the succession of dynasties. Each of these dynasties had to coexist with, respectively, the northern dynasties Han, Tang, Song, and Yuan. But each emperor, North and South, has his own domain. The southern emperor ruled the southern land. In Stephen O'Harrow's assessment of these lines, "history and nature conjoined have anointed a Vietnamese nation whose institutions derive from the same source as China's but whose fate is separate from China."<sup>12</sup>

As the text continues, Le Loi states that "although there are times of weakness and of strength, no generation lacks heroes." Referencing the Mongol invasions as proof, he writes, "Once Sogetu was captured at Ham Tu pass, then Omar was killed at Bach Dang sea. This is clear evidence [of the existence of heroes]." Explaining the events immediately preceding the foundation of his dynasty, he writes:

Recently the trivial and demanding policies of the Ho gave rise to popular resentment and rebellion. The violent Ming waited for their chance, and used this [resentment] to poison our people. An evil clique harbored treason and went so far as to betray our country. "Xin/han" is pronounced like xiang/huong spliced with jin/can; it is a firearm. The common people were trapped in the flames of tyranny, and innocents were sunk in pit of despair . . .<sup>13</sup>

Le Loi's condemnation of the Ho dynasty and his reminder of the troubles he saved the people from are conventional. His aside about firearms is unusual. He introduces the character *xin* and uses the *fanqie* phonetic system to indicate that it is pronounced like the initial sound "*xiang*" plus the final particle of "*jin*" – hence "*xin*" (or, in Vietnamese pronunciation, "*han*"). He does not explain the significance of this firearm, but goes on to explain that the people were oppressed by the Ming war, which was characterized by the use of deadly gunpowder weapons. The novelty of these weapons is underscored by the need to gloss the pronunciation of

<sup>11</sup> Liam Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 28–36. Stephen O'Harrow offers a slightly different translation and an assessment of earlier research, "Nguyen Trai's 'Binh Ngo Dai Cao' 平吳大誥 of 1428: The Development of a Vietnamese National Identity," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (March 1979): 159–174.

<sup>12</sup> O'Harrow, 170. <sup>13</sup> TT, 545–546.

the character. The passage goes on to lament the exactions demanded by the Ming, which sent people to face unhealthy miasma and mosquitoes while mining for gold and diving for pearls. Le Loi continues in this vein for dozens of lines, laying out his rationale for war with the Ming and recounting decisive battles. With the rise of the Le dynasty, he concludes, peace has been restored and the world brought to right.<sup>14</sup>

The intended audience of Le Loi's *Great Pronouncements* was the scholar elite of the Red River plain, the very people who had thrown their support behind the Ming colonization. The text walks a fine line between repudiating the Ming (as well as the unpopular Ho dynasty) and still deploying and thus affirming the conventional Confucian vocabulary of government. There is nothing strange about this. As O'Harrow argues, for the author of the *Great Pronouncements*, Nguyen Trai, "Sinitic institutions were not 'Chinese' and Vietnam an outside entity imitating them at all. Rather they were sharers in a larger circle."<sup>15</sup>

Le Loi's case for cultural and geographic differences between his state and that of its recent colonizers can also be seen in an assessment of Ming colonization found in the *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet*:

The [Ming] bandits divided our prefectures and established counties. They built up city walls while leaving the land uncultivated. Their army occupied our land for more than twenty years. They changed the customs to long hair and white teeth, so that all would become northerners. Alas!<sup>16</sup>

Unlike Le Tac's earlier attempts to assert mutual heritage and celebrate small differences, a politicized consciousness is here constructed on the foundation of significant differences in customs. The Vietnamese were distinguished from the Chinese by their short hair and betel-blackened teeth, a difference celebrated in *Linh Nam chich quai*. Nguyen Trai drew up some of his lessons in a book called *Geography (Du Dia Chi)* in 1435. He wrote that "the people of our land should not adopt the languages or clothing of the lands of Wu [Ming], Champa, the Lao, Siam, or Zhenla [Cambodia], since doing so will bring chaos to the customs of our land." As he explained, "the Northerners have been affected by Yuan customs – their hair hanging down the back, white teeth, short clothing, long sleeves, [and] caps and robes bright and lustrous as piles of leaves. Even though the people of the Ming have resumed the old ways of Han- and Tang-style dress, their customs have changed."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> TT, 547. <sup>15</sup> O'Harrow, 174. <sup>16</sup> TT, 549.

<sup>17</sup> Nguyen Trai, "Regarding Cultural Influences," Whitmore, trans. in *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, George E. Dutton, Jayne S. Werner, and John K. Whitmore, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012): 138–139; Whitmore, "The Fate of the Ngô," 69.

Cultural and armed resistance to the Ming did not necessarily mean a rejection of classical institutions. When Le Loi established the Le dynasty, he maintained the Ming schools and established the first law code in Dai Viet, based on northern law codes, and instituted a bureaucratic government.<sup>18</sup> The North observed Le Loi's movements warily. As the *History of the Ming* notes:

Le Loi . . . occupied the country and called himself emperor. He made Thuan-thien his reign name, established the east and west capitals, and divided the country into thirteen circuits . . . In each he set up an executive office, a surveillance commission, and a defense command office, just like the three divisions in the Central Country . . . He established every kind of official, opened schools, used the Confucian classics and poetry to select officials. Their refinement had a Hua air about it.<sup>19</sup>

This passage sounds like a straightforward account of Le Loi's actions in office. But there are some clues that reveal northern discomfort. The fact that he "called himself emperor" was not acceptable from a Ming point of view. What is more, Le Loi chose as his reign name Thuan-thien, literally "in accord with Heaven." Northern observers must have been galled by the choice of a man they deemed an anti-Ming criminal to choose this name.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the recent war and mutual suspicion, diplomatic relations between the Ming and the new Le state did not cease. In the first thirty years of the Le, Dai Viet dispatched twenty-eight embassies or messengers to China. This allowed a large number of Vietnamese officials to witness the Ming government firsthand, and it certainly influenced the Le restructuring of the government.<sup>21</sup> This is not to say that the Le government slavishly imitated the Ming, or that it saw their country as a lesser version of the North. Government reform was animated by robust local pride. The result, a state that mirrored yet defied the Ming, could only be unsettling to observers in the Ming court.

The Confucian, bureaucratic transformation of the Dai Viet government came to fruition in the reign of Le Loi's grandson, Le Tu Thanh. "Scholars who advocated following the Ming model of governance" educated the young Le Tu Thanh. He grew up to be a Confucian scholar

<sup>18</sup> Lê Thành Khôi, *Le Viet-Nam: Histoire et Civilisations*, 218–219. George E. Dutton, Jayne S. Werner, and John K. Whitmore, eds. *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, 89.

<sup>19</sup> MS, *juan* 321. In contrast, the TT mentions only five circuits, and emphasizes knitting the center to local society, 552.

<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to John Whitmore for pointing out how infuriating this would have been to the Ming. TT, 553.

<sup>21</sup> John K. Whitmore, "The Development of Le Government in Fifteenth Century Vietnam" (PhD Dissertation, Cornell University, 1968), 130.

by both training and inclination.<sup>22</sup> Le Tu Thanh's remarkable thirty-seven-year reign (1460–1497), especially the Hong Duc reign period (1470–1497), was a golden age for Confucian literati. Institutions, laws, and rituals established at that time would last for centuries.<sup>23</sup>

Le Tu Thanh instituted even more far-reaching neo-Confucian reforms than had Le Loi. Le Tu Thanh's government followed the Sinic six-ministries structure (Rites, Personnel, War, Works, Justice, Revenue).<sup>24</sup> The triennial civil service examination promoted by Le Tu Thanh graduated many times more degree holders than were needed to fill administrative posts, more even than were produced in the nineteenth century. Confucian-educated men with no government post returned to their natal villages, ensuring that state-sponsored ideals would penetrate to the grassroots level.<sup>25</sup>

John K. Whitmore has demonstrated that the reforms of Le Tu Thanh followed those of the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang. They were designed to replace the powerful Thanh Hoa oligarchy of Dai Viet's southern region that had assisted Le Loi with a corps of bureaucrats selected through the Confucian civil service examination.<sup>26</sup> This similarity to the Ming, and particularly to the Hongwu reign period of the Ming, was intentional on the part of Le Tu Thanh; he modeled the wording of edicts from the Zhu Yuanzhang era in his own communications. In 1467, Le Tu Thanh consciously pivoted toward the North, changing the name of the state from Dai Viet to "Thien Nam" (the Heavenly South) to make its links to classical culture and parallel position to the northern "Heavenly Court" more explicit.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to administrative change, the early Le was also a period of advances in military technology. Le Loi and his forces had captured a massive number of Ming armaments, perhaps including the "*xin*" or "*han*" he singled out in his *Great Pronouncements*. According to Sun

<sup>22</sup> *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, 121; John K. Whitmore, *Vietnamese Adaptations of Chinese Government Structure in the Fifteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale, Southeast Asia Studies, 1970), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Lieberman refers to it as a "Neo-Confucian revolution." Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830, Volume 1: Integration on the Mainland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 35–36, 43.

<sup>24</sup> *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, 90.

<sup>25</sup> Cooke, "Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Confucianization in Historical Perspective," 277–279. See also Insun Yu, "The Changing Nature of the Red River Delta Village during the Le Period (1428–1788)," *JSEAS*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (June 2001): 15–16. For a longer treatment of Le Thang Tong's reforms, Whitmore, "The Development of Le Government in the Fifteenth Century Vietnam."

<sup>26</sup> Whitmore, *Vietnamese Adaptations of Chinese Government Structure in the Fifteenth Century*, 4–5.

<sup>27</sup> Le Loi had declared Dai Viet as the name of the state in 1428: TT, 553.

Laichen, the Ming forces were initially armed with better weapons than their Vietnamese counterparts. As the war progressed, the Le seized guns and weapons from defeated Ming troops, distributing them to their own troops and imitating their design. Captive Ming soldiers and defectors schooled the Le in advanced techniques and equipment for siege warfare. Many Ming subjects, possibly tens of thousands, chose to stay in Dai Viet once hostilities ceased. The Ming government issued an imperial order demanding the return of Ming officials, soldiers, and weapons. According to the *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet*, Le Loi ordered that all Ming subjects be returned, threatening those who hid them with execution. He later insisted to the Ming that all people and weapons had been returned.<sup>28</sup> Le Loi had an interest in propitiating the Ming, since he desired the return of his daughter, who had been abducted by a Ming official and presented to the Ming palace as a maidservant when she was barely nine years old.<sup>29</sup> Sun Laichen argues that these weapons and people were never returned to China;<sup>30</sup> this seems likely, especially given the fact that the Ming repeated the demand for their return several times.<sup>31</sup>

Dai Viet not only mirrored Ming political culture but also its imperial techniques and ambitions. During the fifteenth century, Le rulers and lowland elites drew explicit distinctions between themselves and their Southeast Asian neighbors, deploying the rhetoric of civilization versus barbarity, and aggressively incorporating southern territory under their central control.<sup>32</sup> During Le Tu Thanh's reign, Quang Nam was wrested from Dai Viet's perennial rival, Champa. The tenuous balance of power that obtained between Dai Viet and Champa since the tenth century shifted, as Dai Viet troops used their improved firepower to deal Champa what proved to be its death blow in 1471, when it annexed three quarters of Champa's remaining territory.<sup>33</sup> The Le state thus adopted a new position in the world, assuming a posture as regional hegemon and demanding tribute from neighbors much the same way the Ming conducted its tributary relations.

Thanks to the government structure established by Le Loi and the Confucianization of society instigated by Le Tu Thanh, Le-era Dai Viet had a government structure and an educated elite that resembled that of

<sup>28</sup> TT, 551; 556. <sup>29</sup> TT, 556.

<sup>30</sup> Sun Laichen, "Chinese Gunpowder Technology," 84–89.

<sup>31</sup> TT, p. 554; 555. John K. Whitmore argues that Le Loi's anti-Ming orientation made him actively seek to expel all Ming subjects and sympathizers, "The Fate of the Ngô: Montane/Littoral Division in 15th–16th Century Dai Viet," 12–13.

<sup>32</sup> *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, 90–93.

<sup>33</sup> Sun Laichen, "Chinese Gunpowder Technology," 100–101.

their northern neighbors more than had been the case during the aristocratic, Buddhist-influenced Tran dynasty. Yet it is unlikely that the Jiajing court was fully aware of these changes in Le Dai Viet. In the sixteen years following Le Tu Thanh's death in 1497, the Le sent eleven missions to the Ming court, now in Beijing, either to present tribute, announce a change in ruler, or express thanks for a reciprocal visit. Ming officials traveled to Dong Kinh four times in this period.<sup>34</sup> But in the period between 1523 and 1536, not a single official communication from Dai Viet had reached Beijing. This cessation of communication was due to the violence, displacement, and confusion that preceded the establishment of the Mac dynasty.

### The fall of the Le and the rise of the Mac

Le Tu Thanh's 37-year reign is remembered as a golden age, a brief period when the strength of the monarch superseded regional rivalries and kept powerful families in check.<sup>35</sup> His beloved son Le Tranh ruled ably but briefly, from 1497 until his death in 1504. Vietnamese historians praised Le Tranh's sage-like love of learning and care for the people and lamented, "Alas! His reign was not long." His death marked the beginning of the decline of the Le. In 1504, Le Tu Thanh's grandson Le Thuan held the throne for less than seven months. Following Le Thuan's death, his 17-year-old brother Le Tuan took the throne. Le Tuan was not only morally dissipated, but also cruel and sadistic. "He loved drinking and killing people . . . The common people complained about him and called him the demon king. The signs of disorder can be seen in this." Indeed, when the Ming ambassador Xu Tianyang ("Assistant Left Supervising Censor for the Office of Scrutiny for Works") arrived in Dong Kinh on an embassy in 1507 to confirm the new ruler as "King of Annan," he purportedly took one look at Le Tuan's face and wrote this poem: "Annan spent four hundred long years on the upswing/Why did Heaven give it this demon as a king?"<sup>36</sup>

Mac Dang Dung (1483–1541) was a military official from Co Trai (near present-day Hai Phong), on the coast east of Dong Kinh. He joined Le Tuan's court as a member of the imperial guard in 1508, when he was 25 years old, only slightly older than the young emperor. According to the *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet* and the *Dai Viet thong su* ("Complete

<sup>34</sup> The Le sent embassies in 1497, 1498, 1500, 1501, 1502, 1504, 1507, twice in 1510, and twice in 1513. The Ming sent embassies to Dong Kinh in 1499, 1503, 1507, and 1513.

<sup>35</sup> Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 396.

<sup>36</sup> TT, 777–783. This would be very impolite behavior for a foreign envoy. Perhaps it was more politic to ascribe the ditty to a foreign visitor than to a Vietnamese.

history of the Great Viet”), Mac Dang Dung was the direct descendent of both Mac Dinh Chi and Mac Thuy. Despite these illustrious ancestors, the sources agree that Mac Dang Dung came from a family of poor fishermen, and rose through the ranks thanks to his military prowess and courage. Indeed, Mac Dang Dung did not enter imperial service through the civil service examination, but rather through the military examination. On his first appearance in the historical record, he is described as “brave and strong.”<sup>37</sup>

As a member of the imperial guard, Mac Dang Dung had a close-up view of corruption and mismanagement in the Le Tuan court. Things finally came to a head in 1509. Le Tuan’s cousin Le Oanh and his supporters forced the emperor to commit suicide by drinking poison. To exact revenge for Le Tuan’s previous murder of his mother and brothers, Le Oanh shot Le Tuan’s corpse out of a cannon, scattering the bones.<sup>38</sup> It was the most vindictive, and sensational, use of Dai Viet’s gunpowder arsenal to date.

Le Oanh ascended the throne under the reign name Hong Thuan (“Great Obedience [to Heaven]”). It seems that he sincerely hoped for a dynastic revival. He sent an embassy to the Ming, solicited and followed advice from his officials, and held examinations. During this period, Mac Dang Dung was granted imperial favor, earning the aristocratic title Count of Vu Xuyen in 1511.<sup>39</sup>

In 1516, a charismatic religious leader named Tran Cao claimed to be a descendent of the former Tran dynasty and rebelled against the Le.<sup>40</sup> He met with some success, even briefly occupying the capital. The confusion, looting, and banditry unleashed by the rebellion hastened the dissolution of the Le dynasty, shaking the people’s trust in government and exposing fault lines between the leading families, the Nguyen and the Trinh. Mac Dang Dung does not seem to have played an important role in putting down the rebellion. Instead, he watched and waited from the sidelines as the government imploded and powerful families competed with one another for dominance over the throne.

A member of the Trinh family had the emperor Le Oanh killed. He was eventually replaced as emperor by his ten-year-old nephew Le Y. From this time forward, the Nguyen and Trinh struggled for control of the country, and the Le emperors exerted no real power. Mac Dang Dung began to step into the spotlight in 1517, submitting two memorials to the throne calling for the execution of magicians who “misled ignorant people” and of a disloyal minister. Both memorials contained long,

<sup>37</sup> TT, 784. <sup>38</sup> TT, 789 <sup>39</sup> TT, 798.

<sup>40</sup> Lê Thành Khôi, *Le Viet-Nam: Histoire et Civilisations*, 234.

high-minded preambles invoking Confucian morality. In a sign of Mac Dang Dung's increasing influence over the court, Le Y assented to both requests. The following year, Mac Dang Dung's rank was increased to Marquis of Vu Xuyen, and just a year after that to Duke of Minh Quan.<sup>41</sup> Duke was the highest aristocratic rank before prince, which was reserved for members of the royal family.

The emperor Le Y relied on Mac Dang Dung as a man apart from the factional struggles of Trinh and Nguyen clans who could bolster his own shaky standing. Indeed, Mac Dang Dung had spent much of the previous three years leading the imperial army against the emperor's enemies. Mac Dang Dung was in such a secure position that he began to execute his rivals with impunity.<sup>42</sup> By 1520, his control of the entire navy and army was confirmed. In 1521, Mac pursued the rebel Tran Cao's son and successor Tran Thang, and succeeded in driving him off and neutralizing that threat to the Le. Previously that year, the emperor had honored Mac Dang Dung by personally visiting his lodgings and increasing his rank to Grand Mentor (*taifu*),<sup>43</sup> the most eminent advisor in the civil administration. Mac Dang Dung now had complete control of both branches of the military, an exalted civil rank, and aristocratic standing as a duke. In this way, Mac Dang Dung worked his way up from bodyguard, to regent, and finally de facto ruler.

But as Mac Dang Dung continued to grow in power, the royal family grew wary. The young emperor, Le Y, was concerned by Mac Dang Dung's ever-increasing military power and growing popular support. In addition, Mac Dang Dung had insinuated a maidservant into the palace to spy on Le Y. In autumn of 1522, Le Y slipped away from the capital with the help of officials unfriendly to Mac Dang Dung. After his escape, Mac Dang Dung and his partisans, notably Nguyen Nhu Que, placed Le Y's teenage brother Le Xuan on the throne.<sup>44</sup> Mac Dang Dung continued to rule behind the scenes. For the next five years, Dai Viet would have two (puppet) emperors, with Mac pulling the strings on one side and the Nguyen and Trinh families on the other. For educated men, sitting on the sidelines was not an option. As in Le Tac's time, officials had to choose between the rival regimes.

In the capital region, Mac Dang Dung was riding high. He may have seemed like a savior to a population still shaken by Le Tuan's reign of terror and Tran Cao's almost-successful rebellion. His image, or perhaps

<sup>41</sup> TT, 816–818. <sup>42</sup> TT, 820. <sup>43</sup> TT, 825.

<sup>44</sup> Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử* (Saigon: Bộ Văn Hóa Giáo Dục và Thanh Niên, 1973), 5b–10a. Hereafter cited as DVTS. TT, 826.

the image he wished to project, can be seen in a 1525 announcement issued in Le Xuan's name:

I specially appointed Mac Dang Dung to lead the All-Terrain Battalion. Hearing of rebellion he goes to quell it; he restrains the army; soaring like an eagle and roaring like a tiger, he captures their masses and makes them scatter like ants and tremble like beasts.<sup>45</sup>

In the winter of 1526–1527, Mac Dang Dung sent an assassin to kill Le Y. On the home front, Mac Dang Dung had his younger sister's husband killed after she complained about his ten concubines. Mac Dang Dung was now confident enough of his position to enter Dong Kinh and force Le Xuan to abdicate. Officials and people welcomed him into the city, but Mac Dang Dung met resistance when he requested that the Minister of Personnel Truong Phu Duyet write the abdication letter. Truong's eyes bulged and he protested, "How can this be right?" A more willing official had to be found to draft the letter.<sup>46</sup> Le Xuan and his mother were forced to commit suicide soon after.

Rather than declaring a new order, Mac Dang Dung and his supporters positioned themselves as heirs to the Confucian flowering of the Hong Duc era of the Le dynasty.<sup>47</sup> Mac Dang Dung selected the reign name "Bright Virtue" (Minh Duc)<sup>48</sup> to indicate that the bad days of the last Le emperors were over and a period reminiscent of the Hong Duc reign (or "Great Virtue") was beginning. In this and other ways, Mac Dang Dung consciously cast himself as the successor of Le Tu Thanh. Accordingly, during the period of Mac rule, the civil service examination was held without fail every three years, even during times of war and unrest. A 1532 entry in the *Complete Chronicles* attests to the stability attained under Mac rule:

Mac ordered that in every place inside and out of the capital city people were forbidden from carrying spears, swords, sharp knives or weapons. He set up roadblocks, and those who disobeyed the law were arrested. At this time merchants and pedestrians walked about empty-handed. At night, there were no thieves. Grazing animals were not brought in; they would just be checked on once a month. If the animals gave birth, they could not tell whose household it belonged to. After several years, people would not pick up items dropped on the road and people stopped locking their doors at night. There were several years of bumper crops in a row. The country had some peace.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> TT, 832. <sup>46</sup> TT, 833–834.

<sup>47</sup> John K. Whitmore, "Chung-hsing and Cheng-t'ung in Texts of and on Sixteenth Century Viet Nam," in Keith W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore, eds., *Essays onto Vietnamese Past* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Publications, Cornell University, 1995); Lê Thành Khôi, *Le Viet-Nam: Histoire et Civilisations*, 236.

<sup>48</sup> DVTS, 13b.

<sup>49</sup> TT, 840. There is a similar passage under Mac Dang Dung's biography in DVTS, 24a.

Between 1527 and his retirement in 1529, Mac rewarded his supporters with rank and position,<sup>50</sup> reorganized the government, and presided over the civil service examination. Concerned about gaining the acceptance of the Ming dynasty, he attempted to send embassies to Beijing to report that the Le line had died out, but they were stopped at the border. At the end of 1529, Mac Dang Dung, “feeling that he was getting old,” abdicated in favor of his eldest son Mac Dang Doanh. Mac Dang Dung “retired to the Palace of Auspicious Brightness, took up fishing, and wandered about at his leisure.”<sup>51</sup> In reality, Mac Dang Dung continued to be the de facto head of government until his death in 1541, handling state affairs and building his base while his son led military missions.<sup>52</sup>

Although he played an important role in bringing the Le dynasty to an end, Mac Dang Dung cast himself as the preserver of Le institutions and of Le Tu Thanh’s Confucian legacy. This would make him doubly troubling to the Ming: both a usurper and a skilled rhetorician of the language of Ming imperialism. Under the capable rule of Mac Dang Dung and his son, it seemed that Dai Viet would at last have a respite from the wars and mismanagement of the previous two decades. Once Zhu Houcong was apprised of events in Dai Viet, however, the Mac had to worry about invasion from the North. Whether we take Mac Dang Dung to be a traitor or a savior, he was certainly an experienced campaigner, an able ruler, and canny enough to not to drown in the treacherous waters of the political scene of the early sixteenth century. He was ready to meet the challenge from the northern emperor head on.

### The Jiajing emperor’s Dai Viet problem

The “Grand Celebration Affair” brought the southern emperor, Mac Dang Dung, to the full attention of the northern emperor, Zhu Houcong. The conflict caused the Ming court to more closely scrutinize Dai Viet than would normally be the case. They did not like what they saw.

Zhu Houcong, the Jiajing emperor (r. 1521–1567), holds a place of infamy in history. Modern historians describe him as “self-centered, self-indulgent, short-tempered, and humorless,” a man whose “love of flattery and intolerance of criticism knew no bounds,” qualities that contributed to make him “one of the most perverse and unpleasant men ever to

<sup>50</sup> DVTS, 14b.

<sup>51</sup> TT, 838. The DVTS contends that Mac abdicated because he “saw that the people’s hearts and minds were not with him”: 18a and 23a.

<sup>52</sup> DVTS, 18a.

occupy the Chinese throne.”<sup>53</sup> Zhu Houcong was jealous of his prerogatives. Within the Ming state, he was interested in enforcing sumptuary law. In foreign relations, he was careful to enforce Ming centrality. Mac Dang Dung, it was found, was freely transgressing the boundaries of the Ming world order; this violation Zhu Houcong could not ignore.

Zhu Houcong's unusual route to the throne caused long-lasting tensions and bitterness between the emperor and his officials. When the Zhengde emperor died without an heir in 1521, his thirteen-year-old cousin Zhu Houcong was selected to replace him. To legitimate this move, the chief Grand Secretary Yang Tinghe called for Zhu Houcong to become the adopted brother of the deceased Zhengde emperor. In that way, Zhengde's father, the Hongzhi emperor, would be ritually made Zhu Houcong's father, and his own birth parents would become his uncle and aunt. Yang and other members of the court expected that this studious young man would be pliable. He quickly proved them wrong.

Zhu Houcong refused to accept their accommodations and insisted that he accept the throne in his own right – as the son of an imperial prince and not as the deceased emperor's adopted brother. He even demanded that posthumous titles be granted his father. His unprecedented demands set off a long and violent struggle, referred to as the “Rites Controversy,” that divided the government. At stake was not only imperial ritual, but who had ultimate control of the state – the emperor or the Grand Secretaries.

Though on the surface the Rites Controversy may seem to be a mere disagreement about minor points of etiquette, passions ran deep on both sides. For officials, violating tradition and precedent potentially threatened the very foundations of the state. Officials risked demotion, exile, and even death to remonstrate with the emperor.<sup>54</sup> Pitted against the bulk of the bureaucracy, the young emperor and a handful of supporters eventually won the dispute after years of turmoil, strengthening imperial power in the process.<sup>55</sup> Relations between the throne and the bureaucracy remained strained throughout the Jiajing reign. Court officials were deeply affected by the decade of debate set off by the Rites Controversy. The contentious atmosphere of the Jiajing court affected the tenor and the openness of court discussion, even over unrelated matters such as Dai Viet policy. The Jiajing emperor did not lighten up after he got his way in the Rites Controversy. He continued to be disengaged, vindictive,

<sup>53</sup> Respectively, John Dardess, *Ming China*, 49; Ray Huang, *1587: A Year of No Significance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 135; Mote, *Imperial China*, 668. James Geiss characterized his rule as “brutal and despotic,” “The Chia-Ching Reign, 1522–1566,” 450.

<sup>54</sup> Geiss, 449. <sup>55</sup> Mote, *Imperial China*, 668.

preoccupied with his personal pursuit of immortality, and a general pain to be around. He was so unbearable that, in 1542, his favorite concubine and several serving girls attempted to murder him.<sup>56</sup> This is the man who turned his attention to Vietnam in 1536.

In fact, the Ming court had been dimly aware of Mac Dang Dung's rise and of unrest in Dai Viet since 1523. That year, a routine diplomatic visit to Dai Viet returned to Beijing after finding the roads to Dong Kinh blocked.<sup>57</sup> In 1525, Zhu Houcong had called for an investigation into the Dai Viet situation, but nothing came of it.<sup>58</sup> The Mac tried to send tribute missions to Beijing several times, but were always turned away at the border. The delay only caused tension and bad feelings to compound, finding release in the Ming's declaration of war against the Mac dynasty.

### A bounded China or an expansive empire?

On November 26, 1536, the Ministries of War and Rites jointly advocated war with Dai Viet, writing, "At present, a rebellious minister is wreaking havoc; he usurped the ruler and seized the country, and tribute has not been sent. A punitive army should be raised to manifest Heaven's retribution."<sup>59</sup> On November 30, 1540, the rebellious minister, Mac Dang Dung, personally surrendered to the Ming dynasty at the border and was recognized by the Ming as the ruler of the Red River Delta region. In the four-year interval between these two events, the Ming court was at odds over how, and whether, to proceed. The ensuing political deadlock prompted the official Li Wenfeng to comment in 1540, "it has been several years from the beginning of the discussion about Annan until now," and that everyone was "sick of thinking about it."<sup>60</sup> The expense, practicality, and strategic goals of a military campaign against Dai Viet came under review; most of the debate, however, was ideological. The essential question was whether or not the Ming had jurisdiction beyond its southern border, in Dai Viet. At stake was the very concept of the Chinese state: an expansive Ming empire as envisioned by the Yongle emperor, or the Hongwu emperor's bounded and self-contained Central Country.

Historical precedent was an important component of policy-making in premodern China. Indeed, Ming emperors paid a daily visit to the Hall of Venerating Ancestors to pay obeisance to prior emperors, making it

<sup>56</sup> Geiss, 462; 464. <sup>57</sup> MSL, 490.

<sup>58</sup> SZL, 207–208. A largely identical but more detailed version is in MSL, 490.

<sup>59</sup> MSL, 495.

<sup>60</sup> Li Wenfeng, *Yue Fiao Shu* (Tainan: Zhuang Yan, 1996), 663, hereafter YJS.

difficult to disregard the past.<sup>61</sup> During the Ming-Mac crisis, officials consulted histories and referred to historical figures and events in their policy suggestions. Even Zhu Houcong, the ultimate violator of ritual norms, felt bound to reconcile current policy with precedents set by the Hongwu and Yongle emperors. Yet the emperor and members of his bureaucracy drew drastically different conclusions from these precedents. Dai Viet's historically ambiguous position vis-à-vis China came to the fore in the debate over how to handle the new regime of Mac Dang Dung. At stake in these discussions were not only immediate military decisions, but a definitive statement of the extent of the Ming and its role in the world. Dai Viet had to be understood in relation to these competing views: either as an intrinsic part of a Ming empire, or a barbarian state outside of the concerns of a bounded Central Country.

Rather than a merely pragmatic assessment of strategy and resources, debate over how to handle the Mac in the Ming court formed around two ideological positions, representing different views of the conceptual location of Dai Viet and China's moral responsibility toward it. Interventionists deployed a discourse of ethics to make a case for increased Chinese involvement in Dai Viet. Their intellectual opponents articulated an anti-imperialist discourse of cultural difference that posited Dai Viet as politically and culturally other and therefore outside of Chinese jurisdiction. The two poles of the debate, the bounded China of the Hongwu era, and the expansive China of the Yongle era, each employed a different set of terms. For those that argued for intervention, China was All-under-Heaven or the empire (*tianxia*) and the Vietnamese were *Jiaoren*, Jiao people, designating them as inhabitants of the Han- and Ming-era province. For those that argued against war, China was Zhongguo, the "Central Country," and the Vietnamese were marginal Yi barbarians, not subjects of the Central Country.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the term

<sup>61</sup> David M. Robinson, "Introduction," in Robinson, ed., *Culture, Courtiers, and Competition: The Ming Court (1368–1644)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard East Asia Monographs, 2008), 22–23; Galeote Pereira, "Certain Reports of China, Learned through the Portugals There Imprisoned . . .," translated in C. R. Boxer, *South China in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1953), 29.

<sup>62</sup> As Peter Bol argues, "spatially and culturally literati always deployed the term *Zhong guo* in relationship to a wider world to establish an opposition between the *Zhong guo* and those outside of it, who were typically referred as the *Yi di* 夷狄." See Peter K. Bol, "Geography and Culture: The Middle-Period Discourse on the *Zhong Guo* – the Central Country," in Huang Ying-kuei, ed., *Space and Cultural Fields: Spatial Images, Practices and Social Production* (Taipei: Center for Chinese Studies, 2009), 63. Although "Zhongguo" is the term most commonly used in Chinese today to signify "China," it had more of an ideological tone in the Ming dynasty. When the Portuguese sailor Galeote Pereira traveled to China in the 1540s, he asked the people he encountered what they called their country. They answered that it was Da Ming – Great Ming. This observation is echoed by Gaspar da Cruz, "Treatise in Which the Things of China Are Related at Great

“Central Country” was abstract enough to be adopted by Vietnamese and Japanese rulers to refer to their own countries, when they wanted to emphasize their own regional and cultural centrality and exclude others.<sup>63</sup> Those Chinese literati who deployed the discourse of the Central Country (rather than other terms such as the “Ming state” (*Mingguo*) or “the empire” (*tianxia*)) largely denied the possibility of absorbing different cultures within the Chinese polity.<sup>64</sup>

The debate was further complicated by the Ming’s vexed relationship with the Le dynasty. Since the Le dynasty grew out of the successful resistance movement against Ming occupation in 1427, Ming officials were ambivalent about fulfilling their customary tributary responsibilities to them.

As debate progressed, Chinese officials had to stake their position on Dai Viet policy based on the precedents of the early Ming, justifying their positions in relation to the renunciation of the Hongwu emperor or the more aggressive policies of Yongle. Grand Secretary Xia Yan, the original advocate of war, acknowledged that the Hongwu emperor had praised the Tran dynasty for their “ability to manifest sincerity and obedience, and the loyalty of being the first to submit.”<sup>65</sup> Because of this, Xia wrote in November 1536, the emperor commanded in his *Ancestral Injunctions* that his descendants were not to attack Annam. Xia explained the Hongwu emperor’s statement as specific to the Tran; once the Tran royal house was replaced by Ho Quy Ly and then by the Le dynasty, this obligation ceased. Xia Yan elided Yongle’s disastrous failed occupation of Dai Viet, retelling the history of Annam as one of successive usurpation and political instability.<sup>66</sup> He argued, “Annam has not sent tribute for twenty years, and according to the border official<sup>67</sup> of Liangguang, neither Le Y nor Le Xuan are the proper sons by first wife of Le Dieu and should not inherit

Length . . .” translated in C. R. Boxer, ed., *South China in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1953), 28–29, 64.

<sup>63</sup> Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, 18–19. <sup>64</sup> Bol, 17, 27.

<sup>65</sup> SZL, 211. Xia Yan was an extremely high-ranking and influential minister in the *neige* (內閣), or cabinet. The *neige* became important after the Hongwu emperor abolished the Secretariat’s executive posts in 1380. Grand Secretaries served a body of consultants with direct access to the emperor, often had little hands-on experience, and were thus viewed with suspicion and resentment by other administrators. Since their rank was relatively low, they often served concurrently as a minister of one of the six ministries. Charles O. Hucker, *Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 346–347, 466–467. Xia Yan was Minister of Rites and also held the three highly esteemed posts of Junior Guardian, Junior Mentor, and Junior Mentor of the Heir Apparent – all indicating his proximity to the royal family.

<sup>66</sup> SZL, 211.

<sup>67</sup> *Shouchen* (守臣), official tasked with protecting a designated area. He is referring to Wang Yuan, the Ming official who alerted the court that Annam had not sent tribute in twenty years.

the throne. Mac Dang Dung, along with Tran Cao, are powerful ministers of that country who tried to usurp the throne. Officials should be sent to investigate and ascertain who instigated these crimes.” Although Xia Yan acknowledged the importance of the *Ancestral Injunctions*, he interpreted Hongwu’s intention as responsibility specifically to the Tran, not as a permanent statement of anti-interventionism. For Xia, the ethical problem of improper succession and usurpation trumped the blanket nonintervention advocated by the *Ancestral Injunctions*. He implied that a new model was needed and proposed the *Spring and Autumn Annals (Chun Qiu)*, which contains the principle that “rebellious ministers and bandits are to be caught and executed.”<sup>68</sup> He applied this principle to Dai Viet, despite the fact that it was a state with its own ruler and not a province of the Ming. Treating Annan as an entity under the jurisdiction of the Ming, he posited an ethical responsibility to punish rebellion and usurpation.

Not all in the government administration agreed with this assessment. Those opposed to war countered the ethical argument of the interventionists by characterizing Annan as a land of Yi and Di, contentious by nature, and therefore unsuited to Chinese rule. In doing so, they deliberately overlooked the transformative changes that took place in Dai Viet during the fifteenth century. Anti-interventionists in the Ming court appealed to tropes of Vietnamese difference that had little to do with the actual situation of the Dai Viet under the Mac. To do so, they employed the binary of “Hua and Yi” and evoked the bounded China of the term “Central Country.”

The rebuttal written in January 1537 by Tang Zhou, the left vice minister of the Ministry of Revenue, is the most cogent summation of the antiwar rationale. Moreover, he was the first to bring the terms “Central Country” and “Yi” into the discussion of the Dai Viet situation. Tang Zhou admonished the emperor to observe the standards set by the Hongwu emperor. In Tang’s assessment, this instruction was based on the principle that “between the Hua and the Yi, as between Heaven and Earth, there are natural divisions, and emperors and kings do not use the governance of the Central Country to administer them. For that reason, Gaodi [the Hongwu emperor] did not send out his mighty army frequently, and recorded in his *Ancestral Injunctions* that Annan was not to be attacked. Your majesty should observe this.”<sup>69</sup>

Tang also raised pragmatic concerns. He noted that in times when Annan was powerful, it posed a threat to border towns such as Qinzhou. Thus, “when the Yi and Di are divided and disordered, it is

<sup>68</sup> SZL, 212.    <sup>69</sup> MSL, 496.

the Central Country's good fortune." Encouraging divisions and rivalries among northern neighbors was a strategy with a long pedigree.<sup>70</sup> Propping up the Le government was of no utility to China, and could indeed cause problems at home. Of course, based on its long history of Chinese rule, Tang conceded, Annan could be considered as a historical part of the Chinese empire, or even part of the cultural China. Addressing this argument, Tang agreed that if Annan were indeed the ancient territory of China, then the state should absolutely seize the opportunity to regain what was theirs. Cleverly flipping the argument, Tang insisted that Annan was *not* the ancient territory of China. To prove this point, Tang cited the legendary bronze pillars of the Han general Ma Yuan. According to Tang, these pillars were located in Siming Prefecture in Guangxi – marking the outer limit of the Chinese state and its jurisdiction. He went on to say that during the twenty-year occupation, there were ceaseless rebellions and innumerable loss of Chinese lives, all in exchange for a few “empty names” to add to the map of Ming territory.<sup>71</sup> Tang Zhou concluded his memorial by reminding the emperor that the Mac actually attempted to send tribute but were turned away at the border, pointing out that war would be prohibitively expensive, and warning that the northern border represented a graver security threat than did Annan.

Once Xia Yan and Tang Zhou had had their say in their memorials, the grounds for debate were set. Those who favored war, notably Grand Secretary Xia Yan, argued for an ethical responsibility to punish usurpation and support tributary states. In contrast, anti-imperialists such as Tang, bolstered by the *Ancestral Injunctions*, argued for a fundamental – or even natural – division between Dai Viet and the Central Country, Hua people and Yi Di. Despite their differences, both poles of thought implicitly agreed on the impossibility of an equal state beyond the southern border.

### Two suns in the sky

In March 1537, a southern scholar, Trinh Duy Lieu, arrived in the north as an ambassador of the exile Le court. He came to request Ming aid in overthrowing the Mac. Despite the initial suspicions of the court, Trinh was able to influence the policy direction of the Ming, due in part to his skill as a writer.<sup>72</sup> Trinh made an ethical appeal, telling a story of Mac violence, usurpation, and subversion of moral norms. He submitted a

<sup>70</sup> This especially applies to the North. See Yu Ying-shih, “Han Foreign Relations,” in Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, eds., *Cambridge History of China: The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C.–A.D. 220* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>71</sup> MSL, 496–497. <sup>72</sup> ANZY, 18.

memorial requesting military aid for the exile Le court, recounting Mac Dang Dung's usurpation of the throne:

... Mac called himself Heavenly King. From this time, the roads were blocked, tribute was halted and envoys could not get through. Because of this, [Le] Y was grieved and angry, fell ill, and died. Our country then selected [Le] Ninh as his successor to handle state affairs. Ninh is Y's son. We rushed letters to the pass several times to inform you of our troubles, but each time the carriers were killed on the road by Dang Dung and we were not able to reach you. For this reason, a Cantonese merchant ship secretly carried us, and we were able to reach the road to the capital. We entreat you to raise an army to punish their crimes, and deliver our country from misfortune.<sup>73</sup>

The Ming Ministry of Rites warned that the embassy was suspect and should be held at arm's length. The reasons were that, unlike standard embassies, Trinh Duy Lieu and his nine colleagues lingered in Champa for two years, arrived in China on a merchant ship, and failed to register at the local yamen when they reached the Chinese coast. The ministry called for an investigation to determine the real author of the memorial, and why the embassy failed to register with the local authorities upon arrival.<sup>74</sup> Zhu Houcong was also suspicious. According to the *Yue Jiao Shu*, "the emperor thought that the script and the genealogical tables [presented by the embassy] did not look like that of foreigners. He immediately assigned an official to look into it. Since he was suspicious of this memorial, he asked the Ministry of Rites and Ministry of War to both translate it and verify that the seal was real."<sup>75</sup>

There was something fishy about Trinh Duy Lieu's unceremonious arrival and his failure to register with the yamen when he first arrived in Guangdong. But his stirring tale of loyalty and risking death to exact vengeance moved the court. Explaining his unorthodox itinerary, he drew upon the interventionists' understanding of an inclusive empire:

The survival or fall of our country was bound up in our single journey. When I set out from home, the entire country knew I had only a one in ten chance of surviving. Drifting on the outer oceans is a dangerous undertaking. When I arrived in Guangdong I did not register because if the outer Yi knew my business it would be dangerous. If I had merely registered my complaint there and headed home, this would also have gotten me killed. And even if they killed me first and then forwarded my letter, my country would not know and my life would be lost in vain. Besides, in talking about the Heavenly Court's transformation of customs, the root of transformation is to teach the people of the empire to serve their ruler with complete loyalty, to serve their relatives with complete filiality. Although I feared that the road was long and arduous, I know that life and death are fated . . . so I decided to secretly come to the capital [Beijing] on back roads. I was hungry

<sup>73</sup> MSL, 498. <sup>74</sup> SZL, 214. <sup>75</sup> YJS, 36.

and did not know if I would live or die. I was on an important mission for my state, if it was not for that, why would I have done it?<sup>76</sup>

Eventually, the Ming court was persuaded. Mac Dang Dung was charged with the following ten crimes:

1. Mac Dang Dung drove off the rightful king, Le Y, and occupied the capital.
2. He forced Le Y's mother to marry him.
3. He poisoned Le Xuan and put his own son on the throne in his place.
4. He forced Le Ninh to flee far from the capital.
5. He [abdicated to his son and] gave himself the title Retired Emperor.
6. He changed the reign titles to Shining Virtue and Great Rectification.<sup>77</sup>
7. He posted troops at the borders, blocking communications.
8. He is cruel and immoral, causing harm to the people.
9. He obstructed the tribute route.<sup>78</sup>
10. He appointed officials [without the permission of the Ming].<sup>79</sup>

This list of crimes was exaggerated, and most likely written with the collusion of Trinh Duy Lieu.<sup>80</sup> The list of crimes moreover suggests some kind of Ming jurisdiction over Dai Viet. It is not merely that the Mac violated diplomatic norms or that they usurped a Ming ally. Ming concern extended to Mac Dang Dung's immorality and unsanctioned use of imperial symbols.

After reading the list of crimes, Zhu Houcong immediately reasserted plans for war on the grounds that the failure to send tribute was unacceptable and that usurpation was an even more serious offense. He was careful to distance himself from the imperial goals of his predecessor, the Yongle emperor, though the parallels were clear. Like Yongle, the Jiajing emperor was contemplating sending an army to overthrow a new regime and restore a tributary state – a situation that led in Yongle's time to the annexation of Annan by the Ming. He wrote, "Our current involvement in Annan is in order to eliminate disorder in that country, it is different from what happened in Taizong's [Yongle] time. A military response is appropriate."<sup>81</sup> The exile Le's request for help brought Dai Viet's

<sup>76</sup> SZL, 214–215.

<sup>77</sup> Ming Duc (明德) and Dai Chinh (大正). The first is Mac Dang Dung's title, the second is his son Mac Dang Doang's.

<sup>78</sup> This presumably means he blocked Le Ninh's attempts to send to China for help, as Mac Dang Dung continued to try to send his own tribute missions through the passes.

<sup>79</sup> MSL, 499. <sup>80</sup> TT, 845.

<sup>81</sup> MSL, 499; Nam Nguyen, "Writing as Response and as Translation: *Jiandeng xinhua* and the Evolution of the Chuanqi Genre, Particularly in Vietnam" (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2005), 267.

ongoing civil war to the forefront of the Ming agenda and provided a firm basis for military involvement.

By September 1537, Mac Dang Dung was aware of the Ming's war preparations, and, according to the grand coordinator of Yunnan, he sent spies to the border to gather intelligence. These spies were captured by Ming troops. On their persons were found a seal as well as a copy of a text called the *Great Pronouncements* (*dagao*) issued by Mac Dang Dung nearly a decade previously,<sup>82</sup> modeled after the *Great Pronouncements* of the Hongwu emperor. Mac Dang Dung's *Great Pronouncements* contained fifty-nine articles to be propagated among the people and read aloud. The original Hongwu *Great Pronouncements* was widely promulgated, and a copy was meant to be owned by every household. Therefore, it is not surprising that it would be well known in post-occupation Dai Viet. Of course, within the Ming state, emperors who succeeded the founding Hongwu emperor were not allowed to amend or create their own *Great Pronouncements*.<sup>83</sup> Needless to say, foreign rulers, especially unconfirmed ones such as Mac Dang Dung, had no business devising their own. Thus, Mac Dang Dung's use of the title *Great Pronouncements* was particularly shocking to the Ming court. Zhu Houcong was sensitive about his prerogatives as emperor and sumptuary law; when the Ming court bestowed gifts on Vietnamese embassies, they were careful not to give clothing or objects too similar to those owned by the Chinese emperor. Coming on top of the ten crimes the Ming court had already charged Mac Dang Dung with, this document was more damning evidence that he was acting without license and threatening the Ming's sole authority to use certain symbols of power.<sup>84</sup>

What is more, in this document, Mac Dang Dung used the imperial "I" (*zhen/tram*) and spoke of inheriting Heaven's Mandate, terms that, from a Chinese point of view, were reserved for the Ming ruler alone.<sup>85</sup> This demonstrated to Zhu Houcong's court that Mac was not only acting without Ming recognition, but he was imitating Ming political culture in a way that seemed aggressive. For the Ming court, Mac Dang

<sup>82</sup> *Yue jiao Shu* records that they were written nine years previously, which may be a clerical error for the ninth year of Jiajing. According to the *Ming Shi* and the *Đại Việt thông sử*, they were written in the ninth year of Jiajing, which would be seven years previously, in 1530. DVTS, 18a.

<sup>83</sup> John Langlois, "Ming Law," in Mote and Twitchett, eds., *Cambridge History of China, Ming Dynasty, Volume 8, Part 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 174.

<sup>84</sup> The Ming court most likely was unaware that Le Loi had issued his own *Grand Pronouncements*, in 1427. TT, 546.

<sup>85</sup> YJS, 36. Use of these terms persisted through Vietnam's last dynasty, the Nguyen. Woodside, *Chinese Model*, 9–10. Woodside goes on to point out that Vietnamese rulers used a dual system of names, one set translated from Chinese, and the other from indigenous Vietnamese.

Dung was an illegitimate rebel, not the rightful ruler of Dai Viet. Even if he was legitimated as ruler, claiming the mandate of Heaven was not an appropriate action for a tributary state.

For Mac Dang Dung, this was merely following in the footsteps of Le Loi's *Great Pronouncements* and Le Tu Thanh and his influential 1471 edict. Rather than challenging Ming authority, Mac Dang Dung's goal was more likely to reassure his Vietnamese subjects that he was not a usurper, but the political heir of Le Loi and Le Tu Thanh. Indeed, historical writing by Mac scholars extol the restoration of the reforms of Le Tu Thanh under the leadership of Mac Dang Dung, staking the legitimacy of the new regime on continuity with the recent past.<sup>86</sup> But Zhu Houcong and his emissaries could not appreciate such domestic positioning. The emperor was conceived as the pivot of the cosmos – how could there be two? This was no mere semantic kerfuffle. The Mac dynasty's use of imperial rhetoric threatened the Ming's ideological coherence. Zhu Houcong was enraged.

Studies of Ming and especially Qing relations with the West hinge on the concept of incommensurability. The Chinese government, operating within the tributary model of foreign relations, confused and angered western envoys operating within the Westphalian model of equal states. No such problems hampered late imperial Sino-Viet relations. Both sides knew the rules and used literary Sinitic as the language of diplomacy. Paradoxically, however, this very commensurability caused problems. Both sides may have agreed to the rules and the forms of diplomacy, but their understanding of their country's place in the world differed.

For the Ming, like their imperial predecessors, the pattern of the world called for a singular emperor who possessed the mandate of Heaven and ruled *tianxia*, All-under-Heaven. This was his exclusive right. There could not be two suns in the sky. Ming China's other close vassal state, Choson Korea, conceded to this view. When a Chinese official asked Ch'oe Pu, a Korean official who visited China in the 1480s, "Is the King of your country called Emperor?", Ch'oe Pu replied, "In Heaven there are not two suns; how under the same Heaven can there be two Emperors? My King's one purpose is to serve your country devotedly."<sup>87</sup> Unlike their Korean counterparts, Vietnamese did use the term emperor in their writings. What is more, Vietnamese rulers including Mac Dang Dung claimed to be emperors possessed of the mandate, like the Ming

<sup>86</sup> Whitmore, "Chung-hsing and Cheng-t'ung." Mac Dang Dung even followed the style of officials' hats and robes established under Le Tu Thanh: Trần Quang Đức., *Nghìn năm áo mũ: lịch sử trang phục Việt Nam giai đoạn 1009–1945* (Hà Nội: Thế giới, 2013), 185.

<sup>87</sup> Ch'oe Pu, *Ch'oe Pu's Diary: A Record of Drifting across the Sea*. John Meskill, trans. (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1965), 57.

emperor. This Vietnamese use of classical symbols of power set them apart from neighboring states such as Choson, and was threatening to China, which claimed, but failed to exercise, sole right to these symbols. In contrast, it is clear in books such as the *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet* that from the Vietnamese point of view, the southern emperor could coexist with the northern emperor.

The conceptual dissonance between the Ming state and Dai Viet, obscured by their mutual acceptance of the tributary model of foreign relations, is best seen in the labels they used for their countries, respectively Zhongguo (Central Country) and Nam Quoc (Southern Country). The most common autonym in Vietnamese texts was “South” (*Nam*). For Vietnamese, Dai Viet was the Southern Country (*Nam Quoc*) ruled by the southern emperor. It was also frequently called the “Heavenly South,” the “Great South,” or “our South.” China was the explicit northern half of this binary. In Vietnamese texts, China is referred to as the Northern Country, ruled by the northern emperor and populated by northerners. As implied in Ly Thuong Kiet’s poem “The Southern Emperor Rules the Southern Land,” there were separate heavenly mandates for the two realms. There were two suns in the sky. In contrast, the Ming did not view their state as the northern half of anything. It was Zhongguo, the Central Country. Under normal circumstances, this conceptual dissonance was ignored and did not play a role in foreign relations. However, when the Ming government increased their scrutiny of Dai Viet, the situation became unacceptable to the Ming court.

For the Mac dynasty, like the Le before them, Dai Viet was like China and yet independent. Elite Vietnamese claimed classical culture as their own. Vietnamese saw themselves and their state as heirs to early northern states and co-inheritors of classical culture. As we have seen through the example of Le Tac, this position did not compromise their identification as Vietnamese. The problem and contradiction was on the Chinese side. For Chinese observers, Vietnamese could not be both similar to China *and* independent. It was a contradiction that had to be resolved. Ultimately, the Ming court in the 1530s solved this problem by accepting Vietnamese independence while insisting on its cultural difference. To accept its cultural similarity would entail reincorporating it as part of the Ming empire.

This is not to say that when Zhu Houcong heard about the Mac *Great Pronouncements*, he truly thought or feared that the Mac actually possessed the Mandate of Heaven. The Ming court was probably aware that *fan* states made use of more grandiose rhetoric in their internal documents or in other ways challenged Ming claims of centrality. What was so threatening was that it was such a strong assertion of Vietnamese

sovereignty. It baldly set out that Chinese authority was limited by real borders and did not simply extend to all tributary states. That Dai Viet was infringing on Ming-claimed land in Guangxi and that Mac Dang Dung had usurped the throne made it that much more flagrant.

The *Great Pronouncements* issue highlights the uncomfortable position of the Mac Dang Dung, attempting in good faith to reestablish tributary relations with the Ming but deemed by them a rebel. Mac Dang Dung's institution of classical modes of government would seem to fit in with the Chinese ideal of cultural transformation. Chinese scholars spoke of transformation through education (*jiaohua*), a discourse that seems to map well onto the "civilizing mission" of Western colonialism. But did this ideal allow for *self*-transformation? Where was the line between *jiaohua* and *lèse-majesté*? The Ming court was not impressed with the Mac's political affinity to China; instead, it was seen as threatening, insubordinate, and worthy of a military response.

### A de-civilizing mission

When the detailed strategic arguments of Tang Zhou failed to dissuade the emperor from waging war on the Mac dynasty, officials who opposed intervention realized that appealing to the emperor based on strategic and practical concerns was ineffective and even dangerous. Those opposed to the war therefore changed tactics and argued that the Le were not worthy tributary partners, and were in fact no different from the Mac. Antiwar officials also refined a subtly new way of talking about Dai Viet. They gave new meaning to familiar tropes of the Vietnamese character, arguing that their incessant rebellions, internal strife, and imperial posturing made them unlike China and therefore outside of the sphere of Chinese influence. In this rhetoric, the Vietnamese were Yi, irreducibly different from subjects of the Central Country, and not worthy or capable of inclusion in the empire. This rhetoric was not merely prejudice or misunderstanding, but a conscious foreign policy strategy designed to preempt military engagement.

The antiwar memorialists worked first to counter the ethical arguments of pro-war voices such as Xia Yan and Trinh Duy Lieu. Two officials, Pan Zhen, the vice minister of the left in the Ministry of War, and vice director of the Secretariat Pan Dan, submitted similar memorials at the end of May 1537. Pan Zhen undercut the argument for political ethics by pointing out that the Le were not worth restoring. He wrote that Mac Dang Dung was indeed a villain and a rebel who deserved to be destroyed, but so was Le Ninh, whose Le dynasty failed to send tribute for twenty years. In the past, he wrote, we would have destroyed them both, but at

the moment, the Ming government has bigger concerns on the northern border that prevent it from dealing with what is an essentially worthless territory. Pan Zhen then directly countered Xia Yan's invocation of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. "According to the laws of the Spring and Autumn period, neither [Mac Dang Dung or Le Ninh] could escape the dispatch of the six armies, but is there really a need to raise troops to help them? Their land is certainly not worth organizing as prefectures and counties [of the Ming], and [their erratic] rebelling and submitting is not like the Central Country." He struck an alarming note about the pressing dangers besetting the northern frontier, reminding the emperor that there were border incidents every day. "It is not advisable to exhaust the Central Country's strength on distant matters in a miasmatic place."<sup>88</sup> He suggested that the Ming "enumerate Dang Dung's crimes, pardon his followers, and order Le Ninh to destroy him. If the [Mac] father and son traitors are not captured but do surrender, there is no need to trouble our army."<sup>89</sup>

Building on the foundation set by his colleague, Pan Dan argued for nonintervention using historical precedent and cultural difference as his rationale. Ignoring, or perhaps ignorant of the neo-Confucian reforms that took place under the Le and continued under the Mac, Pan wrote, "The Yi and Di are like birds and beasts, fundamentally lacking human morality. If we regulate them with the laws of the Central Country, none of them would be fitting to take the throne. But if we manage them with the ways of the Yi and Di, then Yuan Hao can be a lord, the unrighteous can be marquis, or even king."<sup>90</sup> They fight with one another and go to war without cease, they all use fake titles from the Heavenly Court to claim that they are ruler."<sup>91</sup> Like Tang Zhou, Pan used the term "Central Country" to make a *political* distinction between the Chinese and Vietnamese, Ming subjects and Yi and Di outsiders. The political nature of the Vietnamese was different, making them unsuited to Chinese rule, just as Yuan Hao ultimately failed in his capacity as a China-supported monarch.

The response, written by Minister of Rites Yan Song and Minister of War Zhang Zan, laid out the pro-war position. The opening lines consciously echo the *Ancestral Injunctions*: "Annan is an obedient state at our borders. It is delegated as a tributary and called a vassal, and is respectful in offering tribute. In these respects it is different from the northern Lu and the western Rong." They continued:

<sup>88</sup> MSL, 500–501. <sup>89</sup> MS, *juan* 203, *liezhuan* 91.

<sup>90</sup> The Liang dynasty helped Yuan Hao (c. ?–529) become emperor of the Northern Wei. He proved to be a terrible leader and ungrateful vassal.

<sup>91</sup> MSL, 501; SZL, 217.

Mac Dang Dung drove off his lord and killed his ruler, controlled government and seized the country – his crime is obvious. Besides, Annan was enfeoffed as a country by the imperial ancestor [Hongwu]: how could Xuan give it to the rebel Dang Dung and how could the rebel Dang Dung receive it from Xuan? Since you say that the Yi and Di are by nature lacking in human morality, and that Yuan Hao can be made a king, and the unrighteous made lords, then we will continue to have situations like the rebel Dang Dung killing his ruler and seizing the country and then submitting a memorial requesting to be enfeoffed. How will our state manage that? You say that they fight with one another and go to war without cease, so we should temporarily accept them both and not look into it. But this will inevitably prolong the disorder and give free rein to treachery. As for Le Ninh's intentions in requesting aid, now you drag in . . . Yuan Hao as verification, but the principles are not correct. It is not the way to make Yi traitors come to allegiance or to elevate our country.

In contrast to the anti-imperialists, Yan Song and Zhang Zan do not use the term Central Country, and use the term Yi to refer only to rebels. They went on to say that since the Le heir Le Ninh was still alive, he should not be discarded, nor should tribute from Mac be accepted. The emperor approved, and the original war plan moved forward. Moreover, Pan Zhen was accused of speaking recklessly, stripped of his office and forced into retirement because “the emperor blamed him for thwarting completed orders.”<sup>92</sup>

Despite this renewed energy for war, there was still resistance within the bureaucracy. In November, Yu Guang, the regional inspector of Guangdong, detailed the allegedly Vietnamese habit of “vying with one another to be emperor, king, duke and lord,” forcefully restating the positions already articulated by Pan Zhen and Pan Dan.

Mac Dang Dung holds all of the land, and the chieftains are loyal to him. Le Ninh has absconded and his whereabouts are unknown. Besides, the Le preyed on the people. During the Tran they were bandits, always grasping and always rebelling.<sup>93</sup> During our dynasty, they have been the main rabble-rousers. Now they lost the country and fled – maybe Heaven lent a hand to castigate them. Among the Yi and Di, usurping power is quite normal. Since the Song dynasty, the Dinh changed places with the Ly, the Tran grabbed power from the Ly, the Tran were usurped by the Le, and it has passed again to the Mac. To the Ly, the Tran were bandits; to the Tran, the Le were bandits; and now, to the Le, the Mac are bandits. This is the way of those who are fond of retribution. If we restore the Le, it would run counter to the righteousness of turning over the cruel, and their power would not last long. The fate of the Yi and Di is that once they are defeated, they cannot be restored . . . Take Le Ninh. If we restore him to power now, ultimately he will be replaced by someone

<sup>92</sup> MS, *juan* 203, *liezhuan* 91; MSL, 501.

<sup>93</sup> This must be an indirect reference to the Ming occupation, when Le Loi led an armed resistance against the Chinese government for a decade. It is also possible that he is referring back to Ho Quy Ly, whose adopted surname was Le.

else, then what? An uprooted tree cannot be replanted and dead ashes cannot be reignited. This is Heaven's way.<sup>94</sup>

Rather than recognizing Dai Viet's status as an heir of classical culture, Yu mocked the Vietnamese for their misbegotten attempts to be civilized, overlooking the fact that dynastic change was nearly as frequent in China during the same period. Yu Guang's arguments, and all antiwar arguments, are an indirect recognition of Vietnamese independence. Simply put, the inhabitants of Annam are Yi. Yi are, by definition, beyond the pale, at least minimally self-governing, and therefore not the responsibility of the Chinese state.

Ultimately, Yu argued, the pro-intervention stance of upholding tributary obligations by supporting the Le against the Mac proved inappropriate. The Tran state was the first to recognize the Ming, and the Yongle emperor invaded Dai Viet to punish the Ho and restore the Tran. This precedent could not, however, be extended to the Le, with its roots in Le Loi's resistance to Ming rule. Moreover, the Le had neglected their tributary responsibilities for twenty years and were therefore no longer owed Ming support.

These antiwar arguments were not necessarily persuasive. Indeed, two of the remonstrators were ignored and three were punished. But bureaucratic resistance and foot-dragging prevented a speedy move to war. They may not have persuaded Zhu Houcong, but they certainly frustrated him. He was annoyed with the halting pace of mobilization, caused, he claimed, by the indecisiveness of his officials. The emperor said to the court, "I hear that you ministers have been talking among yourselves in private, saying that we should not deploy troops. Your job is to oversee government decrees, but you are undisciplined with no definite ideas – you all entrust it to 'group discussions.' As you will not devote yourselves to coming up with a plan for the country, let's just end it."<sup>95</sup> Zhu Houcong, initially a supporter of war, effectively withdrew from discussion from this date. Officials at the border were granted permission to handle affairs at their discretion. This withdrawal was part of a general retreat from management of the government by the emperor.

Pragmatic officials realized that Chinese control of the Red River Delta region was a thing of the past, necessitating a corresponding change in both policy and rhetoric. For them, in order to accept Vietnamese independence, and overlook Vietnamese neo-Confucian reforms, it was better to de-civilize the Vietnamese, to cast them as barbarians in order to

<sup>94</sup> MSL, 507.

<sup>95</sup> MS; Liang Tianxi, *Annam laiwei tuce* (Beijing: Shumu Wenxian Chubanshe, 1988), 441. Hereafter cited as ALT.

demonstrate that they were not fit for Ming rule. Culturally distancing the Vietnamese became a tool of non-conquest, a rhetorical move by those officials who wanted to limit, not expand, the Ming empire. For them, China was the bounded country implied by the term Central Country, whose borders should not be stretched to accommodate barbarians.

### A clouded mirror

Dai Viet was a country with a similar cultural background and political infrastructure, yet Ming officials preferred to see it as a distant, barbarian land. Otherwise, it became a discomfiting mirror image of China – a country with a parallel emperor, issuing *Great Pronouncements* and presiding over civil service examinations based on the classics. If Dai Viet was *not* an integral part of the Chinese empire, it was better for it to be a categorically different state. It could not be accepted as a mirror state. Officials, especially those who opposed Zhu Houcong's plan of invading Dai Viet, worked to culturally distance Dai Viet and its ruler. In this way, they could chart a path of nonintervention, rather than repeating the Yongle emperor's recolonization of Dai Viet as a lost province of the Han and Tang empires.

An example of this kind of cultural distancing is found in the *Yue Jiao Shu*, a 1540 compendium of writings on Dai Viet compiled by the Chinese official Li Wenfeng (*jinsi* 1532) in response to the Mac crisis. Li used Le Tac's *A Brief History of Annan* as his foundation, but inserted comments that reflected poorly on the cultural level of Dai Viet and of the Mac. The *Yue Jiao Shu* is the first text, and possibly the source, of the charge that the Mac descended from the marginalized Tanka (*dan*) ethnic group.<sup>96</sup> The term *dan* had been in use to designate houseboat dwellers from along the coast of Fujian and Guangdong since before the Tang dynasty.<sup>97</sup> Labeling Mac Dang Dung as a *dan* was surely an insult, one that cast his state as something akin to an uncivilized pirate syndicate. Leaving out his illustrious connection to the scholars Mac Dinh Chi and Mac Thuy, this text asserts that Mac Dang Dung hailed from Dongguan in Guangdong, China.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>96</sup> YJS, p. 46b; SZL, p. 233. Tanka/*Danjia*, in this text just *Dan*. For a near-contemporary description of *dan* people, see Gaspar da Cruz' account in Boxer, *South China in the Sixteenth Century*, 114–115.

<sup>97</sup> E. G. Pulleyblank, "The Chinese and Their Neighbors in Prehistoric and Early Historic Times," in David Keightley, ed., *The Origins of Chinese Civilization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 428.

<sup>98</sup> According to Lin Xiyuan, the prefect of Qinzhou along the coastal border in the 1540s, "the Tanka live in boats, and their livelihood is fishing." Lin Xiyuan, *Qinzhou zhi* (Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji shu dian ying yin, 1982), 31b. For a good biography of Mac

The negative connotations of the label Tanka became more apparent later. Samuel Baron, a merchant born and raised in Tonkin, wrote in 1685, “then *Mack* [Mac Dang Dung] usurped the crown. This man was of a low and vile origin, born about *Batshaw*, a fisher village, at the river’s mouth where the European ships enter it; he was a wrestler by profession, and so dexterous therein, that he raised himself to the degree of a *Mandareen*, or lord: But his ambition, that aspired higher, could not be satisfied with any other condition but the sovereignty itself, and accordingly he conspired against the king, and effected his design, rather by crafty practices and stratagems than force.” Surely Baron was merely repeating what he learned from his Vietnamese informants.<sup>99</sup>

Li Wenfeng was a native of Qingyuan prefecture in Guangdong, and must have had some familiarity with conditions in the southern borderlands, but his treatment of Mac suggests that he took some liberties with the story. His editorial hand is most apparent in a section on customs of Annam copied from Le Tac’s *A Brief History of Annam*. The parts added by Li Wenfeng are italicized below:

People from Giao and Ai are elegant and thoughtful; those from Hoan and Dien are refined and are fond of studying. Men till the fields and women raise silkworms and weave. In one year they have two rice harvests and eight generations of silkworms. When people from distant lands drift to their kingdom, it is their habit to ask question after question. *Although their land is narrow and small, it is their custom to be arrogant and to exaggerate. The phenomenon of killing a sovereign and rebel leaders’ usurpation of the throne, vying with one another to be emperor, king, duke and lord is their pigheaded attempt to measure up to the Heavenly Court. The Vietnamese all go barefoot from the nobility down.*<sup>100</sup> *They are carried through the market on a bamboo rack by two carriers.*<sup>101</sup> *They are not ashamed that Yi customs are still in existence there. All the rest are foolish and deceitful, and, like the Man and Liao, disdain propriety and duty, exalt the brave and wealthy, and call those who are contentions heroes and select them as officials, while the poor and weak are daily taken as captives or robbed. They cut their hair, tattoo their bodies, and have black teeth. They have square collars and speak unclearly.* Since they bathe in the river in the summer, thus they are good at swimming.

*Mac Dang Dung, who was established by Le dynasty, went barefoot even though he was upper class. He dove naked into the water to catch fish. [The people] live in a simple houses and go hatless in their daily lives, and sit on a mat cross-legged. When visiting*

Dang Dung that takes up this point, see Nam Nguyen, “Writing as Response and as Translation,” 257–258.

<sup>99</sup> Dror and Taylor, 239.

<sup>100</sup> The contemporary observer Samuel Baron also noted this custom: “It is a goodly sight to see such a crowd of lords, and how everything is carry’d here with that decency and decorum, that strikes and awe in every beholder, and would have much majesty in it, if they would dispense with, or abrogate that slavish custom of going barefoot”: 252.

<sup>101</sup> Perhaps this means a hammock. Samuel Baron noted that princes and mandarins either rode on horseback or were carried in a hammock: 221.

respected people, they bow three times. For both treating guests and marriages, they prepare betel as a gift. They are addicted to salty and sour food and most of them are thin and weak . . .<sup>102</sup>

While drawing on the authority of Le Tac's text, Li Wenfeng managed to make Vietnamese customs seem more outlandish than Le Tac had intended. Li copied the earlier text word for word, but inserted his own negative assessments of the Vietnamese. Li Wenfeng's disdainful characterization of Mac Dang Dung calls to mind King Zhao Tuo's uncivilized behavior, sprawling unceremoniously as he received the Han ambassador. Mac Dang Dung appears as a rustic descendent of fishermen rather than a threatening southern emperor. Compared with the stately sedan chairs of China, the image of being carried through the market on a wooden rack is comical and absurd. Li wrote that it is part of Vietnamese culture to endlessly vie for position and rebel, in a vain attempt to imitate China, a dominant stereotype of the Vietnamese by the time of the Ming. Traditional images of Vietnamese otherness – short hair, tattoos, and black teeth – are present, and stand in contrast to the spirited defense and explanation of these practices from sources as disparate as the *Linh Nam chich quai* and Le Loi's words in the *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet*.

The scholar Xu Xueju (js. 1583) also repurposed the lines from *A Brief History of Annan* in his *Guochao Dianhui*. After defining the borders of Dai Viet, Xu writes:

They are uncouth and ferocious and they like to fight. Their rulers and chiefs are crafty and sly. They use a fake name when dealing with the Central Country. Since the time of the Le dynasty they have called themselves emperor even as they send tribute and say they are a tributary. This is just like the old practice of Zhao Tuo. When their ruler dies they grant him a fake posthumous name.

Xu then gives the background information of the political situation in Dai Viet, stating that the Le emperor was murdered by the Trinh family, that Mac Dang Dung seized power, and that Le Ninh was not truly the son of Le Y. He notes that information traveled to the Ming in a confused way and had to be investigated. He continues: "Customs: Only people from Giao and Ai are elegant and those from Hoan and Dien are refined, with a Hua air about them."<sup>103</sup> Le Tac's regionalism was thus echoed in Xu Xueju's late Ming text, while the more generous tone of the original text was completely lost.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>102</sup> YJS, 162–681.

<sup>103</sup> Xu Xueju, *Guochao Dianhui*. Accessed through Scripta Sinica, 50–52.

<sup>104</sup> Also cited in Luo Yuejiong, *Xian bin lu*, 131. Elements from AZ, YJS, and *Guochao Dianhui* are likewise mashed up and repeated in other texts, such as Wang Qi's (js. 1565) *Xu Wenxian Tongkao*.

The tradition of relying on Le Tac's text while adding more negative assessments carried over the official *History of the Ming*, written early in the eighteenth century. The final lines of the section on Annan reads: "The people are by nature uncouth and fierce. People from the two prefectures Giao and Ai are more cultivated. Hoan and Dien have more elegant scholars. The other places are different."<sup>105</sup> Le Tac's original assessment of the regions of his homeland thus entered the official record, with the additional statement that the Vietnamese were uncouth and fierce.

These were not the only sixteenth-century texts to denigrate the cultural level of Dai Viet. In contrast to the Tang-era tropes of an exotic and dangerous, yet alluring, South, late Ming characterizations self-consciously measure Dai Viet's cultural proximity to the Central Country, before smugly concluding that they still have a distance to travel. For example, in the 1570s text *Shuyu Zhouzi Lu* ("Comprehensive Records of Strange Lands"), the author Yan Congjian lists dozens of Chinese books in circulation in Dai Viet. These texts included not only the classics and famous works of literature and history, but also dictionaries, medical texts, Buddhist tracts, and scientific treatises. He comments that these books were published in China with typographical errors and in the newfangled workman's typeset, implying that they were bad models for gaining refined literacy. Finally, he reassures his readers, "And besides [we have] laws and regulations, rites and music, and court ceremonies. Compared with the various Yi barbarian countries, there is a discernable difference. Even if they have peeped at our books, how could it be possible for them to resemble the civilization of the Central Hua?"<sup>106</sup> The fact that Yan felt compelled to end his otherwise factual account of Dai Viet with this qualification demonstrates that his Chinese readers would have been dis-comforted by a literate and civilized Dai Viet state. Despite a shared corpus of texts, they did not share a cultural identity.

By the time Li Wenfeng denigrated Dai Viet in *Yue Jiao Shu*, Mac Dang Dung had already formally surrendered to the Ming, obviating the need for war. Antiwar arguments about the illegitimacy of the Le had proven decisive, as is shown in Li Wenfeng's 1540 summation, written after the court had decided to accept Mac rule. Li wrote that the magnitude of Le Loi's crimes, including killing government troops and occupying Ming lands, was such that it reached Heaven. Even though the Ming court had pardoned him, for the subsequent one hundred years, the Le behaved dishonestly, placing their state on the same level as Ming China while feigning loyalty. This viewpoint transformed the position of the Mac from

<sup>105</sup> MS, *juan* 321. <sup>106</sup> SZL, 238–239.

usurpers to heroes. “For this reason, although Mac Dang Dung and his son committed a crime against the Le by usurping the throne, they did the good deed of defeating bandits for the Central Country. To forget their good deed and record their crimes would be like cursing the hunter and weeping over the dead tiger.”<sup>107</sup> Although rarely stated as directly, this dismissal of Le legitimacy is implicit in Ming officials’ eventual negotiations with the Mac, giving them the ethical space to accept the Mac as a replacement of the Le.

Tiny Dai Viet never posed a serious security threat to its superpower neighbor. In contrast, every Chinese state since Vietnamese independence in the tenth century attacked Dai Viet. Historians of Vietnam must explain and account for northern domination, influence, and aggression in Vietnamese history. Historians of China, in contrast, can afford to ignore Dai Viet. This tendency has only been fueled by the focus on the theme of Vietnamese resistance to foreign aggression since the 1970s, when Viet Nam had impressed the world with successive military victories over France and the United States. Yet this compelling narrative obscures a hidden one – that early modern Dai Viet *was* threatening to Ming China. The threat was neutralized once Ming literati could explain, ridicule, and dismiss Mac claims of being a civilized preserver of classical culture as merely the comical posturing of barbarian bandits.

The 1536 announcement of the birth of an heir caused Ming China to closely investigate the political situation in Dai Viet, more closely than usual. They discovered to their dismay a southern emperor ruling a mirror state without Ming recognition. Although it seems as though the Ming state would be pleased that a neighbor adopted classical culture, in the case of Dai Viet, the transformation went too far. The Ming civilizing mission, as far as there was one, aimed only for white teeth and long hair. It did not reckon on spawning a sovereign southern emperor who challenged the Ming’s exclusive cosmological control of All-under-Heaven. This forced the Ming court to take action, recasting Mac Dang Dung as a buffoon and Dai Viet as a Pacification Commission, something less than a fully sovereign state, in order to reach *détente*.

<sup>107</sup> YJS, 162–664.

## Part II

### Officials in the borderlands

Vietnamese emperors rarely, if ever, crossed the border into China, but that is precisely what Mac Dang Dung did on November 30, 1540, the day he surrendered to the Ming. Representatives of the Ming throne stood waiting in pavilions specially built for the occasion as Mac Dang Dung, the founder of the Mac dynasty, entered the Zhennan border pass with a large retinue of officials, elders, and royal family members.<sup>1</sup> By most accounts, the surrender of the Mac was a lavish event, and replete with symbols of Mac submission and Ming superiority.<sup>2</sup> Mac and his followers crossed the border barefoot, wearing ropes around their necks to symbolize their willingness to receive punishment. During the ceremony, the group bowed before an altar bearing an edict of the Jiajing emperor of the Ming. Mac then presented the Ming delegation with census information, maps, and a letter claiming allegiance to the Ming throne. He ceded a marginal area along the Sino-Viet coast, called the four (or five) *dong*, to Ming control. As a result of this exchange, the Ming court later ceremonially revoked Dai Viet's status as an independent country (*guo*) and reclassified it as a commandery (*dutongshisi*), a category only slightly better than a native chieftaincy, under the control of a Pacification Commander.<sup>3</sup> The Mac surrender has earned a place of notoriety in history, even though it was not dissimilar from other "surrenders" that Le Loi, and later Le Duy Tan, participated in in order to initiate friendly relations with the Ming government.

This dramatic surrender and loss of territory has come to be the defining feature of the Mac dynasty. The story is more complex than it appears

<sup>1</sup> Literally, the "South Suppressing Gate." In the *Đại Việt thông sử* and other Vietnamese sources, it is referred to as "the South Gate"; since it was at the northernmost point of the Vietnamese polity, the amended name was still from a Chinese perspective. Today, it is called "the Friendship Gate."

<sup>2</sup> MS, *juan* 321; TT, 847. Essentially the same account is recorded in DVTS, 20; *Xian bin lu*, 130. For a recent English description, see John Dardess, *Ming China*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Wang Gungwu renders it "a superior form of pacification commission" in "Ming Foreign Relations: Southeast Asia," 330. Accordingly, Mac Dang Dung would be styled "pacification commissioner" or "pacification commander." Liam Kelley's translation is "commissioner of the Supervisory Command of the Secure South": *Beyond the Bronze Pillars*, 76.

on the surface. Behind the flashy surrender lay months and years of internal debate within China and external alliances between the two countries. While debate raged in Beijing, officials at the border were working toward a resolution. One official, Lin Xiyuan, embodied the Yongle-era interventionist approach. The majority, however, were more interested in policing and enforcing the existing border, as was done during the Hongwu era. Jiang Yigui best personifies this approach of renunciation. That Ming officials were so active and even outspoken about their goals shows that despite the Ming government's justified reputation as rather autocratic and dangerous for outspoken officials, there were those who were willing to be the nail that sticks out.

## 4 An official at odds with the state

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Whether in Chinese, Vietnamese, or Western histories, Mac Dang Dung's 1540 surrender to the Ming and concomitant loss of territory has been the defining feature of the Mac dynasty. Typical of this view is Tran Trong Kim's 1920 history of Vietnam. Tran describes the 1540 surrender in a conventional way, following the *Dai Viet thong su*. He writes that Mac Dang Dung, terrified by Ming military preparations at the border, went with forty others to the border pass to surrender in November 1540. They were "all bound with ropes, and pled guilty at the border gate. They bowed to the ground and presented maps and census information, and offered to return the five *dong* . . .<sup>1</sup> to belong to Qinzhou. They also gave gold and silver to the Ming." This is a familiar narrative and does not deviate from standard accounts. Tran Trong Kim's vehement commentary, however, leaves no doubt that these were the actions of a traitor and a wretch:

When Mac Dang Dung killed the king to seize the throne, he was like a man playing god; he acted as the ruler but he could not hold the territory, and so the land was lost. He is a traitor. He acted as the king but could not hold all the value, to the extent that he had bound himself and went to bow down before our enemies and let them grab all the honor – this is a man who lacks all integrity.<sup>2</sup>

Later, he adds, "For the king to be a traitor, for the country to commit treason, how can we have this type of person? He has no dignity; who could admire a person like that?"<sup>3</sup> Tran Trong Kim was following a four-century-long historiographical tradition of vilifying Mac Dang Dung for

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<sup>1</sup> Te-phu, Kim-lạc (Ch. Jinle), Co-xung (Ch. Gusen), Lieu-cat (Ch. Liaoge), La-phu (Ch. Luofu). In most Chinese sources, the four *dong* are listed as Silin, Jinle, Gusen, and Liaoge. Some of the *dong* are under the jurisdiction of the larger units Ruxi and Tielang. Although the names and number of the *dong* differ depending on the source, they are located in the same general area.

<sup>2</sup> Trần Trọng Kim, *Việt Nam Sử Lược*, 17. <sup>3</sup> *Việt Nam Sử Lược*, 114–115.

the surrender and subsequent loss of land. His updated work remained influential throughout the twentieth century and confirmed the long-held view of Mac Dang Dung.

Absent in this story is the Ming, other than as a looming threat always ready to wreak destruction when given an opportunity. In fact, Ming officialdom was split over how to deal with Mac Dang Dung. The surrender ceremony was actually designed by them as a way to avoid war. The trade of land, so important in Tran Trong Kim's account, was a mere footnote to larger events. Moreover, the loss of land was largely engineered by one man, the Ming official Lin Xiyuan (c. 1480–1650).

Lin, a native of Fujian province, had become a presented scholar (*jinshi*) in 1517. He was an energetic and outspoken official, qualities that earned him promotion and demotion in succession. He began his career as a junior judge in the Court of Judicial Review in Nanjing, a central agency that oversaw and reviewed judicial proceedings as well as the conduct of officials.<sup>4</sup> Lin was quickly promoted to senior judge, only to be transferred after criticizing a superior. Ill and unable to get along with colleagues, he left government service altogether for a period of three years. Before being appointed magistrate of Qinzhou in 1535, Lin had reentered government service and even served a short stint in Guangdong, as assistant surveillance commissioner. After criticizing the central government's handling of a rebellion of soldiers in Liaodong, Lin was "charged with false reporting" and demoted.<sup>5</sup> In 1535, based on his years of service, the Ministry of Personnel suggested that the fifty-five-year-old Lin retire or be sent to a peaceful place. Lin would not hear of it. He instead "requested a place where he could be of service," and so was assigned to Qinzhou, a city near the border with Dai Viet.<sup>6</sup>

Lin Xiyuan, a man of tremendous self-confidence and persistence, best embodies the interventionist approach to Dai Viet. In his view, shared through numerous unsolicited memorials to the throne, civil war in Dai Viet was an opportunity too good to miss. Like Zhang Fu before him, Lin pointed to support within Dai Viet for reincorporation with the Ming empire. Unlike Zhang Fu, Lin insisted that some of these people *already* followed the customs of China. Dismissed by his colleagues as a meddler, Lin Xiyuan did not have recourse to Ming military power or the support

<sup>4</sup> Lin Xiyuan gives a brief sketch of his career in Lin Xiyuan, *Tongan Lin Ciya Xiansheng wenji shiba juan* (Tainan: Zhuang Yan Wenhua, 1997), *juan* 4, 519.

<sup>5</sup> Bodo Wiethoff, "Lin Hsi-yuan," in L. Carrington Goodrich and L. Chaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 920; Du Shuhai, "Qinzhou Xibu de Difangshi yu Dudong zhi Minzu Xian Jiyi de Chuangzao," *Minzu Yanjiu*, vol. 2 (2009): 72–73.

<sup>6</sup> Du, 73; Lin Xiyuan, *Tongan Lin Ciya Xiansheng wenji shiba juan*, *juan* 4, 519.

of the emperor. He still found a way forward, through assertion of historical claims, creation of maps, promotion of Hua culture, and encouragement of economic ties. Ultimately, he succeeded in changing the contours of the border. That Lin, already in disgrace, pushed his policy suggestions so forcefully demonstrates that Ming officials continued to take seriously their role as remonstrators, even as the state, and the Jiajing emperor in particular, demonstrated again and again that rewards for such actions were unlikely and punishments severe.

### Lin Xiyuan in Qinzhou

In 1536, Lin Xiyuan, newly arrived to serve as magistrate of Qinzhou in the far south of the Ming empire, climbed the city wall and surveyed his new home. Qinzhou was a port city in Guangdong province along the southeast coast of present-day Guangxi province, a mere day's travel from the Dai Viet border.<sup>7</sup> The location was deemed so undesirable by most of the Chinese elite that it was reserved as a post for poorly performing bureaucrats or for disgraced officials.<sup>8</sup> Chinese empires had long struggled to incorporate Qinzhou and the surrounding area to central control, and rule was nominal even during periods of strong Chinese control over the Red River plain.<sup>9</sup> That does not mean that the area was desolate or poor. In fact, Qinzhou had been, and remained, a busy trading post for Vietnamese and local traders since at least the Song dynasty.<sup>10</sup>

Describing the day of his arrival, Lin wrote in his gazetteer, "When I arrived here, I climbed the wall and looked out in every direction. I saw that the auspicious mist (*wangqi*) of Qin was all in the west. Nearby are the villages of Zhonghe, Yongle and Daohua, more distant are the counties of Guangxi and Jiaozhi [Dai Viet]. One must pass through Qinzhou to get to these places. It would not do to shut this door – I suggest we open it."<sup>11</sup> An area known as the four *dong* (the *si dong*) in Chinese texts and the five *dong* in Vietnamese texts, lost to the Ming in 1427, lay due west of

<sup>7</sup> Due to twentieth-century redistricting, Qinzhou is now located in Guangxi province. In the Ming, it was in Guangdong province.

<sup>8</sup> For Ming officials' perceptions of Guangxi, see Leo Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State*, ch. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Churchman, "Where to Draw the Line? The Chinese Southern Frontier in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries," in James A. Anderson and John K. Whitmore, eds., *China's Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier over Two Millennia* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2015), 59–77.

<sup>10</sup> Li Tana, "A View from the Sea: Perspectives on the Northern and Central Vietnamese Coast," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Feb., 2006): 92–93.

<sup>11</sup> *Qinzhou Zhi* (Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji shu dian ying yin, 1982), *juan* 7, 7; Du Shuhai, 73.

Qinzhou city.<sup>12</sup> The four *dong* marked the beginning of Dai Viet territory. Lin quickly intuited that his hopes for promotion lay to the west, and set out to repair the western wall and bridge of the city to encourage increased interaction. Lin would complete several similar projects during his time in Qinzhou, but his biggest accomplishment was impelling the Mac government of Dai Viet to return the *dong* to Ming rule.

Reacting to Lin's posting in the deep South, his contemporary Zhang Yue, the prefect of Huian in Fujian, wrote of Qinzhou: "The people who live there are narrow-minded with uncouth customs. Even the scholars there are coarse and vulgar." Ten years, he wrote, would not be enough to enlighten them.<sup>13</sup> Qinzhou was not an easy posting. More vexing still than uncouth scholars, at the time of Lin's appointment, Qinzhou was a dangerous and unstable area. Qinzhou was indeed the gateway to Dai Viet, thought by some to be the site of one of Ma Yuan's legendary bronze pillars marking the edge of empire.<sup>14</sup> This location, as well as its convenient port, meant that the city was the site of unregulated trade and frequent raids. Yet Lin energetically took up the challenge.

Lin initiated various projects, such as extending education and repairing government buildings. For example, between 1536 and 1538, he commissioned the construction of government buildings including a prison, a temple, a ceremonial gate, halls, storehouses, and a watchtower and suggested relocating several military inspectorates (*xunjiansi*).<sup>15</sup> He rebuilt a home for poor widows and orphans and erected a memorial archway.<sup>16</sup>

Lin built eighteen community schools (*shexue*) in order to transform the customs of the people of the area to those of Hua/China and arranged for land and shops to support them.<sup>17</sup> In explaining his rationale for founding schools, Lin drew on classical sources and applied them to the local situation. Lin saw education as a key component of his mission, explicitly stating his goal to use the schools to "transform the people" (*huamin*) and change local customs. Paraphrasing Mencius, Lin wrote, "if people are well-fed, warmly-dressed, and comfortably-housed but lack education, they are little better than beasts." Education, Lin believed, was proven to "inspire obedience."<sup>18</sup> Going further than Mencius, Lin wrote that the five relationships, a key part of the content of Confucian

<sup>12</sup> ANZY, 14; 16. <sup>13</sup> *Qinzhou zhi*, juan 5, 6. <sup>14</sup> ANZY, 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Qinzhou zhi*, juan 6, 23–25. <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, juan 7, 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, juan 5, 7–8. This includes a school in the village of Zhonghe, mentioned on the first page of this essay, and one in Tielang, an area with jurisdiction over the two *dong* Gusen and Silin.

<sup>18</sup> *Qinzhou zhi*, juan 5, 8. This essay also appears in Lin Xiyuan, *Tongan Lin Ciya xiansheng wenji shiba*, juan 10, 629–630.

education, differentiated the Central Country from the Yi Di people. He hoped that through his initiative, education would reach everyone, even in the most remote corners of the district. Lin saw education as a way to encourage the local people to adopt northern customs and to bind them more closely to the center.

Alongside his building and pedagogical tasks, Lin compiled a gazetteer for Qinzhou, the *Qinzhou zhi* (“Gazetteer of Qinzhou”), in which he carefully recorded his predecessors’ and his own civic activities. Gazetteers were increasingly popular during the Ming, anthologizing writings on local geography, poems on famous sites, biographies of notable residents, and the locality’s history. Borderlands gazetteers in particular were used to promote Chinese culture and bring marginal areas into the imagined geography of the Chinese empire.<sup>19</sup> Compiling the gazetteer required Lin to research the administrative history of the region, making him an expert in the changing status of the four *dong*. Lin Xiyuan’s thoughts and ambitions are laid out in the *Gazetteer* and in his memorials to the throne.<sup>20</sup>

Soon after arriving at his post, he made a sacrifice to the city god. Lin Xiyuan’s words on the occasion of the sacrifice reveal an attitude of optimism in spite of his undesirable official appointment in Qinzhou. They also reveal a keen interest in nearby Dai Viet. In his speech, Lin began by mentioning his predecessor, Yuan Shi, a man with whom he unsurprisingly identified. In the speech, Yuan serves as a stand-in for Lin Xiyuan himself. Yuan too “was demoted and sent to this place because of events outside his control.” Although “Yuan had never even dreamed of Qinzhou, he had heard that Qinzhou was near to Annan and that . . . those who were interested in Annan always paid attention to Qinzhou.” Lin mused that “the Creator may have had a hand in this,” sending an industrious but disgraced administrator to a wild and overlooked frontier, a place where careers could be built anew. After all, he continued, the famed poet-official Su Shi (1037–1101) of the Song dynasty “transformed the people through his will and his writing” while in exile on Hainan island. “Who is to say that Qinzhou is not a latter day Hainan?” When Lin alluded to Yuan Shi’s “private ambitions” to be like Su Shi, he was also signaling his own desire to transform the local people to the culture of the North as well as to transform his undesirable post into a stepping stone to better things. Lin’s speech betrays a quirky and unorthodox mind, steeped in classical allusions, written in grandiose

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Dennis, “Projecting Legitimacy in Ming Native Domains,” in Anderson and Whitmore, eds., *China’s Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier over Two Millennia* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 259–272.

<sup>20</sup> Wiethoff, “Lin Hsi-yuan,” 921.

literary language.<sup>21</sup> Instead of dwelling on his current disfavor, Lin preferred to hopefully cast himself as a successor to Su Shi, with an important place in a design of cosmic proportions. He quickly set about to realize these lofty aspirations.

By 1537, Lin was so confident that there would be a Ming military response to unrest in Dai Viet that he ordered the construction of ten rooms to serve as storehouses for troop provisions.<sup>22</sup> In May 1538, Lin's first memorial concerning the Mac arrived at the court. Lin's memorial was the strongest argument for war yet presented before the throne.<sup>23</sup> Lin's memorial titled "My Humble Opinion in Support of Attacking Annan" is a painstaking response to all possible reasons not to attack Dai Viet, which Lin feared were gaining favor in Beijing.<sup>24</sup> Lin offered rationale for attacking not only the four *dong* but the entire territory of Dai Viet. In response to those colleagues who claimed that distant Dai Viet lacked any significance and that its subjugation would only burden the Ming, he wrote, "Annan's land is fertile and the people are rich. Its ivory, jade and incense would be beneficial to our country. Attaining their land would enrich our country, even more than Guizhou or Guangxi."<sup>25</sup> Lin Xiyuan's memorial listed several reasons in favor of the Ming launching a military campaign against Dai Viet, and several conditions that indicated such a campaign would be a success. Unlike other pro-intervention voices, Lin stated explicitly that Dai Viet should be conquered and annexed as an administrative unit of the Ming. Lin argued that Dai Viet should be attacked as a message to other foreign states, in order to avoid setting a precedent that the Ming could be provoked with impunity.

Lin singled out customs as a way to gauge levels of Vietnamese support for Ming colonization: "When we abandoned Annan at the beginning of the Ming, Annan consequently at that time attacked Ruxi and Tielang's four *dong* of Qinzhou and they established it as Xin'an (Vietnamese Tan An) subprefecture. I have heard that the people often think of returning to the speech and clothing [of the Ming]."<sup>26</sup>

This statement reveals why Le Loi took such pains to promote Vietnamese customs and root out Chinese customs. Perhaps some pockets of the population did cleave to Chinese styles, language, and customs. These people would not only seem potentially traitorous within Dai Viet,

<sup>21</sup> *Qinzhou zhi*, *juan* 10, 9. <sup>22</sup> *Qinzhou zhi*, *juan* 4, 31. <sup>23</sup> MSL, 510–511.

<sup>24</sup> Li Xiyuan, *Tongan Lin Ciyan*, *juan* 4, 496–505; Du, 75.

<sup>25</sup> *Tongan Lin Ciya*, *juan* 4, 505; Du, 75.

<sup>26</sup> And therefore wish to rejoin the Ming. Incidentally, Tan An is mentioned as the home prefecture of Mac Dang Dung in Chinese sources, Nam Nguyen, "Writing as Response and as Translation," 236.

but give hope to interventionists like Lin Xiyuan that internal support for his cause existed and could be marshaled against the Dai Viet state.

Even if the inhabitants of Dai Viet rejected Chinese customs, Lin Xiyuan felt that there were historical reasons to impose them: “Annan was originally the Central Country’s sovereign territory. Since we separated they have expelled our people who dressed in our fashion. Now they wear their hair short, go around barefoot and have barbarian customs. They would certainly be rectified by Guan Zhong.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, both Vietnamese regimes were illegitimate: “The Le family unjustly obtained the country. Mac Dang Dung inherited their strategies. Neither one of them should have obtained control of the country.” In his closing arguments, Lin noted the chronic political instability of Dai Viet, and then the current danger of Dai Viet forming two states: “It has been six centuries since they broke away from us, yet the surname of their emperor changed five times. Although the dynasties kept changing, the land had not been divided. But now that the land has been split apart, heaven’s intention can be deduced and known.”

In Lin’s view, the situation in Dai Viet was literally heaven-sent, both an opportunity and a mandate for Ming conquest:

Although it is said that [Mac] Dang Dung’s power already has a foothold, many important officials have yet to follow him, they all form marriage ties to strengthen their alliances, and now three families [Le, Mac, and Trinh] are at war with one another. The people’s hearts are full of misgivings; they are all willing to restore the former dynasty. Dang Dung is shaking with fear at the thought of the arrival of the army – by day he throws around massive amounts of money to win the people, like he is scattering bribes in the wind.

Lin’s final reason for annexing Annan was that “once Annan is divided, it will be difficult to put it back together. The three families are all grasping power and definitely will not yield to one another. They will all lose, and seem to be willing to let that happen. This is heaven’s way of giving us an opportunity to put Jiaozhi back together [under Ming rule].”<sup>28</sup> Lin concluded his list by noting that the border people covet land, and that their rebellions have caused dozens of deaths. A Ming army, Lin argued, could win the people’s hearts in no time.

Lin’s argument for war went against the mainstream of the bureaucracy, and was even more forceful and direct than the arguments of any pro-war colleagues. Unlike his more cautious colleagues, he made it explicit that

<sup>27</sup> Guan Zhong was a Spring and Autumn period official praised in the *Analects* for championing Chinese customs.

<sup>28</sup> Lin Xiyuan, *Tongan Lin Ciya*, *juan 4*, 504; Du, “Qinzhou Xibu,” 74.

overthrowing the Mac dynasty would entail annexing the Red River Delta, as the Ming had done a century previously after the overthrow of the Ho dynasty, with disastrous results. In Du Shuhai's recent assessment, Lin Xiyuan was "flamboyantly ambitious and blindly optimistic."<sup>29</sup> Despite Lin's impassioned plea, Ming court officials greeted his memorial with indifference. But Lin Xiyuan remained a persistent pro-war voice, memorializing a total of four times on the subject.

In May of 1540, Lin again urged the court to go to war, sending a detailed packet of military strategy and advice to the court. This time, perhaps realizing that a full-fledged war and occupation was unlikely, he modified his position to emphasize recovery of the four *dong*:

I have heard that Mac Dang Dung of Annan has requested to surrender and that high-ranking ministers have been specially appointed to investigate. Those who surrender should present their land and people, but recently [the Mac] have killed our soldiers and stolen our warships.<sup>30</sup> Is this the behavior of those who surrender? Whom will those high-ranking officials who were sent to investigate talk to? If we conduct investigations in their country, they will use surrender to trick us, and we will not find out the real situation. If they make inquiries on our side of the border, then our border officials will support their request, not daring to say anything different. I think that if we want to find out where things stand, we should set a date with them on which they must return our four *dong*, accept our calendar, follow us, and surrender. Otherwise, they are indeed deceiving us.

If the Mac were indeed deceiving the court, he continued, then the Ming would have no choice but to raise an army against them. Lin gave specific instructions on what routes this army should use to enter Dai Viet, as well as detailed suggestions on where to raise troops and how many to send, reflecting his intimate knowledge of the border area.<sup>31</sup> Lin's plaint was not successful. Zhu Houcong himself commented that Lin should allow the officials appointed to handle Dai Viet to do their jobs and desist in spreading "reckless talk."<sup>32</sup>

### **Mac Dang Dung and the *dong***

Lin Xiyuan left behind his gazetteer, collected works, commentaries on the classics, and a wide trail through official histories. It is much more

<sup>29</sup> Du, "Qinzhou Xibu," 75. Historian Cheng Wing-sheung calls Lin a "radical" with an "Annan complex," 181.

<sup>30</sup> Cheng Wing-sheung writes about this incident, alleged by Lin to have occurred in 1538: 173.

<sup>31</sup> See for example Lin Xiyuan, *Tongan Lin Ciya*, *juan 4*, 503–504.

<sup>32</sup> MSL, 514–515; Cheng Wing-sheung, 174, 178.

difficult to piece together an accurate portrait of Mac Dang Dung. When the Le expelled the Mac from Dong Kinh in 1592, they destroyed or absorbed Mac records. In order to maintain the continuity of the Le state, Le records dismiss the Mac as an illegitimate interregnum. Much of the surviving, if biased, information on the Mac can be recovered from *The Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet*. The Mac dynasty kept its own *thuc luc*, or “veritable records,” which were incorporated into seventeenth century Le-sponsored extension of *The Complete Chronicles*.<sup>33</sup> The history of transmission is unclear, but it seems likely that the Mac records were copied into *The Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet* with some revisions. The result is a hybrid text that acknowledges some Mac dynasty successes while still denigrating it as a “false” dynasty.

Thanks to the elision of Mac texts, Vietnamese histories have made the loss of the *dong* the defining action of the Mac dynasty, enduringly tainting its legacy. In Vietnamese histories, the loss of Vietnamese territory to the Ming symbolized the cowardice and corruption of the Mac dynasty and in particular, of Mac Dang Dung. While the Le traced their lineage to Le Loi and his heroic resistance to the Ming after their restoration in 1592, they presented Mac Dang Dung in contrast as a weak-willed capitulator. Throughout the Vietnamese histories, Mac actions are described as craven bribery – in the Le telling, the Mac paid off the Ming with land in order to retain their illegitimate control of power rather than confront Ming troops on the battlefield, as had Le Loi.<sup>34</sup> This assessment of the Mac, due in part to the Le dynasty’s monopoly on historical writing from 1592 to 1788, has proven to be remarkably

<sup>33</sup> Chingho A. Chen, “One the Various Editions of the Dai-Viet Su-ky Toan-Thu,” *Occasional Papers* 1 (Center for East Asian Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, June 1976): 1–4; Yu Insun, “Lê Văn Hưu and Ngô Sĩ Liên: A Comparison of Their Perspectives on Vietnamese History,” in Tran and Reid, eds., *Viet Nam: Borderless Histories* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 46. Keith W. Taylor, “Nguyen Hoang and Vietnam’s Southward Expansion,” in Anthony Reid, ed., *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power, and Belief* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 43.

<sup>34</sup> On Mac offering bribes to the Ming to gain ascendancy over the Le, see for example TT, 837: when the Ming court sent agents to find if there was a living Le heir, “Mac (people) made excuses, embellished the facts, and bribed [the Ming agents] with gold and silver . . . Dang Dung was afraid that the Ming would punish him, so he planned to give the land and people of the two subprefectures of Gui [Quy] and Shun [Thuan] along with two gold statues and all kinds of precious goods.” Mac bribery of Ming officials is also mentioned on pages 838 and 909. This is true too of less widely available histories, such as the *Nam sử làm yếu*, Institute of Hán-Nôm Studies A. 1371. This late-eighteenth-century text contrasts Le Loi’s heroics with Mac corruption in *juan* 114, 57–58. The author contends that the Ming emperor was only willing to accept Mac and reopen diplomatic relations after Mac bribed China with a large amount of money and the two subprefectures of Gui and Shun. The surrender of the four *dong* is presented as a later instance of the same dynamic of using bribes in exchange for recognition.

persistent. Even though the Nguyen dynasty was not an enemy of the Mac, they followed Le precedent in their description of the Mac period.<sup>35</sup> This view that the Mac surrender and loss of land was one of the most disgraceful in Vietnamese history persisted well into the 1990s.

Vietnamese official histories therefore converge with Chinese official histories to tell a story of Mac Dang Dung's fear and total submission. While officially sponsored Chinese sources emphasize Mac Dang Dung's fear and total submission, the Vietnamese sources imply that the Mac liberally bribed Ming officials and border guards to bring about the rapprochement. The Vietnamese perspective confirms the Ming portrait of Mac Dang Dung as corrupt and cowardly and also reveals the moral turpitude of the Ming.<sup>36</sup> Le sources cast Mac Dang Dung as a simple fisherman with a traitorous heart, who acted like "a dog and a pig."<sup>37</sup> Contemporary Ming sources were concerned with neutralizing Mac Dang Dung's use of imperial rhetoric. These sources therefore dismissed him as a country bumpkin who enjoyed such non-regal activities as fishing in the nude.<sup>38</sup> Twentieth-century historians have worked hard to explain Mac Dang Dung's decision to surrender to the Ming by linking his ancestry to Mac Thuy, the best-known collaborator during the Ming occupation. It is only recently that Vietnamese historians have begun to reassess the Mac, reexamine the loss of the *dong*, and clear Mac Dang Dung's name.<sup>39</sup>

To understand the issue, we must first understand the land under debate: referred to in Chinese sources as the four *dong* and in Vietnamese sources as the five *dong*. The character *dong* commonly occurs in place names and is the Chinese transliteration of a Tai word meaning "mountain valley" or "level ground between cliffs and beside a stream,"<sup>40</sup> and also similar in pronunciation to the Vietnamese word for "field" (*dong*). The presence of this word in place names therefore indicates that the original residents were non-Hua.<sup>41</sup> The term could be

<sup>35</sup> Hải Đoan, "Bản về cuộc đảo chính lật đổ vua Lê năm 1527 của Mạc Đăng Dung," in Đặng Lợi Ngô et al., eds., *Mạc Đăng Dung và Vương Triều Mạc* (Hải Phòng: Hội sử học Hải Phòng, 2000), 23–24.

<sup>36</sup> TT, 837, 838, 909; DVTS, 17b. <sup>37</sup> TT, 835–836.

<sup>38</sup> Đinh Khắc Thuan describes this state of affairs, and seeks to rectify it, in *Lịch Sử Triều Mạc: Qua thư tịch và văn bia* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2001), 33–39.

<sup>39</sup> Đinh Khắc Thuan has been at the forefront of this effort. See also Hải Đoan, "Thê kỷ XVI và vai trò lịch sử của Mạc Đăng Dung (1483–1541)," 40–41.

<sup>40</sup> Pulleyblank, "The Chinese and Their Neighbors in Prehistoric and Early Historic Times," 430.

<sup>41</sup> See Richard David Cushman, "Rebel Haunts and Lotus Huts: Problems in the Ethnohistory of the Yao" (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1970), 190. He writes that there were five kinds of villages in the tribal areas of Guangxi in the Ming: *dong* 峒, *xiang* 鄉, *l* 里, *cun* 村, and *bao* 堡.

translated as settlement, chiefdom, or upland valley communities, implying a confederation of agricultural villages.

The number and name of *dong* differ in various sources. Generally speaking, the *dong* were located in a marginal area between Dai Viet and the Ming not far from the coast in present-day Guangxi, including the five *dong* mentioned by Tran Trong Kim (Silin, Gusen, Jianshan, and Boshi<sup>42</sup>) along with the towns Tielang and Ruxi. The area lies nestled in a mountain valley between present-day Mong Cai (Vietnam) and Dongxing (China) on the border and Fangcheng Harbor to the south/southwest of Qinzhou. They were arrayed in a roughly east-west orientation to the south of the Shiwan mountain range, accessible through a number of mountain passes.<sup>43</sup> The *dong* and the surrounding area had long been marginal to both Vietnamese and Chinese government control, occupied by people who fell between the two states, both culturally and politically.<sup>44</sup> From the Tang to Song, Qinzhou's appearance in the official histories is generally marked by violence and raids, speaking to the unstable mix of Chinese, Vietnamese, and native inhabitants, as well as the new opportunities for trade represented by their coming together. By the Ming (1368–1644), the Chinese social presence in the region had greatly increased, especially along the coastline, leading to more local conflict. Even before the area was lost to Dai Viet in the fifteenth century, the Ming state had struggled to assert control over the area's valuable pearl beds and active trade routes.<sup>45</sup>

During the two decades of their occupation of Dai Viet (1407–27), the Ming controlled the lowlands north and south of the *dong*. Nevertheless, three major raids on Qinzhou were recorded in the Ming *Veritable Records* during this period. Later, during Le Loi's Vietnamese war of resistance against the Ming (1418–1427), the local leaders of the *dong* Jianshan, Boshi, Silin, and Gusen, consisting of two hundred and ninety-two households and twenty-nine villages, voluntarily broke off from the Ming to defect south of the border to the Le government of Dai Viet. In exchange, they received from the Vietnamese official titles, seals, and the right to pass on their positions to their descendents.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Boshi is also known as Hezhou 河洲 or A'mu 阿募. Jianshan is also known as Luofu 羅浮.

<sup>43</sup> ALT, 469–470.

<sup>44</sup> M. Churchman, "The People in Between": The Li and the Lao from the Han to the Sui," in N. Cooke, T. Li, and J. A. Anderson, eds., *The Tongking Gulf through History* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 67–83.

<sup>45</sup> Brian A. Zottoli, "Reconceptualizing Southern Vietnamese History from the 15th to the 18th Centuries: Competition along the Coasts from Guangdong to Cambodia," (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2011), 74–77.

<sup>46</sup> *Qinzhou Zhi*, *juan* 6, 25, and in the "Valley Dong" (*gu dong* 谿峒) section. This section lists these *dong*: Boshi, Jianshan, Tielang, Shiluo, Silin, Ruxi, Gusen, and Shixiu; Du,

At that time, the Le claimed this area as ancient territory of Dai Viet. Once the war was resolved and Le Loi was accepted by the Ming as the legitimate ruler of Dai Viet, the two states negotiated the contested border. Since the Ming had recently lost control of Dai Viet, there were inevitably border towns claimed by both states. The Le agreed to cede some territory to the Ming, but remained adamant on the subject of the villages to the southwest of Qinzhou. They requested that Ming officials carefully investigate the history of the region. The Ming government's task was made harder by the fact that the inhabitants appear to have been more inclined to Vietnamese rule. The land ultimately came under Vietnamese jurisdiction. Throughout the fifteenth century, the Ming government, continually frustrated with what seemed to them Dai Viet's refusal to control its inhabitants along the border, accused Vietnamese inhabitants of stealing from pearl beds and of crossing the border to engage in illegal trade.<sup>47</sup> Even after it came under Ming jurisdiction in 1540, Ming officials had little success enforcing the law or incorporating the land.<sup>48</sup> This remote and uncooperative region was claimed by both sides but controlled by neither.

Since the 1540 conquest of the *dong* was largely a paper victory, why has it loomed so large in the scholarly assessment of the Mac? The Mac surrender was mainly recorded in unfriendly sources, both Le and Ming, which sought to build up the reputation of their own states at the expense of the Mac. Recently, Vietnamese historians have begun to rehabilitate the Mac and revisit the surrender of 1540. They seek to overturn not only traditional texts, but also more recent ones, like Tran Trong Kim's negative assessment in *Viet Nam su luoc*. Key to this recovery was a 2000 conference and resultant volume, "Mac Dang Dung and the Kings of the Mac Dynasty."<sup>49</sup> The explicit goal of the conference was to clear Mac Dang Dung's name and illuminate the Mac dynasty's positive contribution to "the nation's destiny." The essays go in the opposite direction of traditional historiography, sifting out the most positive indications buried in the historical record. Mac Dang Dung is praised as a hero "of noble blood"<sup>50</sup> who presided over a "civil revolution" under which true meritocracy was achieved.<sup>51</sup>

"Qinzhou xibu," 71; Qu Dajun, *Guangdong Xinyu, Vol. 1* (Beijing Zhonghua Shuju, 1997), 233. Qu contends that the chiefs of the five *dong* were descendents of Ma Yuan.

<sup>47</sup> Du, "Qinzhou xibu," 71.

<sup>48</sup> See Niu Junkai, "Wanli nianjian Qinzhou shijian yu Zhong Yue guanxi", *Haijiao shi yanjiu*, Vol. 2 (2004): 69–76.

<sup>49</sup> Đặng Lợi Ngô et al., *Mac Đăng Dung và Vương Triều Mạc* (Hải Phòng: Hội sử học Hải Phòng, 2000).

<sup>50</sup> Phạm Văn Sơn, "Mac Đăng Dung (1483–1541)," in Đặng Lợi Ngô et al., eds., *Mac Đăng Dung và Vương Triều Mạc* (Hải Phòng: Hội sử học Hải Phòng, 2000), 51.

<sup>51</sup> *Mac Đăng Dung và Vương Triều Mạc*, 16.

For several of the authors, the most important aspect of the 1540 surrender was that it headed off a Ming invasion. The Ming was a brutal and opportunistic regime that wished to conquer Dai Viet and turn its people into slaves.<sup>52</sup> In the words of the historian Hai Doan, we would be “foolish if we did not see that the actions were taken to save us from the feudal Ming dynasty” and foolish if we did not see the Le loyalists who sought Ming aid against the Mac, such as Nguyen Kim, as enemies for guiding the Ming to Dai Viet.<sup>53</sup> Although the sources describe Mac Dang Dung as humiliatingly bound in ropes, one scholar suggests that this was merely a figurative description.<sup>54</sup> Besides, many Vietnamese states used formalized language with Chinese states and gave them gold and silver. It is not fair that only the Mac should be singled out for criticism for engaging in this form of diplomacy.<sup>55</sup>

As for the four *dong* (or five *dong*, as they are referred to here), according to this group of scholars, the land belonged to China already anyway. Therefore, the exchange was merely an act of “fictive vassalage.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the trade was worth it to protect the Vietnamese people from a Ming attack. The Mac managed to avoid a war with a stronger power when the people were weak, and for a reasonable price: a bit of land and silver.<sup>57</sup>

The historian who has contributed the most to the recovery of Mac history is Dinh Khac Thuan. In keeping with the theme of the conference, in his later monograph, Thuan presents Mac Dang Dung as a patriot who would do anything to protect his homeland, even when that entailed ceding to the Ming a small and remote piece of land to prevent the Chinese from invading. For Thuan, this action fits into the inescapable pattern of asymmetric relations between big and small states: small countries must bend to the demands of powerful states, to prevent their complete destruction.<sup>58</sup>

Although these arguments may go a bit too far in some cases, on the whole they present a more reasonable account of the surrender and its causes. Rather than an act of greed or cowardice, the surrender was part of a flexible foreign policy.<sup>59</sup> The primary concern of the Mac was

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 19. <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 41. <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>55</sup> Trần Quốc Vương, “Mây Vả Đề Về Nhà Mạc,” in Đặng Lợi Ngô et al., eds., *Mạc Đăng Dung và Vương Triều Mạc* (Hanoi: Hội sử học Hải Phòng, 2000), 165–166.

<sup>56</sup> Trần Quốc Vương, “Mây Vả Đề Về Nhà Mạc.” In this essay, Trần also challenges the long-standing theory that Mac Dang Dung presented the four *dong* to China as a bribe in order to win their support.

<sup>57</sup> Phạm Văn Sơn, “Mạc Đăng Dung”; Lê Văn Hoè, “Thần Oan Cho Mạc Đăng Dung,” *Mạc Đăng Dung và Vương Triều Mạc*, 91.

<sup>58</sup> Đinh Khắc Thuân, *Lịch Sử Triều Mạc: Qua Thư tịch và Văn bia* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2001), 71–74.

<sup>59</sup> *Mạc Đăng Dung và Vương Triều Mạc*, 19.

overcoming Le resistance; an additional conflict with the Ming was to be avoided at all costs. On the other hand, the amount of attention paid to the 1540 surrender contributes to the view that the surrender was the most significant event of the Mac reign. Scholarship that rationalizes and justifies Mac Dang Dung's behavior shows how conventionalized the Le narrative of Mac cowardice is. In fact, the surrender is not so different from ceremonies that marked the establishment of the Le in 1427 and the reestablishment of the Le in 1597.

The revisionist history, though it does much to improve our view of the Mac, neglects three important aspects. One is that the Ming was far from united in its desire for war. Preparations were in fact accompanied by strenuous debate. The second is the important role of Lin Xiyuan, who was the solo architect of the seizure of the four *dong*. The third was that the land remained beyond the control of either state, and would remain so for a long time. That it became a stronghold of Mac resistance after 1592 best illustrates this.

### The fall of Lin Xiyuan

Lin Xiyuan's research into the administrative history of the four *dong* and his forceful memorials to the throne helped precipitate the diplomatic crisis between the Ming and the Mac. Grand Secretary Xia Yan had initially strongly advocated for war in 1536. In the following years, war preparation was bogged down in bureaucratic procedure, undergoing seemingly endless discussion and delay. By 1540, Lin's strong support of war with Dai Viet made him an exception within the bureaucracy. Lin Xiyuan's meddling was resented by Cai Jing and Mao Bowen, among the "high-ranking officials" he mentioned in his memorial. They sent him on a fool's errand to Fujian province to raise troops for an Annan campaign, keeping him well out of the way of ongoing negotiations at the border.<sup>60</sup> By the time he returned, Mac Dang Dung had already surrendered, obviating the need for war. Even worse, Lin Xiyuan's direct involvement in what was essentially not his concern rankled his superiors. As a result, he was "found guilty of usurpation of authority and neglect of his proper duty," dismissed from government service, and sent home to Fujian.<sup>61</sup>

However, Lin's involvement was effective in at least one respect. In the final draft of the Mac letter of surrender, Mac Dang Dung acknowledged as much. He wrote, "Recently, I heard that Lin Xiyuan, the subprefectural magistrate of Qinzhou, memorialized that the two cities Ruxi and

<sup>60</sup> Lin Xiyuan, *Tongan Lin Ciyuan*, juan 4, 520.

<sup>61</sup> Wiethoff, "Lin Hsi-yuan," 921; Cheng Wing-sheung, 175–176.

Tielang and the four *dong* Silin, Jinle, Gusen and Liaoge are all the former territory of Qinzhou. If that is indeed the case, I will obey orders [and return the land].”<sup>62</sup> Lin Xiyuan could not resist plaintively recording this line in yet another memorial to the emperor, insisting that “the Mac bandits did not want to return the occupied land of the four *dong*” until he himself had made it a condition of surrender.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, although the Ming court had rejected Lin Xiyuan’s memorial, thwarted his desire for war, and eventually fired him, his suggestions entered into the negotiation process. The return of the *dong* became a matter of treaty, though actual incorporation into the Ming central administrative structure would prove more elusive.

Lin Xiyuan attempted, and succeeded, in extending the Ming state by using the international crisis as an opportunity for self-promotion. He marshaled various techniques to articulate the border: marking civilization versus barbarity, both promoting civilization within Qinzhou and labeling some residents of the four *dong* as leaning toward Chinese customs; repairing and improving the city infrastructure not only to protect residents but also to foster economic exchange; conducting historical research and promulgating his findings through his *Gazetteer of Qinzhou* (*Qinzhou zhi*); and making military recommendations for reinforcing or exploiting particular mountain passes.<sup>64</sup>

In the end, Lin’s involvement in reclaiming the *dong* brought him both punishment and reward. After the Ministry of War read Cai Jing’s memorial on the surrender, they included this addendum: “The first proponent of the recovery of the *dong* was the Assistant Surveillance Commissioner Lin Xiyuan. Although he has now been removed, his achievement cannot be ignored.” He was issued a present of silver and silk.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>62</sup> MSL, 517. This is also recorded in the TT, though Lin Xiyuan is not mentioned. TT, 847.

<sup>63</sup> Lin Xiyuan, *Tongan Lin Ciya*, juan 4, 521.

<sup>64</sup> In some ways, such as collecting information and commissioning maps for the gazetteer, Lin Xiyuan was prefiguring the Qing colonial techniques explored by Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>65</sup> MSL, 517. Though no longer a Ming official, Lin Xiyuan remained active and continued to voice opposition to government policies, in particular policies limiting international trade. In his twilight years, Lin was involved with illegal smuggling, becoming the middleman or “harboring host” (*wozhu* 窩主) for “pirates” – foreign traders who sought a way to sell their goods in China while evading government restrictions: Wiethoff, 922. The 1540s were also the height of the *wokou* pirate troubles along the Chinese coast, as Japanese and Chinese sailors worked together to circumvent the strict anti-trading policies of the Ming. (For more on this topic, see Kwan-wai So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China during the Sixteenth Century* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1975).) Lin, along with his neighbors living near the coast, urged the central

### The four *dong* after Lin Xiyuan

In December of 1542, the ruler of Dai Viet, Mac Phuc Hai, sent a formal letter to the Ming court, announcing the death of his grandfather Mac Dang Dung and reaffirming the handover of the four *dong*.<sup>66</sup> His letter gave the approximate population and area of each locality, listing the borders of each place. In this accounting, the place names Silin, Gusen, Hezhou (formerly Boshi), Jinle, Anliang, and Luofu (formerly Jianshan) were used. According to Mac Phuc Hai's report, the area comprised more than eight hundred and forty-four households and more than three thousand four hundred and seventy individuals. Although it is difficult to assess the exact dimensions of the territory from Mac Phuc Hai's description, he describes roughly four thousand one hundred and ninety-five square *li* of land.<sup>67</sup>

Yet, despite the four *dong*'s official reentry into the map of the Ming empire, the border remained porous. In the official histories of both Vietnam and China, the exchange of land appears to have been an open-and-shut case. Nevertheless, while the border was easy to draw on the map, it was difficult to enforce that line on the ground. A Ming border official who played a significant role in brokering the Ming-Mac rapprochement, Vice Surveillance Commissioner of Guangxi Weng Wanda, best expressed the problems of administering the four *dong*. Soon after the Ming received the land, Weng noted that "the dispute over the four *dong* has been going on for a long time," and that resentment had been gathering. He acknowledged that the people living there were not compliant. At that point, even giving back part of the land would cause a rift, given the divided loyalties of the area. He thought that the land could be effectively administered neither as a county nor as a department. He suggested that the four *dong* be placed under the jurisdiction of Nanning, with an Assistant Prefect to govern and make arrests and a Commander to defend it. Weng further suggested instituting *dong* elders and the *baojia* system to keep peace at the local level. If we comfort and reward the people in this way, Weng argued, the area could become peaceful and profitable within five years.<sup>68</sup> Although Weng's suggestions

government to lift the restrictions on maritime trade, while continuing to defy the bans on the sly. His intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the government and his connections to the bureaucracy insulated him from prosecution, while his involvement in trade enabled him to amass a legendary fortune. Timothy Brook, "Communications and Commerce," in F. W. Mote and Denis Twitchett, eds., *Cambridge History of China: Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, Part II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 696.

<sup>66</sup> MSL, 521. <sup>67</sup> ALT, 469–470.

<sup>68</sup> Weng Wanda. *Weng Wanda Ji* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1992), 98.

were not taken up, it demonstrates that Ming officials were aware of and concerned about the problems of incorporating and controlling the *dong*.

Indeed, Qinzhou remained an important contact point between the two countries. Refugees and rebels fled over the border from Dai Viet, creating problems for future Qinzhou administrators. In the unrest that followed the death of the Mac ruler in 1546, Mac Dang Dung's nephew Mac Van Minh and his second son Mac Chinh Trung fled to Qinzhou to seek safe haven from hostile forces within the Mac court. They were assigned sinecures. Not long after, in 1548, another group of Mac subjects raided Qinzhou.<sup>69</sup> As late as 1591, Mac royal family members fled to Qinzhou to escape their Le enemies.<sup>70</sup>

Lin Xiyuan was right to see Qinzhou's significance as a portal to Dai Viet. His ideas about what that meant differed from many of his peers. Lin Xiyuan represents the extreme end of the interventionist argument. Even though his policy suggestions aligned with that of the Ministries of War and Rites and the emperor, he went too far. He was not able to use his position as a stepping stone. He stepped down. On the other hand, he did achieve an important goal, changing the border on the map of empire. The border stood.

<sup>69</sup> SZL, 233; MSL, 523; MS, j. 321.      <sup>70</sup> MS, j. 321.

## 5 The fearsome panther

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In 1571, an unusual text was published in China, called *Annan laiwei tuce*, literally “An Illustrated Account of the Overawing of Annan.” Although the surrender of Mac Dang Dung, as the title indicates, is a central part of the book, in fact most of the pages detail the activities of one minor official, Jiang Yigui, the magistrate of Taiping Subprefecture in Guangxi. Often referred to by his style name, “Mr. White Stone” (see Figure 1), or called “the fearsome panther,” Jiang’s exploits are narrated in both word and image in this remarkable text. Yan Congjian, another late Ming author, noted that “Jiang Yigui played a role in securing the surrender at that time,” and that the *Account of the Overawing of Annan* was worth examining.<sup>1</sup>

In an anecdote recorded in the *Illustrated Account of the Overawing of Annan*, two Vietnamese envoys from the Mac looked through a Ming government storehouse near the Zhennan border pass in Pingxiang, Guangxi. They discovered two test preparation guidebooks for the civil service examination and requested permission to take them back to Dai Viet. Jiang Yigui denied their request. Jiang kept a meticulous list of the items in the storehouse. The narrator asked Jiang why he would not allow the “Yi” envoys to borrow the book of sample examination essays. Jiang replied that not only were the books embarrassingly disorganized and poorly written, but that if the Vietnamese obtained them, “they will be able to steal a look at the court’s plans.” The narrator then praised his strictness and care in managing the Vietnamese envoys.<sup>2</sup>

It is unlikely that the test preparation guides posed a real security threat. It is more likely that Jiang was protecting Ming prestige by censoring inferior materials.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, for Jiang, the Vietnamese were not to be

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<sup>1</sup> SZL, 234. <sup>2</sup> ALT, 397.

<sup>3</sup> Geoff Wade mentions many examples of this kind of national face saving recorded in the *Ming Shilu*. In particular, he notes that Siamese envoys were prevented from buying impoverished Chinese children to bring to their country as servants, since officials feared



Figure 1 Portrait of “Mr. White Stone,” Jiang Yigui. National Library of China

included within the circle of scholarly endeavor. The use of the term Yi, rather than the more neutral Jiao, indicates Jiang and his interlocutor’s

it would make the Siamese sneer at China. Geoff Wade, “The Ming Shi-lu as a Source for Southeast Asian History,” <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl>, 26.

attitude toward the Vietnamese: namely as people beyond the borders of the Ming state. Dai Viet in 1540 was no longer the Ming colony that the Yongle emperor strove to incorporate into the northern education system. Further, the anecdote cracks open a window onto the mid-Ming southern borderlands, revealing a more casual, and dangerous, atmosphere than that seen from the distant court in Beijing. Borderlands officials such as Jiang had to make decisions on the fly about negotiating with foreign envoys well beyond the rules and rituals of the capital. Vietnamese ambassadors were freely crossing the border and gathering information, and Jiang had to be scrupulous to ensure they did not cross any invisible lines.

Jiang Yigui, along with his colleagues Cai Jing, Wang Wengda, and Mao Bowen, played a major role in resolving the Ming-Mac conflict. Unlike Lin Xiyuan in Qinzhou, their approach embodied the Hongwu-era approach of policing of borders and treating Dai Viet with caution. These men worked together to suggest, plan, and execute Mac Dang Dung's dramatic 1540 surrender.

According to officially sponsored histories, including the *Mingshi Jishi Benmo*, the *Veritable Records*, and the *History of the Ming*, Mac Dang Dung's decision to surrender was motivated by his terror of the Ming army. As these sources tell it, in a campaign to overawe Mac, the Ming amassed nearly 120,000 troops at the border, put a bounty of 20,000 pieces of gold on the heads of Mac and his son, and offered to reward and retain Mac officials willing to betray their ruler.<sup>4</sup> In the face of such overwhelming pressure, the story goes, Mac Dang Dung had no choice but to submit.

The 1540 surrender, however, is not quite what the official histories present it to be. For one thing, contrary to the implication of most accounts, Mac Dang Dung was no longer the Mac emperor, having overseen the accession of his grandson, Mac Phuc Hai, to the throne earlier that year.<sup>5</sup> When Mac Dang Dung crossed the border, the reigning emperor of the Mac dynasty was thus safely ensconced in the capital, Dong Kinh. For another, the common image of the surrender suggests the cessation of a war between the Mac and the Ming. Yet the Mac never engaged in any battles with the Ming. They had in fact consistently attempted to establish friendly relations. They were at war only with the Le dynasty, their rivals to the throne of Dai Viet. What explains a surrender without a war?

<sup>4</sup> Gu Yingtai, *Mingshi Jishi Benmo*, juan 22. These numbers are likely exaggerated. It is also unclear whether or not troops were already in place.

<sup>5</sup> TT, 847.

In fact, a few Ming officials posted to the border in Guangxi and their Mac counterparts designed the surrender precisely to preempt war. They built up troops at the border, distributed pamphlets among the Vietnamese, and made a show of overwhelming force, all in the interest of avoiding war altogether. The ceremony, a piece of political theater, or, to apply Womack's phrase, "ritualized interaction," was the culmination of months of cross-border negotiations and planning by Jiang Yigui and his peers. When the Ming court began debating the crisis in Vietnam, the stated goal was to put Le Ninh on the throne as the king of a restored Le dynasty. But key Ming officials with power at the border did not want to fight for this goal. As time passed and difficulties mounted, Zhu Houcong's interest in war wavered. The surrender ceremony was a diplomatic sleight of hand that created an exit strategy. Thanks to the behind-the-scenes work of those officials opposed to interceding in a regional war within Dai Viet, the Ming state instead recognized and legitimated the Mac. Far from opening a space for Le ascendancy, the Le were cast aside. The elaborate surrender ceremony distracted attention from this drastic change in policy direction and made compromise look like victory.

The 1540 surrender offers a glimpse into the internal workings of the Ming state, revealing how anti-intervention officials worked to reach a compromise with the Mac while presenting it as a victory to the Ming court. The surrender reveals stark differences between the initially pro-war emperor and his influential grand secretary, and pragmatic border officials. These border officials engaged directly with their Vietnamese counterparts to find a way to recognize the Mac without harming Ming prestige and influence in the borderlands. Seen in its full context, the surrender marked not a moment of Chinese imperial expansion, but of retrenchment and an acceptance of a more limited role for the Ming in the South.

The drama of the surrender is vividly and prominently described in official records, while the process of diplomatic negotiation and intricate stage management that preceded and enabled the event is revealed in private histories and accounts. Alternative narratives of the surrender contained in the collected works of scholar officials involved in the surrender, including the *Illustrated Account of the Overawing of Annan*, permit a more nuanced recounting of the process of give and take and mutual compromise that pulled the two countries back from the brink of war. At the same time, the subtext of each of these accounts is to cast particular men, such as Jiang Yigui, as heroes of the moment and preserve their triumph for posterity. This chapter focuses on three stories and two poems that fill in the gaps in the official histories. The first concerns the

writing and revision of the Mac petition of surrender. The second shows how Ming officials stationed at the border stage-managed the surrender ceremony. Both demonstrate that some border officials were anxious to use the petition of surrender and the surrender itself to persuade Beijing to abandon war plans. The third reveals how a visual account depicts a surrender ceremony slightly at odds with the official account. The poetry, though late, may reflect the Mac attitude toward the surrender. Unlike the brief description contained in official histories, these accounts show the careful preparations, secret negotiations, and strong personalities that shaped the 1540 rapprochement. The various players in this international crisis had differing goals: Zhu Houcong and the inner court wished to wage war with the Mac, even if that entailed annexing their country; the exile Le hoped that the Ming would use military means to restore them to the throne; several border officials wanted to wash their hands of the Mac without taking any significant action; and Mac Dang Dung and his successors hoped to initiate diplomatic relations with the Ming. These four alternative accounts lead to a surprising conclusion: only Mac Dang Dung achieved his goals, goals that aligned with the Hongwu vision of a bounded China.

### **A letter to persuade the emperor**

The letter of surrender presented to the Ming by Mac Dang Dung lies at the heart of the Ming-Mac rapprochement of 1540. No mere form letter, it was drafted, commented on, and revised over a two-year period. This process of revision reveals that the surrender ceremony was an instance of carefully managed diplomacy. The Ming officials Cai Jing and Mu Chaofu urged the Mac to frame their letter in a particular way, a process of revision that can be plausibly reconstructed from several surviving versions of the letter.

The most important figure in this exchange was the Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi and Vice Minister of War Cai Jing. Cai Jing had experience putting down the Rattan Gorge rebellion in Guangxi in 1539, and thus was well aware of the instability of the southern borderlands. Cai Jing had previously submitted a memorial to the throne arguing against war in Dai Viet. Zhu Houcong initially agreed, only to change his mind a year later.<sup>6</sup> Obligated to enact a policy he did not support, Cai Jing, along with his colleagues such as Mu Chaofu, the hereditary Duke of

<sup>6</sup> Ray Huang, "Chang Ching," in L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography, Volume I* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 46.

Qianguo in Yunnan, sought to find a way to prevent war while still representing the Ming as the victor to the emperor. Rather than a clear case of Dai Viet's subordination to the Ming, the surrender entailed factions within the Ming state allying with various Vietnamese partners. Cai Jing worked with the Mac to reach the common goal of averting war, while Zhu Houcong, the Ministry of War, and members of the inner court aligned themselves with the interests of the exile Le and their proxies.

Since some of these drafts are difficult to authenticate, ambiguity remains. It is clear, however, that the Mac's communication with Beijing became increasingly formal and conciliatory and that intercession of Ming officials was partially responsible for this change.<sup>7</sup> What is more, these border officials were at times working at cross-purposes to the Ming court. Early in 1538, a full-scale war still seemed like a real possibility. The Ming started to mobilize for war in earnest, amassing troops and building garrisons near the border in Guangxi, signaling their willingness to use force against the Mac. The Le loyalist Vu Van Uyen was dispatched by the Ming to encourage the Le officials among the population to raise anti-Mac armies.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, some Ming border officials advanced a peaceful way out of the impasse. A communication was sent to Mac Dang Dung informing him that if he bound himself with rope, surrendered in person, and presented maps to the Ming, then he would not be executed.<sup>9</sup> This approach to dealing with problems along the Vietnamese border, namely offering the option of surrendering in order to initiate diplomatic relations, had been used successfully in the past, most recently when Le Loi "surrendered" to the Ming in 1427 after he had decisively defeated their troops on the battlefield. Entering into regular tributary relations with the Ming was a desirable outcome, for both Le Loi and Mac Dang Dung. By gaining Ming recognition, Mac Dang Dung would not only neutralize military pressure from the north, but also go from a capricious usurper to a recognized ruler.

According to Ming sources, early in 1538, Vu Van Uyen defeated both Mac Dang Dung and his son Mac Dang Doanh in skirmishes. After this, a "terrified" Mac Dang Doanh first began discussing the option of surrender. After his defeat, in the wording of the *Veritable Records of the Ming*, Mac Dang Doanh sent an ambassador to the border to "present a memorial and surrender."<sup>10</sup> This can be understood at least as the beginning of formal negotiations between the two sides.

<sup>7</sup> Cheng, *Zhengzhan yu Qishou*, 169–170. <sup>8</sup> MSL, 508; Cheng, 164. <sup>9</sup> MSL, 509.

<sup>10</sup> MSL, 509. There is some disagreement about who won the skirmishes. In the YJS, 163–37a, the Mac first capture Vu Van Uyen's wife and son before he can defeat them. The Mac also sent spies across the border into Yunnan in this account. In contrast, Cheng

This 1538 memorial, the first of a series of surrender letters or petitions, is summarized in the Ming *Veritable Records*. In the letter, Mac Dang Doanh explained that the Mac were not usurpers – in fact, his father Mac Dang Dung had *put down* a rebellion by the would-be usurper Tran Cao and had only taken control of the country at the insistence of the people. As for the request to surrender to the Ming maps of the country, he demurred on the grounds that they were already contained in the *Yitong Zhi*, the “unified gazetteer” of Ming territory (most likely in full awareness that these maps were schematic and lacking in detail). Mac Dang Doanh promised to resume tribute payments and to make good on back payments. Finally, Mac Dang Doanh dealt with the problem of Le legitimacy by claiming that Le Ninh was not a member of the Le family at all, but was actually the son of the Le military leader Nguyen Kim and therefore an impostor, and that the Chinese seal he claimed to have was a fake.<sup>11</sup>

Cai Jing and Mu Chaofu reacted positively to the letter. Mu Chaofu recommended that the Mac be allowed to continue to rule and Ming troops be withdrawn. His only condition was that the Mac return border territory that had formerly belonged to the Ming and promise not to retaliate against Vu Van Uyen and Le Ninh. Cai Jing concurred with Mu Chaofu after reading the letter, deciding that Mac Dang Doanh and his father should be forgiven and allowed to retain control of government affairs for the time being. Their positive response is not surprising. Thanks to their proximity to the border and knowledge of local conditions, officials in the field, unlike members of the Grand Secretariat and the ministries in Beijing, could more accurately calculate the expense and difficulty of war mobilization. They were more aware of instability in the border region and thus less sanguine about securing the support of local chieftaincies. They also knew they would be personally responsible for the outcome. Border officials thus were more motivated to seek diplomatic, peaceful solutions than were their colleagues in Beijing.

And yet, the inner court proceeded with its war preparations, exposing a gulf between their approach and that of Cai Jing and Mu Chaofu. In April of 1538, one month before Lin Xiyuan’s first memorial in favor of war arrived in Beijing, the Ministry of War rejected Mu Chaofu’s proposal on three grounds: that *tusi* (native chieftaincy) leaders would lend their support to the Ming in the case of war, making it less of a burden on the military; that the Mac continued to refuse to provide maps; and that intransigence must be punished as a general rule. As the Ministry of

writes in *Zhengzhan yu Qishou* that the Mac defeated Vu, 166. In the TT, the skirmishes are not mentioned; only the Mac request to surrender is mentioned: 846.

<sup>11</sup> MSL, 509; Cheng, 169.

War wrote, “Even though they are a country of Yi barbarians, how could there not be loyal officials [of the Le]? The people all want the criminals to be apprehended, how can we deny them our aid?”<sup>12</sup> The ministry was making an ethical case for Ming intervention and presuming widespread support for it among the Vietnamese and the border peoples.

Although Cai Jing and Mu Chaofu were more open to negotiation than their colleagues in Beijing, they still attached conditions. Cai Jing demanded specific changes to the first letter of surrender submitted by Mac Dang Doanh. According to the unofficial history *Yue Jiao Shu*, Cai Jing felt that “the style (of the letter) was entirely improper, and it was rejected. Dang Doanh then completely changed it and Cai accepted it.”<sup>13</sup>

What were the changes accepted by Cai Jing? The *Veritable Records of the Ming* record that on March 14, 1539, Mac Dang Doanh sent his ambassador to the Zhennan pass with a second letter of surrender.<sup>14</sup> Reading this second letter against the first, the changes demanded by Cai Jing become clear. This second, revised letter was written in a more formal style, praising the Ming in deferential language. It affirmed, “I know that the land and people of my country all belong to the Heavenly Court [of the Ming] . . .,” a pro forma confirmation of the Ming’s regional dominance that would not entail the end of kingship in Dai Viet.<sup>15</sup> It then went on to explain how the Le line had died out. In contrast to the first letter, this version elided all reference to the rebel Tran Cao. Instead of describing Mac Dang Dung as a hero who defeated a rebel and took over the reins of government in the ensuing power vacuum, it cast him as a reluctant ruler. “Charged by the Le above with the handling of state affairs, and compelled by the people below,” Mac Dang Dung had no choice but to accede to their demands and steer the ship of state out of chaos and rebellion. That he failed to inform the Ming court of the changes was entirely due to “relying on Yi barbarian customs in his haste.”<sup>16</sup> This is a rare case of the word Yi being used as an autonym. Here, Mac Dang Doanh is using it to demonstrate his and his father’s ignorance and thus non-culpability. In this narrative, Mac Dang Dung comes across more like a wise regent reminiscent of the classical hero the Duke of Zhou than like a regicidal maniac. Mac’s swashbuckling past as a

<sup>12</sup> MSL, 509. <sup>13</sup> YJS, 163–37a. <sup>14</sup> Also in TT, 846.

<sup>15</sup> Dai Viet was not alone in using a “humble tone and classical style” of writing in official communications. Wang Yi-T’ung’s *Official Relations between China and Japan, 1368–1549* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953) translates dozens of Japanese memorials and Ming rescripts that employ the formalized language of diplomacy. Although Japanese communications with the Ming were at times defiant and resistant, at many times, “The Japanese were willing to be as submissive and humble to China in order to insure good profits”: 65.

<sup>16</sup> MSL, 512.

successful general was downplayed to promote an image of a humble administrator with the proper respect for hierarchy.<sup>17</sup>

Mac Dang Doanh emphasized administrative irregularities in this second letter, treating the root of the Ming-Mac conflict as mere breach of diplomatic etiquette on his part, not the usurpation of a Ming tributary state. He argued that his father, Mac Dang Dung, was legitimately appointed by the Le to take control of the country. The only real problem was that Ming guards prevented his ambassadors from crossing into China and informing the Ming court of the appointment. He wrote, “All these long years and not even one messenger made it through. My father and I worried day and night. Our food had no taste and we slept fitfully.” Most significantly for his imperial audience, he included the long-awaited maps and census information.<sup>18</sup>

Despite these concessions, the Ming court decided to disregard Mac Dang Doanh’s request and continued to investigate matters and deliberate over how to proceed through 1539.<sup>19</sup> Before plans were agreed upon, Mac Dang Doanh died, in March 1540.<sup>20</sup> Mac Dang Dung put his grandson Mac Phuc Hai on the throne in his stead and personally took over the role of negotiator formerly filled by Mac Dang Doanh. The two letters Mac Dang Dung wrote that year reveal the growing tension in the Sino-Viet borderlands, as the Ming court continued to hold out the possibility of using force to install Le Ninh as king of Dai Viet.

The first letter sent by Mac Dang Dung (number 3 in Chart 1) mainly reiterated the content of his son’s previous letter, apologizing for the breach of succession protocol and requesting instructions. His tone was still conciliatory but showed his growing impatience with the Ming’s continued war preparations. He began by paraphrasing the contents of a letter he had received from the Ming on August 4, 1540:

The contents said “concerning the letter of surrender that you just sent, is this the truth of the matter, or is there some other trick?” I respectfully had it read aloud over and over; I could not overcome my sense of fear. I thought to myself, I have reviewed my transgressions and repented my crimes, the true situation and my sincere

<sup>17</sup> Instead of seizing the throne from his young nephew, the eleventh-century-BCE Duke of Zhou led the state as regent and stepped aside when the young king came of age. Incidentally, this portrait of Mac Dang Dung troubled the later compilers of *The Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet*. According to commentary in that text, Mac forced the Le emperor to abdicate but then acted as though he was the Duke of Zhou; the author thinks he should be classified instead with the likes of usurpers such as Wang Mang, Cao Cao, and Ho Quy Ly. TT, 842.

<sup>18</sup> MSL, 511–512; MS, j. 321. <sup>19</sup> MSL, 511.

<sup>20</sup> TT, 847. Qiu Luan and Mao Bowen wrote to the Ming court, “some say he was killed by a bolt of lightning”: MSL, 515.

Chart 1 *Iterations of the Mac surrender letter*

Letter	Text	Date	Author	Tone
1.	<i>Ming shilu</i>	1538	Mac Dang Doanh	Curt
2.	<i>Ming shilu</i>	March 14, 1539	Mac Dang Doanh	Conciliatory
3.	<i>Shuyu Zhouzhi lu</i>	After August 4, 1540	Mac Dang Dung	Conciliatory, impatient
4.	<i>Annan laiwei jilue</i>	C. 1540	Mac Dang Dung	Conciliatory, impatient

thoughts were all disclosed in our previous petition of surrender – nothing was concealed.<sup>21</sup>

Mac Dang Dung then said that he had sent many messengers to the Ming and had been awaiting instructions from the court in good faith. Although his tone was polite, he clearly implied that the Ming court was being unreasonable in failing to confirm him as the rightful ruler of Dai Viet. He had done all that was requested of him, and it was time for the Ming court to stop deliberating about war and recognize his rule. He wrote:

Should your gaze illuminate my sincerity and forgive my transgression, I will be able to start anew. The land and the people all belong to the Heavenly Court. In the past I gave you a true accounting, presented maps and awaited your verdict. I only long for heavenly generosity day and night, the way grain longs for spring rains. How could there be anything else to say!

Finally, the letter addressed the issue of the Le family. According to the interventionist camp in the Ming government, if Le royal heirs still existed, then Mac rule would be illegitimate. Mac claims to power rested on the Mac insistence that the Le line had ceased, and that the last Le emperor had willingly chosen the Mac family as the rightful successor. Mac Dang Dung wrote:

As to the Le line being cut off with no heirs, I have already explained this thoroughly in my previous letter. If you still do not believe me, please ask the elders and people of my country to verify its truth. If such a Le heir should appear, then I will gladly accept the charge of duplicity. How could one person's hand cover the eyes and ears of an entire country! I am as true as stone and metal. How could I deceive you?<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> SZL, 222. <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

From the letter, it appears that even though Mac Dang Dung was eager to conclude the surrender, at the same time, he was unwilling to cede certain points and allowed his impatience to show.

The second half of *An Illustrated Account of the Overawing of Annan* records an undated alternative surrender letter (number 4 in Chart 1). Although it repeats much of the language of the previous letters, the letter preserved in *An Illustrated Account* deals in more depth with two pressing issues: the legitimacy of Le Ninh and the redrawing of the Sino-Viet border. In the alternative letter, Mac Dang Dung wrote, “The border officials of Guangdong and Qinzhou have memorialized requesting that [jurisdiction] be as before,” and then agreed to give up claims to land near Qinzhou that had once been ruled by China but was currently under Mac control.<sup>23</sup> He added that he was willing to consign some land in the northwest to the control of Yunnan province in China. The implication is that in order to accept this attractive proposal, the Ming would have to recognize Mac’s authority to cede the land.

As for the purported Le heir, Le Ninh, Mac wrote in this letter, “All I know is that the people are talking to one another about Le Ninh. They all think that he is the son of [the Le general] Nguyen Kim. There are really no descendents of the Le family, so I have already set up temple land in the capital to continue the Le family’s sacrifices.” He concluded, “If it is as the people say, I implore you to be compassionate and think of the good of the common people and allow me to rule this country.”<sup>24</sup> The last line is a subtle argument or even a threat against further Ming attempts to restore the Le. According to Mac, the people of Dai Viet know that Le Ninh is an impostor and are content under Mac rule. To interfere would only stir up local unrest.

A comment in *An Illustrated Account of the Overawing of Annan* confirms that negotiation was a give-and-take process. The author notes that negotiations reached an impasse because Mac Dang Dung refused to accept four of the ten crimes he had previously been charged with.<sup>25</sup> Although the crimes were not explicitly addressed in the letter, it is likely that he refused to plead guilty to the first four crimes, events that he bore at least partial responsibility for. These were driving off the emperor Le Y, forcing Le Y’s mother to marry him, poisoning the royal heir, and forcing Le Y’s son Le Ninh to flee far from the capital.<sup>26</sup> Mac Dang Dung was willing to accept blame and ask forgiveness for crimes he was not actually guilty of, specifically procedural irregularities and failure to send tribute. He had in fact continually attempted to contact the Ming court since

<sup>23</sup> ALT, 436. <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>25</sup> ALT, 388.

<sup>26</sup> See Chapter 3 for the full list of crimes. MSL, 499; MS, *juan* 321.

1528, almost immediately after he came to power.<sup>27</sup> Yet he steadfastly denied the more serious crime of usurpation and murder. Nor did he recognize Le Ninh as the legitimate ruler, or even as a true member of the Le royal family.

Reading against the necessarily court-centered bias of the official record, it seems likely that the revised petition of surrender was at least partially instrumental in thwarting war. Since taking the throne in 1527, Mac Dang Dung had tried repeatedly to contact the Ming court, receive recognition, and conduct tributary relations with them. After thirteen years of rebuffs, the Mac were willing to make some concessions to accomplish this goal. Between the first letter sent by Mac Dang Doanh and the alternative letter preserved in *An Illustrated Account*, the Mac agreed to share maps and census information and avowed that “the land and people all belong to the Heavenly Court.” They would not budge on the subject of the Le; both Mac Dang Dung and his son refused to accept Le Ninh as a legitimate Le heir or agree to a power-sharing arrangement. Ming officials were persuaded to agree, deeming the background of Le Ninh impossible to verify. A date was set for the in-person surrender to formalize the agreement. The involvement of the Ming officials Cai Jing and Mu Chaofu in drafting the letter and mediating between the Mac and the Ming court shows that they were interested in using diplomacy to avert war, even when it meant going against the wishes of the interventionists of the inner court. They also had a significant amount of discretion in the field. They seem to have coached the Mac court to write in a style and tone that conformed to Ming diplomatic expectations and could mollify the emperor, Zhu Houcong.

November 30, 1540, was selected as the date for a formal surrender of Mac Dang Dung to Mao Bowen, the Ming-appointed commander-in-chief for the expedition against Dai Viet. Both the Mac and the Ming border officials knew that the surrender ceremony had to be just so: the Mac delegation requested, and were granted, a dress rehearsal in the upstairs room of the border gate before the formal surrender.<sup>28</sup>

### Surrender as political theater

Several border officials played crucial roles in negotiating the Ming-Mac rapprochement, notably Weng Wanda (1498–1552, *jinsi* 1526) and his friend Mao Bowen (1482–1544, *js.* 1508). Both men worked hard to come to terms with the Mac, in the process showing different faces to the Mac, their own soldiers, and the Ming court. Weng advised Mao Bowen,

<sup>27</sup> TT, 837.   <sup>28</sup> ALT, 59.

“The best policy would be to cede [Annan to the Mac] and announce success. The second best policy would be to intimidate them to the point that they dare not disobey. The worst policy would be to utterly destroy them.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, the best course of action would be to accept the status quo and present it to the Ming court as a victory, second best would be putting on a show of force to convince the Mac that war was imminent, and the worst would be to actually engage in combat. Mao Bowen, a latecomer to the Ming-Mac negotiations, agreed. Both men set out to impress the inner court with their progress, and to coax and intimidate the Mac, combining the best and second best approaches. They hoped to burnish their own reputations in the process.

Like Cai Jing, Weng Wanda’s knowledge of the Ming southern borderlands stemmed from experience in official positions there. In 1533, when he was thirty-six years old, he served as Prefect of Wuzhou County in Guangxi. He won praise in that position and was promoted to Assistant Commissioner of Guangxi, with jurisdiction over the Mac affair.<sup>30</sup> Weng Wanda felt that management of the *tusi*, the aboriginal offices or native chieftaincies that studded Ming China’s southern borderlands, was of central importance to resolving the Dai Viet crisis. The situation, in his estimation, was not good. Ming soldiers were poorly fed and morale was low. Ming control in the south was weak, as aboriginal officials (*tuguan*) openly fought and usurped one another, defying Ming attempts to stabilize the area. If the Ming did not exert more control, the *tusi* might be pulled into Dai Viet’s orbit, further weakening Ming control in the border area. Weng Wanda thought that the disarray and instability of the Ming southern borderlands signaled to Mac Dang Dung that the Ming were not capable of threatening his hold on power. Mac Dang Dung allegedly said, “Aboriginal officials in China frequently kill their leaders and have been uncontrollable for decades. Why are you investigating me?”<sup>31</sup> Cai Jing was worried about this, and discussed it with Weng. Weng thought that problems in the borderlands would have to be solved in order to give the Ming a credible negotiating position, and to prevent rebellious aboriginal officials from linking up with Mac.<sup>32</sup> Weng then listed several examples of *tusi* leaders who usurped the throne or assassinated rivals with no repercussions or reaction from the central state, concluding: “if they are planning to start an internal rebellion, we will not be able to protect ourselves.” He advised that the Ming first deal with the problem of the aboriginal officials, and then Dai Viet would fall in line as a consequence. With Mao Bowen’s approval, four aboriginal officials were arrested.

<sup>29</sup> Cheng, 175. <sup>30</sup> MS, *juan* 198, *liezhuan* 86. <sup>31</sup> MS, *juan* 192.

<sup>32</sup> *Cangwu Junmen Zhi*, *juan* 20, *Scripta Sinica*.

From this time, according to the *History of the Ming*, Mac Dang Dung began to fear the Ming.<sup>33</sup>

Weng took other steps to persuade the Mac that the Ming were prepared to invade at a moment's notice. According to Weng's biography in the *History of the Ming*, a Vietnamese spy was captured while Weng was dealing with the crisis at the border. Weng treated him graciously and released him, hoping that the spy would return to Dai Viet and report that the troop buildup along the border was more than the Mac could counter.<sup>34</sup> If his biographer is to be believed, Weng's actions had the desired result, leading directly to Mac's request to surrender.

Weng's collected works contain several pages of his writings on Dai Viet. His policy suggestions were thoughtful and practical – for instance, suggesting that Vietnamese envoys be housed and questioned separately from one another to avoid collusion. He argued that Ming troops would fight well, but only if they were given sufficient food. Following the second best policy, he used strong language to threaten Mac Dang Dung, writing, for instance, “This Vietnamese joker is rude and impertinent, he relies on his distant location to avoid coming to court, and this is why Heaven will strike him down. We should have a long-term plan. In this battle, we should send the troops first, followed by provisions. If the troops have enough to eat, we will come down on them like a ton of bricks. The advantage will be with us.”<sup>35</sup> At the same time, he was negotiating with the Mac to avert the worst option – war.

Weng Wanda was a master of political theater, working to boost his troops' morale, both to prepare for a possible war and to intimidate the Mac from taking them on. His collected writings preserves his “Vow to Attack Annan,” in which we learn that in order to raise the morale of the soldiers, Weng performed a torch-lit dawn sacrifice in front of the arrayed troops, calling on them in rousing language to forget their families and their lives and fight together. He exhorted them to fight bravely, like bears and tigers, while warning that those who deserted, lagged behind, or hurt the innocent would be severely punished.<sup>36</sup> His sacrifice and speech were meant to rouse his troops for a war that, by his own avowal, he wished to avoid.

Weng Wanda's efforts were effective, at least in the eyes of his closest colleagues. In 1539, Weng was promoted to a position in Zhejiang, but Mao Bowen and Cai Jing petitioned the throne to recall him to Guangxi. Weng's assistance, they argued, was invaluable for solving the Mac crisis. Their request was granted. (Weng returned Mao's admiration. When

<sup>33</sup> MS, *juan* 192. <sup>34</sup> MS, *juan* 198, *liezhuan* 86.

<sup>35</sup> Weng Wanda, *Weng Wanda ji*, 97. <sup>36</sup> Weng Wanda, 684–685.

Mao died in disgrace in 1544, after having been removed from the registry of officials,<sup>37</sup> a devastating punishment, Weng memorialized the emperor, reminding him of Mao's role in securing the surrender of the Mac and urging him to reconsider his dismissal.)<sup>38</sup>

For the surrender both to allay the tension between the Mac and the Ming and to supersede the inner court's initial call for war, Mac Dang Dung had to appear sufficiently contrite. Once Mao Bowen finally arrived in Guangxi to take up his post in the summer of 1540, he assured his audience, the inner court, that this was so: "From a distance, Mac Dang Dung saw that our armies were near the border and became violently afraid. He quickly requested to cross the border to surrender and await punishment. His emotion was piteous and sincere."<sup>39</sup> In fact, this was not a new situation: Mac Dang Dung had requested such a surrender from as early as 1538, when he sent his ambassador to the Ming court.<sup>40</sup> These earlier attempts were conveniently forgotten as Ming officialdom found the march to war increasingly fatiguing.

Mao Bowen set about planning an appropriate ceremony for the surrender, taking the same kind of care Cai Jing had in supervising an appropriate letter of surrender. The Ming troops built a military tent with a high platform inside of it.<sup>41</sup> Everything had to be just right. In the account he wrote about the event, Mao Bowen comes across as a persnickety master of ceremonies:

We stationed the troops about a *li* away from the pass and instructed them not to be rowdy. They looked stern and orderly. When the ritual implements were all ready, we arranged a dragon arch in the tent, covered it with a yellow cloth and arranged the imperial orders inscribed on a banner and medal that was within it, and burned incense before it on the table. Several officials from the Guangdong and Guangxi offices, holding flags and medals, were arranged in two rows according to rank. Then we passed along the orders to open the gates. Mac Dang Dung, his nephew Mac Van Minh, and the chieftains, elders and scholars came in through the left side of the gate. They took off their shoes and approached barefoot. Facing north, they kneeled on the ground. We received our orders and allowed a student named Xie Tianzong to loosen their bonds and accept their document of surrender. Once Dang Dung had finished crawling forward, bowing five times and kowtowing three times, his nephew, the chieftains, elders, and the scholars all did so in turn, according to rank. All the Yi people of that country craned their necks on their side of the pass, and seemed to be vigorously bowing and knocking their heads on the ground. There were untold tens of thousands of them.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Wallacker, "Mao Po-wen," in L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography, Volume II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 1049.

<sup>38</sup> Weng Wanda, 516. <sup>39</sup> ALT, 59. <sup>40</sup> TT, 486. <sup>41</sup> ALT, 59. <sup>42</sup> ALT, 59–60.

Afterward, Mac Dang Dung was allowed to return home and await further instructions from the Ming court.<sup>43</sup> Mao Bowen and Weng Wanda's threats had been successful in luring Mac Dang Dung across the border and putting on an event designed to allay Zhu Houcong's concerns about Mac intransigence. The story, however, is slightly at odds with the visual record contained in *An Illustrated Account of the Overawing of Annan*, in which Mao and Weng play a minor role, and Mac seems more like a foreign dignitary than a cowed enemy.

### The fearsome panther

*An Illustrated Account of the Overawing of Annan* is the only visual record of the surrender ceremony of 1540. Judging by this account, it seems that the ceremony resembled a polite meeting of host and guest, not the humiliating affair remembered in official histories. This is due to its unusual focus. Rather than the Ming official sources' focus on the pomp and grandeur of Mac Dang Dung's surrender, the perspective of *An Illustrated Account* follows a relatively minor player, Jiang Yigui. *An Illustrated Account* casts Jiang, and not Mao Bowen, Weng Wanda, or Mac Dang Dung, as the protagonist and hero of this diplomatic affair, lauding him as "the fearsome panther"<sup>44</sup> that single-handedly averted war with the Mac.

Although the title of *An Illustrated Account of the Overawing of Annan* suggests that the surrender is its subject, roughly half the text celebrates the life and career of Jiang Yigui and promotes an image of him as a moral father and enlightened civil servant. In this book, the Mac surrender provides the high point of Jiang's career; that it marks a milestone in Sino-Viet relations matters less. Jiang's son compiled and published *An Illustrated Account* in 1571, after his father's death.<sup>45</sup> His son may have felt that such a public memorial would attract favorable attention on two fronts, advancing both the legacy of his father and his own career. Since it is unclear when the illustrations were made, they should not be understood as an eyewitness account. Nonetheless, the illustrations still offer a valuable alternative view of the surrender.

Jiang Yigui played the role of intermediary among Mao Bowen, Weng Wanda, and Mac Dang Dung. This role can be seen in a letter preserved in *An Illustrated Account*. Jiang Yigui sent this letter to Weng Wanda:

In the sixth month this year [1540], we received your encrypted orders about this case, and prepared to receive the Provincial Military Commander [Mao Bowen]. The call to arms was passed on to us, and we diligently forwarded it to Annan. The

<sup>43</sup> ALT, 60–62. <sup>44</sup> ALT, 387. <sup>45</sup> ALT, 375–376.

Yi leader Mac Dang Dung returned his document of surrender to us, and we listened to his confession to see whether or not it was truthful.<sup>46</sup>

It can be seen that Jiang was the main link between Mac and the Ming high officials, not only passing on messages but making judgments on their content.

*An Illustrated Account* elevates Jiang Yigui over Mao Bowen. The preface of *An Illustrated Account* contrasts Jiang favorably with Mao Bowen, casting the former as the voice of reason in the potentially explosive situation preceding the surrender:

Mao [Bowen] had complete control of the military; he mustered several tens of thousands of troops from Yunnan, Guangdong, and Guangxi. They were champing at the bit. They were divided into columns and ready to proceed. Jiang Yigui said, "The distant Yi are under the loose rein. We should first send them an announcement to familiarize them with the situation." When the Mac asked to meet him face to face, Mr. White Stone suspected they wanted to stall for time and that the drafting and gathering of troops over the past eight years would come apart. The officials sent an announcement of war, as well as a summons. Mr. White Stone passed through the border gate to handle this, truly doing his utmost.

As a direct result of his intercession:

The chief Mac Dang Dung listened to orders, memorialized the throne, returned the occupied land and requested to be a tributary state. He put mud on his head and face and surrendered bound in ropes before the regional military commander [Mao]. When the emperor heard of this he forgave him and changed his title to the military commissioner<sup>47</sup> ... Thus the distant south was pacified without using troops.<sup>48</sup>

In other words, Jiang skillfully handled the overeager Ming troops and officials, crossed the border to negotiate directly with the Mac, mollified the previously recalcitrant Mac Dang Dung, and reached a favorable resolution, all without causing bloodshed.

Despite the attention he receives in *An Illustrated Account*, Jiang's name is scarcely mentioned in official Chinese histories. Although Jiang is not mentioned in the Ming *Veritable Records* or the *History of the Ming*, the Vietnamese history *Dai Viet thong su* does highlight his role and even records the content of the letter he sent to Mac Dang Dung. As noted above, Jiang Yigui traveled to the Zhennan border pass in Pingxiang to be closer to the Mac camp. Jiang was tasked with determining Mac Dang

<sup>46</sup> He continued: "Mac Dang Dung has started to worry about the danger, yet he continues to hesitate and wants to attenuate our army ... ambassadors and spies have been sent through the passes one after another": ALT, 58.

<sup>47</sup> Military commissioner of Annan (Dai Viet), instead of king. <sup>48</sup> ALT, 375.

Dung's true reasons for surrendering and gauging his sincerity. Mac responded with the slightly peevish letter cited above (letter 3 in Chart 1), to which Jiang replied:

Our emperor, athwart a dynastic revival and touching fortune, united the Hua and the Yi. Of distant places, none does not admire us and pay us tribute. Only your country has not come to court for a long while, so the military commander [Mao Bowen] received the order to investigate. Then we found out that there were the father and son Mac Dang Dung and Dang Doanh, who took advantage and capriciously did evil. They usurped the throne of the ruler, incited rebellion, and continuously engaged in war to the point that the people of the country were miserable and their towns and hamlets were destroyed. Since the crime is clear, it would be difficult to pardon him under the law. The Son of Heaven [Zhu Houcong] is the ruler of the Hua and the Yi, he must show the benevolence of restoring a country [the Le dynasty] that has been destroyed. Wise men are the representatives of virtue; they must manifest the righteousness of punishing rebellion and eliminating evil. Now the Le family line still has not been destroyed and the Mac family's ledger of evil is full. People's intentions are clear to Heaven and cannot be hidden.<sup>49</sup>

The letter makes it clear that Mac Dang Dung and his son are considered criminals and will be held to account by the Ming. As the letter continued, Jiang appealed to the people of Dai Viet to execute Mac Dang Dung and his son in exchange for money and position:

Anyone has license to kill the disordered minister and his bandit son. Although Annan is located in a distant corner of a fiery wasteland, yet there are always those among them who have heard the Heavenly Court's instruction. How could there not be those that embrace loyalty and uphold righteousness, and talented men who get rid of disorder and return to the right? They certainly are capable of gathering a righteous army to put down the greatest evil, and we will reward them for this in order to speed their progress.<sup>50</sup>

The consequences for protecting the Mac were dire: "When the celestial troops gather from the four corners, it will be impossible to avoid utter destruction. At that time, although there are loyal and righteous men, they will not be able to show themselves, but will only be able to stick out their necks and die. Then it will be too late for regret."<sup>51</sup> Jiang ended this letter to the Mac by noting that he was preparing fourteen thousand copies of his letter for distribution to the people of Dai Viet. The "fearsome panther" within Jiang Yigui hinted at in *An Illustrated Account* is thus more clearly revealed in the Vietnamese record. Jiang deployed Confucian allusions and ideology like a battering ram to intimidate the Mac and even to encourage uprising. His scare tactics – suggesting to the

<sup>49</sup> DVTS, 29b. <sup>50</sup> DVTS, 31b. <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

people of Dai Viet that they execute their ruler and receive a king's ransom – may explain why Vietnamese sources claim that Mac surrendered out of fear. Jiang Yigui's formula of surrender is repeated throughout *An Illustrated Account*: “submit, return stolen land, offer tribute and call yourself a tributary state, send a son to be a captive, be bound and await punishment.”<sup>52</sup>

The centerpiece of *An Illustrated Account* is a continuous series of seventy-three images with short descriptive texts accompanying the scenes. The illustrated portion of the text takes the reader through the events culminating in the Mac surrender, with Jiang Yigui as the protagonist. Each section has a title and is accompanied by a short text that both explains the title and heaps praise on Jiang Yigui. The story begins with Mao Bowen summoning Jiang to help with the delicate negotiations with the Mac. According to the captions in the illustrated portion of *An Illustrated Account*, Mac Dang Dung wrote to Mao Bowen that he would retreat from the border, ceasing negotiations, unless he could meet Mr. Jiang. According to the *Account*, Mao wrote Jiang, “Dang Dung came [to the border] because he admires you. I have known this for a long time but I was afraid it would sully your position so I blocked his request. This affair is now urgent. I will borrow your greatness to quickly complete this important affair.” The following pages show Jiang's entourage racing to reach the border, noting, “He received the call at midnight and set out at midnight.” The soldiers, eager to glimpse the face of this “fearsome panther,” gather around to observe the moment he emerges from his sedan chair (see Figure 2).

The distant emperor is represented in *An Illustrated Account* by an altar supporting an imperial edict. Much of the action takes place in front of this altar. In one image, we see Jiang Yigui, who has just arrived and descended from his sedan chair, kneeling before Mao Bowen, Weng Wanda, and a third official, Zheng Zonggu. They are flanked by soldiers and by kneeling servants presenting platters of pig heads (see Figure 3).

Soon after, the panels of *An Illustrated Account* show the arrival of Mac Dang Dung. This version has a different focus than the received version of the event as described in official histories. The description of the surrender in the *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet* is typical of official accounts:

Mac Dang Dung, his nephew, [nine ministers], and others went through the Zhennan Pass [into China]. Each was bound with ropes around their necks. They went towards the pavilion of the Ming and prostrated themselves barefoot. They kneeled with bare heads to present their petition of surrender, gave a full account of the country's land, soldiers, people, and officials, and then awaited

<sup>52</sup> ALT, 390.



Figure 2 Jiang Yigui arrives at the border. The accompanying caption notes, “They [the commanders and soldiers] competed with one another to raise the carriage curtains and expose Jiang Yigui to the light. They gathered and gazed at him.” National Library of China



Figure 3 Image of Jiang Yigui kneeling before the Provincial Military Commander Mao Bowen, the Secondary Commander Weng Wanda, and the Army Inspecting Censor Zheng Zonggu. National Library of China



Figure 4 Waiting for Mac Dang Dung at the border pass. National Library of China

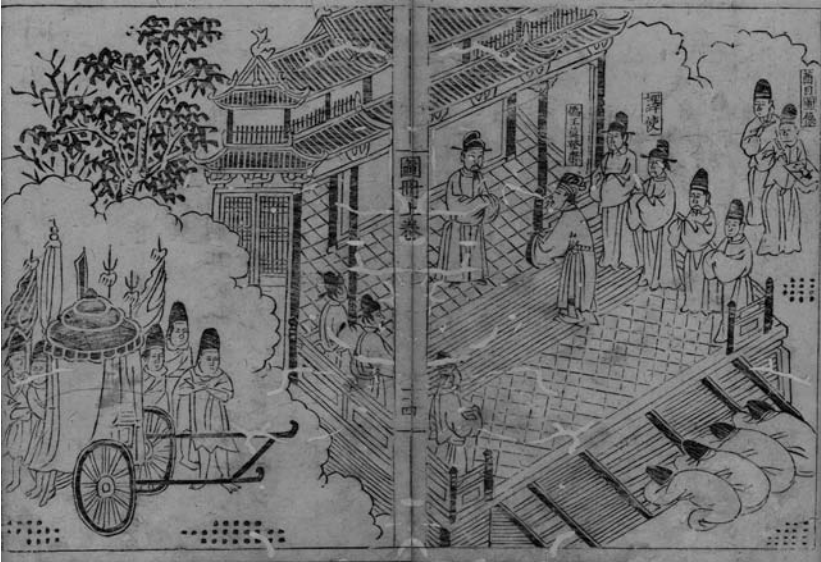


Figure 5 Mac Dang Dung surrenders before the representative of the Ming throne, Mao Bowen. National Library of China

punishment. They gave the Ming several border villages, because they were willing to belong [to the Ming] and again be subordinate to Qinzhou. Mac Dang Dung even asked to receive the calendar and a seal, and carefully held on to them until they could be updated. They also sent Mac Dang Dung's nephew [and others] to present the petition of surrender in Beijing.<sup>53</sup>

The ropes twined around their necks symbolized Mac willing to receive whatever punishment Zhu Houcong wished to dispense.

The official histories of Vietnam and China dwell on details that emphasize the submission of Mac Dang Dung, including his bare feet, the rope tied around his neck, ritualized kowtowing, and deliberately mussed hair, while downplaying the symbolic nature of the event. The images from *An Illustrated Account*, in contrast, show a much more standard meeting of host and guest, and even moments of levity. For instance, one image shows a crowd awaiting Mac Dang Dung's arrival at the border pass, including spectators on the Vietnamese side climbing trees for a better vantage (see Figure 4).

Mac Dang Dung's arrival at the temporary imperial tent looks more like the arrival of a king of a tributary state than of the defeated head of an opposing army. Labeled "the false king Mac Dang Dung," Mac stands

<sup>53</sup> Yanjing is present-day Beijing. TT, 847.



Figure 6 Mac Dang Dung returns home at the end of a long procession. National Library of China

before Mao Bowen and bows gently from the waist. Although he is the king of a foreign state, he stands below Mao, the representative of the Ming emperor. Beside him are four translators, two Chinese and two Vietnamese. Beyond them are two illustrators, busily sketching the scene with brushes and easels. Less exalted members of Mac Dang Dung's retinue are depicted in the act of supplication, but Mac is only shown performing the role of foreign guest (see Figure 5).

Ritual completed, Mac Dang Dung mounted his carriage and returned home, as part of an impressive procession complete with flag bearers and musicians, suggesting a celebratory mood. Mao Bowen bids Mac farewell in the upper right of the image, with the border gate visible behind him (see Figure 6).

Celebration happened north of the border as well. Jiang Yigui had a special hall built so that the soldiers and laborers could celebrate, and he distributed money and medals to those who performed especially well. Alluding to a disagreement between Jiang and more hawkish officials, *An Illustrated Account* asks rhetorically, "should we open new land, manage Annan and announce our success, or waste time on conflicts all the way to the southern ocean?" Clearly, the answer was peaceful resolution, brought about by none other than Jiang. Jiang bowed before the altar to the imperial edict, reporting success to the throne (see Figure 7).

Once that obligation was completed, servants carried in and unpacked the many boxes of gifts sent by the Mac for the Ming royal family, including incense burners made of precious metal, several varieties of incense, lacquer fans, perfume, and rhinoceros horns.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> ALT, 398.



Figure 7 Jiang Yigui reports success to an altar containing the imperial edict. The accompanying caption says, “What is pacification? It is sending a son to be a captive. It is that captive requested to surrender while bound with ropes. It is submitting, returning stolen land, sending tribute and calling oneself a tributary state. In the past eight years, we

Thus, the resolution of a diplomatic deadlock between two powerful countries was recorded for posterity from the perspective of one of its more humble participants. Jiang Yigui's stature takes on exaggerated proportions; he is described as the only man who could handle the crisis. As for Mac Dang Dung, the more humiliating aspects of his surrender recorded in official sources (ropes, mussed hair, faces daubed with mud) may have been present: they were either too brief or insignificant to be recorded by the artist. It is instead the ritualized significance of the surrender that was of primary importance, a symbolic normalizing of relations between the Ming and their new tributary, the Mac Pacification Commission of Annam, mediated by none other than Jiang Yigui.

Although the Ming army was ostensibly mobilized to punish the Mac and restore the Le, by the time of the surrender, the Le had virtually been forgotten. Instead, the Mac "surrender" as though they had been at war with the Ming, rather than their foes the Le. In effect, the surrender merely normalized relations between the Ming and the Mac court, an outcome the Mac had been working toward for more than a decade. In the exchange, the Mac received more than just breathing room: they also gained the recognition and support of the Ming. This relationship carried over to the Qing and allowed the Mac to continue to dispute Le and later Le-Trinh claims to power, even after the Mac were expelled from Dong Kinh in 1592 and fled to Ming protection in the North.<sup>55</sup>

### A battle of poems

The voice that has been most silent in this political drama is perhaps the most important one, that of Mac Dang Dung. In the sources, he trembles and cowers but barely speaks apart from his cajoling letters. It is my view, however, that Mac Dang Dung was not simply manipulated or intimidated by the Ming, or even by the fearsome panther Jiang Yigui. He stood his ground on the issues most important to him, securing the Ming's

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Caption for Figure 7 (cont.)

were never successful in achieving this, and now in just one morning they are submissive." National Library of China

<sup>55</sup> Hoang Anh Tuan, *Silk for Silver: Dutch-Vietnamese Relations, 1637–1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 19. For more on the fate of the Mac dynasty after 1592, see Niu Junkai, *Wang shi hou yu yu pan luan zhe: Yuenan Mo shi jia zu yu Zhongguo guan xi yan jiu* (Beijing: Shijie Tushu Chubanshe, 2012).

support and their tacit acceptance that the Le royal family was no longer viable. This alliance served his family well for more than a century, as his descendants were given shelter in Ming territory once their dynasty was finally destroyed.

A clue to the way Mac Dang Dung's contemporaries in Dai Viet viewed him might be found in a (most likely apocryphal) exchange of poems between the Ming general Mao Bowen and his Vietnamese counterpart Giap Hai (1516–1588) on the theme of “duckweed.”<sup>56</sup> These poems are preserved, with some small but significant differences, in two eighteenth-century texts: *Son cu tap thuat* and *Dai Viet dinh Nguyen Phat luc*. Together, they show that disagreement over the legacy of the Mac persisted in Vietnam long after their fall from power.<sup>57</sup>

In the “Song of Floating Duckweed” poems (Chinese: *Fuping Changyong*), “duckweed” stands in for Mac Dang Dung. This is both a play on words (Mac Dang Dung's grandfather's name was Bang, “Duckweed”)<sup>58</sup> and a possible reference to his purported background as a member of the boat-dwelling Tanka (*Dan*) minority.

In the version contained in *Son cu tap thuat*, Giap Hai sends a boastful challenge to Mao Bowen in poetic form, bragging that even a famous strategist such as Jiang Taigong of the Zhou dynasty could not find a way to penetrate the Mac defenses.<sup>59</sup> In response, Mao Bowen compares the Mac state to rootless pond scum, too foolish to know it is doomed to destruction.<sup>60</sup> After receiving this poem, according to the text, Mac Dang Dung was so intimidated that he took the unprecedented step of binding himself and surrendering to the Ming.

In the biography of Giap Hai contained in *Dai Viet dinh Nguyen Phat luc*, the poems are virtually identical, but they come in a different order. In this version, Mao Bowen first issued his lyrical challenge comparing the Mac to aquatic weeds, and was answered by Giap Hai line by line. This

<sup>56</sup> This could also be translated as flotsam and jetsam. In modern Vietnamese, duckweed (*canh beo*) connotes something of little importance.

<sup>57</sup> I am indebted to Tran Khai Hoai for finding these poems and sharing them with me. I am also grateful to him for sharing his interpretations and discussing my translations with me.

<sup>58</sup> TT, 784. YJS contains the contemporary negative Chinese assessment of this name, recording that Mac Dang Dung was a Tanka fisherman, whose father “drifted” to Co Trai in Annan, under the control of a village head named “Duckweed”: 46b. “The head of the family was called ‘Duckweed,’ because he left no traces”: SZL, 233.

<sup>59</sup> For the full literary Sinitic text of the poem, with my translation, see Baldanza, “Perspectives on the Mac Surrender of 1540,” *Asia Major*, Vol. 27, Part 2 (2014), footnote 71, 74, and 76. *Son cu tap thuat*: Institute of Han-Nom Studies A.822.

<sup>60</sup> *Son cu tap thuat*. Institute of Han-Nom Studies A.822.

order is more plausible because it has Giap Hai using Mao Bowen as a foil.<sup>61</sup> In striking contrast to the image of Mac Dang Dung surrendering before Mao Bowen, these poems have Mac besting his rival. They give us a glimpse of how the Mac and their army may have actually viewed Ming military bluster.

According to this version, Mao Bowen first sent this challenge:

The duckweed is scattered on fields and water.  
 After all, it does not have deep roots.  
 Without sprouts, without leaves,  
 it dares to grow branches, it dares to grow a stem.  
 It knows only to bunch together, not knowing it will be scattered.  
 It only knows when it is afloat, not knowing it will sink.  
 When it encounters a violent wind from Heaven,  
 it will be swept out to sea, never to recover.<sup>62</sup>

Given the context, Mao Bowen is implying that the Mac is a rootless state, bound to be swept away by the superior might of the Ming, never to be restored.

In his response, Giap Hai turned the duckweed analogy on its head, making it stand for strength:

The duckweed petals are too close to be penetrated,  
 its leaves and tendrils incredibly dense.  
 It constantly battles clouds for the water's surface.  
 Would it be willing to let the sun break through its waves?  
 Pounded by a thousand swells, it is truly hard to break;  
 shaken by ten thousand gusts of wind, it is not easily sunk.  
 How many dragons wait beneath the surface?  
 Even Jiang Taigong would have no way to drop his hook and catch them.<sup>63</sup>

In Giap's poem, instead of a symbol of transience, duckweed is resilient and unsinkable. The sun, wind, and rain, representing the might of the Ming, cannot break through its defenses. In this exchange, Vietnamese resistance to Ming military aggression is masterfully expressed through the medium of classical poetry in literary Sinitic. Like Ly Thuong Kiet's earlier poetic declaration that the "Southern emperor rules the southern

<sup>61</sup> Another argument for the plausibility of this order is that it is unlikely that Mao Bowen ever wrote such a poem. It is more likely that Vietnamese authors attributed it to him to serve as a foil for Giap Hai. Pham Van Son also treats this as the correct order of the poems, without explanation. His essay on Mac Dang Dung includes the Vietnamese transliteration and translation of the original poems. Pham Văn Sơn, "Mạc Đăng Dung (1483–1541)", 51–84.

<sup>62</sup> *Đại Việt đình nguyên Phật lục*, Institute of Han-Nom Studies, A.771 (Circa 1736), 40a.

<sup>63</sup> *Đại Việt đình Nguyên Phật lục*. Institute of Han-Nom Studies, A.771. Reference from Hoai Tran, personal communication. This source is a biography of Giap Hai.

land,” the author of this poem uses classical training to assert Dai Viet’s place as domain of classical culture separate from China. It asserts that though Mac Dang Dung’s background may be with humble fishing folk, that does not negate his strength, heroism, and ultimate success. Put to the test, his state survived.

### The frustrated autocrat

Let us return to that November day in 1540 when an emperor crossed a border and surrendered to the Ming state. From the perspective of Le writers of history, Mac Dang Dung, his face daubed with mud and hair in disarray, represented the weakness and illegitimacy of the Mac dynasty. Such a dynasty could be left out of the orthodox succession of Vietnamese states, neatly preserving an uninterrupted Le dynasty. In Ming official histories, the Mac capitulation instanced yet again a foreign state paying homage to the Ming.

In the Vietnamese record, written a century after the event by the victorious Le in the *Dai Viet thong su*, the Ming military buildup was transparent bluffing. That text notes that although the Ming had charged Mac Dang Dung with several crimes, “actually they did not dare to send troops, and were just brandishing empty words to intimidate.” In the face of these empty threats, “Dang Doanh and his father Mac Dang Dung quaked in fear, sent [an ambassador] to present a memorial to Guangxi and request to surrender and accept punishment. Their words were very heart-rending. Because they offered huge bribes to the officials of the three offices of Guangdong and Guangxi, and others in Qinzhou and Lianzhou, those officials accepted the bribes, so the Ming officials requested the court that the army not be sent.”<sup>64</sup> Later Le scholars and kings proudly traced their lineage to Le Loi, the brave and persistent resistance fighter against earlier Ming occupation.<sup>65</sup> Le Loi’s own “surrender” to the Ming was downplayed in the historical record. In contrast, the Mac come across as weak and traitorous, willing to trade land and treasure in the face of toothless threats from the Ming court. The surrender captures this perfectly, and so is emphasized in the historical record.

The narrative structure of the *History of the Ming* implies that Zhu Houcong was informed of and engaged with preparations for the surrender. This linear narrative is contradicted by the Ming *Veritable Records*, the primary account of the happenings at court used as the basis of the

<sup>64</sup> DVTS, 27a.

<sup>65</sup> Whitmore, “Chung-hsing and Cheng-t’ung in Texts of and on Sixteenth Century Vietnam,” 116–135.

official histories. In the *Veritable Records*, the emperor's reaction to the surrender was not recorded as happening until April 1541. By that time, the Mac surrender was an accomplished fact. At that point, the emperor had little choice but to accept it, though he appended his own set of conditions.

According to the *Veritable Records*, after being informed of the surrender, Zhu Houcong emerged from his increasing seclusion to claim victory. In his remarks, Zhu acknowledged the divisive effect on the Ming court of the Dai Viet crisis: "In the past, my intention was to punish Annan, but there were those who quailed, scoffed, and blocked state affairs."<sup>66</sup> The lavish surrender ceremony and conciliatory letter allowed the emperor to treat the venture as a success, despite the interference of officials whose quailing and scoffing had so frustrated him. With a stroke of the writing brush, the emperor executed a bloodless (if largely meaningless) administrative coup, demoting Annan from independent country to a Pacification Commission, something more akin to a native chieftaincy. Mac Dang Dung, he ordered, was no longer a king, but a Pacification Commander; Annan was no longer an independent kingdom of alien Yi people but a historical territory of China, reclaimed through the desire of its own inhabitants to be subjects of the Ming throne. Instead of using words of military conquest, Zhu Houcong drew on a conventional vocabulary of imperial benevolence, casting himself as a savior to the people of Annan. He wrote, "I have examined their letter of surrender and the characterization of the people of the country. Since the situation is understandable, I will pardon them. It has long been the plan of the Vietnamese people to get rid of this label of kingdom, in order to prevent uncontrolled power struggles among rival groups." As for the support the Ming owed their former vassal state the Le, he dismissed it: "the Le line has no heir and Dang Dung is already accepted by the people."<sup>67</sup> In truth, the Ming had no reliable way to gather information about events in Dai Viet. The Ming court decided that the Le envoy Trinh Duy Lieu probably never met Le Ninh and should not be taken as a good source of information. They settled Trinh Duy Lieu's case by giving him some land in Guangdong to settle down on.<sup>68</sup> Accepting Mac Dang Dung's claims that the Le had no viable heirs was easier than verifying it.<sup>69</sup> They were

<sup>66</sup> MSL, 519.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* Geoff Wade characterizes this instance as drawing on the topoi of "the emperor as possessor of virtue": Geoff Wade, "Some Topoi in Southern Border Historiography," in Sabine Dabringhaus and Roderick Ptak, eds., *China and Her Neighbors: Borders, Visions of the Other, Foreign Policy, 10th to 19th Century* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997), 141.

<sup>68</sup> TT, 848. <sup>69</sup> Zhao Tang, 577a.

just, as it turns out, kicking the can down the road. The issue had to be investigated once again, in 1596.

According to the *History of the Ming*, Mac Dang Dung received this notice revoking Dai Viet's status as an independent country in fear and trembling.<sup>70</sup> In actuality, he had died before the addendum of the emperor arrived, of illness, at the age of fifty-nine.<sup>71</sup> He did live to see the welcome result of his surrender – the Mac went from being beset by enemy states on two fronts to gaining the patronage of the Ming.

The Mac surrender reveals the complex workings of the Ming government. In this case, a group of border officials blocked and outmaneuvered the emperor's stated desire to wage war on Dai Viet. At the same time, since their careers and or even lives depended on the whims of the emperor, these officials worked hard to bring about a surrender that would mollify Zhu Houcong. Indeed, the final letter left no room for Zhu and his supporters to find fault, without conducting exhaustive inquiries into the parentage of Le Ninh.

Unraveling the moment of surrender reveals it as a case of true diplomacy. Historical scholarship tends to emphasize the Vietnamese state's need to be pragmatic in the face of Chinese pressure, to compromise or acquiesce to the conditions of the so-called tributary system in order to avoid conflict. But this view overlooks the Chinese state's need to exercise caution in its relations with Dai Viet in order to prevent costly and destructive wars. The surrender was a compromise, which entailed the Ming abandoning its support of the Le and thwarting Zhu Houcong and the Ministry of War's initial desire to wage war. Just as the Mac pragmatically neutralized the Ming state as a foe through their surrender, border officials such as Jiang Yigui, Cai Jing, and Weng Wanda steered the state toward peace rather than waste resources in an ambiguous struggle with a foreign state.

Since the abandonment of Dai Viet as the Ming province of Jiaozhi in 1427, the Ming government had been torn between interventionist and anti-imperialist approaches. By facilitating and accepting the Mac surrender, the court effectively postponed formulating a comprehensive Dai Viet policy. The government of the Ming settled for a compromise, becoming involved in Vietnamese politics but stopping short of dethroning the Mac dynasty. The resolution marked by the surrender was not so much an exercise of China's hegemonic power, but rather acceptance of a more limited role for the Ming in the region. Zhu

<sup>70</sup> MS, *juan* 321, 8336.

<sup>71</sup> In the eighth month of 1541. TT, 847. According to the YJS, he died of a miasmatic illness, probably a febrile disease such as malaria: 231.

Houcong, despite his triumphant claims of victory, comes across as an autocrat frustrated in his attempts to wage a war that he viewed as justified and necessary. Despite going through a tedious if contrived surrender, Mac Dang Dung – unlike his fellow rulers Le Ninh and Zhu Houcong – achieved his goals.



### Part III

## The return of the Le dynasty

Vietnam has been a problem not only for Chinese emperors, but also for modern historians. Vietnam's difficult twentieth century only served to confirm a David-and-Goliath narrative, as tiny Vietnam successively expelled the larger and richer countries of France, the United States of America, and the People's Republic of China. A generation of Western scholars was inspired to take up the study of Vietnamese history in order to understand Vietnam's astonishing resilience. What they uncovered confirmed the centrality of Vietnamese independence, unity, and hatred of foreign oppression. Western scholars of Vietnam, picking up on a strong tradition within Vietnamese historiography, came to see resistance to foreign aggression as the defining characteristic of Vietnamese history.<sup>1</sup> A central problematic of Sino-Viet relations has been resolving the seeming paradox of Vietnamese resistance to Chinese aggression and acceptance of Chinese influence. Whether implicitly or explicitly, historians of Sino-Viet relations have had to reconcile Vietnamese resistance to Chinese political control with acceptance of Chinese cultural influence.

This first generation of postwar scholars turned away from earlier work that posited Vietnam as "the smaller dragon" – a mere appendage of China and similar to it in every important way.<sup>2</sup> These newer works on Vietnamese history and political institutions were mindful of Sino-

<sup>1</sup> This is an extremely common theme in histories of the Vietnam War. See, for example, Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 10; and George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975, fourth edition* (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 4. For a historiography of postcolonial Vietnam, see Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*. Pelley brings up the themes of Vietnamese resistance, opposition, and agency on pages 8, 10–11, and 13, and points out that postcolonial scholars often meant them to be prescriptive. She also shows the early roots of this historiographical tradition: 142.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1958). Woodside (see Note 3) explicitly responds to Vietnamese historians writing in this mode: 8. Patricia Pelley writes that postcolonial historians in Vietnam turned away from this kind of colonial history, extricating Vietnamese history from both models of Chinese or French influence: Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, 7.

Vietnamese elements while pointing out Vietnamese or Southeast Asian innovation and adaptation. The research of Alexander Woodside, Keith Taylor, and John K. Whitmore showed how the Vietnamese state initially came into being under Chinese rule, and how later Vietnamese governments struggled to domesticate classical Sinic institutions without being dominated by them. They situated Vietnam at a crossroads of East Asia and Southeast Asia, where it could draw from multiple traditions.<sup>3</sup> Care was taken to distinguish between elite practice and local practices, with the understanding that the upper strata of Vietnamese society in some ways may have had more in common with Chinese elites than with their less educated countrymen.<sup>4</sup>

Since these seminal works in Vietnamese history were published, historians have turned to the task of challenging nationalist constructions of Vietnamese history. The question of Chinese influence has largely been relegated to a peripheral concern. A strong trend has been to turn away from China and the North and toward the “new ways of being Vietnamese” made possible through southward expansion, as well as through Vietnamese interactions with a wider world.<sup>5</sup>

Another rich area of research is the deep north/south division that characterized Dai Viet from the end of Ming colonization in 1427 until the establishment of the Tay Son dynasty in 1778. Keith Taylor has shown that the military elite of Thanh Hoa were pitted against the scholar-elite families of the Red River plain throughout the sixteenth century.<sup>6</sup> John K. Whitmore defines this split as one between the northern coast with its strong connections to overseas Chinese communities and

<sup>3</sup> Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, 4. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*. John K. Whitmore, “The Development of Le Government in Fifteenth Century Vietnam.” These same scholars have continued to shape the direction of the field of precolonial Vietnamese history. To cite just two examples, Keith Taylor and John Whitmore’s 1995 edited volume *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts* brings to the fore the variety and richness of the Vietnamese past through essays on fifteen disparate textual sources. Woodside’s 2006 volume *Lost Modernities* uses the well-functioning, rational, and relatively transparent bureaucratic governments of pre-twentieth-century Vietnam, China, and Korea to challenge the notion that “modernity” began in the West and was only later, painfully, adopted in Asia. Woodside, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea and the Hazards of World History*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998), 12. See also Keith W. Taylor, “Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Nov. 1998): 949–978; Anthony Reid and Nhung Tuyet Tran, eds., *Viet Nam: Borderless Histories* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Charles Wheeler, “Re-Thinking the Sea in Vietnamese History: Littoral Society in the Integration of Thuận-Quảng, Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Feb. 2006), 123–153.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, “Surface Orientations,” 957–958; Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 256.

the montane regime of Thanh Hoa.<sup>7</sup> The Mac family was rooted in the coastal Sino-Viet milieu while the Le originated in the uplands of Thanh Hoa. It is precisely these heated battles that forged the modern nation of Vietnam, which incorporates a territory much larger and more diverse than did premodern Dai Viet. And yet these battles, and the subsequent relocation of Vietnamese speakers to far corners of the map, are often glossed over in accounts that wish to highlight Vietnamese national unity.

Although the Mac have recently been rehabilitated in Vietnam and given more attention as a legitimate Vietnamese dynasty,<sup>8</sup> relatively little attention has been paid to the violent conflict that defined the second half of the sixteenth century. Regional divisions played out on the battlefield, as Vietnamese armies deployed deadlier weapons and caused massive casualties. The Seventy Years War between the Mac dynasty and the Le-sponsored Trinh lords is the subject of Chapter 6.

Once the Le ousted the Mac from Dong Kinh in 1592, they attempted to gain recognition from the Ming government. To do so, they sent one of their finest Confucian scholars, Phung Khac Khoan, to Beijing. Phung Khac Khoan's mission, and the way it was retold in Dai Viet, is the subject of Chapter 7. Phung Khac Khoan's southern self-representation reiterated the Southern Country's long-standing connections with the Northern Country. It shows how an elite representative of the Dai Viet state positioned himself in relation to classical culture, the Ming state, and his own state, the Le dynasty. His story complicates the simple story of Chinese influence by revealing the clash between Vietnamese self-representation and Chinese views of Vietnam. Later Vietnamese accounts of his embassy show a movement toward a more assertive national identity in the eighteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> Whitmore, "The Fate of the Ngô".

<sup>8</sup> See especially Đặng Lợi Ngô et al., *Mac Đăng Dung và Vương Triều Mạc*.



## 6 Ruler and minister

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### Internal crisis

The Mac surrender did not bring peace to Dai Viet. The country existed in a state of regional conflict, pitting the Le dynasty against the Mac. The Le emperors, located in the western capital of Tay Kinh in Thanh Hoa, played only a nominal role in this struggle. True power rested with the powerful Trinh family. The Trinh lord (Chua Trinh) served as the head of the military and the de facto head of government in the Le realm, passing the position to his eldest son. Although the Mac dynasty retained the traditional capital of Dong Kinh and commanded a larger population, the two sides were locked in stalemate for decades. This was an unsettling time for Vietnamese literati, for whom loyalty to the ruler was paramount. *The Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet* records dozens of high-ranking civil and military officials switching allegiances from one side to the other, sometimes more than once. The battles between the two sides became increasingly deadly over the second half of the sixteenth century, exacting a terrible toll on the devastated countryside.

There were problems within each realm as well. The emperor Mac Phuc Hai died in 1546. Both his father Mac Dang Doanh and his grandfather Mac Dang Dung predeceased him, so the senior emperor system was not in place. He passed the throne on to his infant son Mac Phuc Nguyen, but Mac Dang Dung's second son, Mac Chinh Trung, contested the succession. The succession dispute lasted five years and caused fighting to spill over the border into Ming territory. The problem was so serious that the Ming government again threatened raising troops to pacify the Mac realm.<sup>1</sup>

A nineteenth-century Vietnamese text, *The Veritable Records of Cao Bang* (*Cao Bang thuc luc*), gives a sense of the divided loyalties of that time and the imperative to avoid attracting the attention of the Ming. It describes several local heroes who resisted the Mac and became powerful spirits. One such spirit, of a chieftain named Phu Thiet who had opposed

<sup>1</sup> TT, 850; YJS, 233; SZL, 233; MSL, 523.

the Mac, protected the army of the Le when it pressed Mac troops in Cao Bang in 1604. “The Le emperor ordered his army to attack the Mac. Mr. Mac scurried off. While the imperial army was posted in Cao Bang, Phu Thiet’s spirit revealed itself and protected the army. Everyone could see its brilliance . . .”<sup>2</sup>

Another story in the same volume tells of a Mr. Tran who hid himself in reclusion rather than serve the Mac. When he heard that the Le army was approaching, he went to them and volunteered to be in the vanguard. “They pursued the Mac to the border pass, arrested several members of their clique, and then tracked the bandit leaders. However, the cornered bandits turned around and counterattacked. Mr. Tran died in battle.”<sup>3</sup> This account implies that the border with the Ming was a true line that the Mac could not go past; at some point they had to stand and fight.

Both the Mac and the Le mobilized large armies equipped with old technology (such as war elephants) alongside new and more effective gunpowder weapons. New terms for weapons begin to enter the *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet* from the 1550s. For example the Mac army was bombarded with the “sounds of guns” and the “sound of artillery” when they wandered into a Le ambush. The Le in turn captured a countless number of weapons from the defeated troops. In a later battle, the Mac encountered continuous fire from cannons.<sup>4</sup> The *Complete Chronicles* also describes the brightness caused by the firing of these new weapons; in one battle, artillery fire was said to have lit up the sky for a distance of ten *li*.<sup>5</sup> In a 1577 battle, a Le general who had earlier defected to the Mac was killed in his saddle by a shot fired from a blunderbuss (*chong*).<sup>6</sup> The following year, a line of Mac troops was mowed down and forced to retreat by a round of fire from blunderbusses.<sup>7</sup>

Cracks were beginning to appear within the Le realm as well. In 1558, Trinh Kiem appointed his brother-in-law Nguyen Hoang as the governor of Thuan Hoa. Nguyen Hoang was the second son of Nguyen Kim, the Le general the Mac accused of being the actual father of the emperor Le Ninh. Thuan Hoa is located in present-day central Vietnam, but at that time it was the southernmost frontier of the Le realm. By 1570, Nguyen Hoang had charge over all of Quang Nam, even deeper to the South. Although he continued to recognize the Le emperors, the South came increasingly under the control of the Nguyen family. This region was

<sup>2</sup> *Cao Bằng Thực Lục*, 34–35.   <sup>3</sup> *Cao Bằng Thực Lục*, 37.   <sup>4</sup> TT, 853–854.

<sup>5</sup> TT, 864.   <sup>6</sup> This term could perhaps be translated as trebuchet.

<sup>7</sup> TT, 877–878. Another account of this time period is replete with descriptions of artillery lighting up the night like day, and of weapons such as the fire-lance (*huotong* 火筒): Bàng Trung Nguyên, *Việt Nam khai quốc chí truyện* (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Shuju, 1987). Hereafter cited as VNKQ.

called Dang Trong in Vietnamese – “the inner region.” When Europeans began arriving on Vietnamese shores in the eighteenth century, they recognized two Vietnams: Nguyen-ruled Cochinchina in the South, and Trinh/Le-ruled Tonkin (the Western transliteration of Dong Kinh) in the North. Later, the Nguyen family would unite and rule both realms, under the Gia Long emperor Nguyen Phuc Anh.<sup>8</sup> During the sixteenth century, however, the strained alliance between the Nguyen and Trinh families held.

Fighting increased in the 1570s, in part due to instability in the Le realm. When the first Trinh lord Trinh Kiem died in 1570, he passed the position on to his eldest son, Trinh Coi. However, his second son Trinh Tung “was smarter than most” and wanted the position for himself. Fighting between the brothers prompted people to flee northward to join the Mac. Taking advantage of unrest in Tay Kinh, a massive Mac army attacked Thanh Hoa. Trinh Coi surrendered to the Mac, and went to the Mac court with his wife, family, and a thousand followers.<sup>9</sup> Trinh Tung was left in charge of the southern realm of Dai Viet.

By 1572, the countryside in the south had been ravaged. The fighting displaced people from the land, and famine soon followed. Nghe An was depopulated. In the midst of this devastation, the Le emperor fled Tay Kinh with his four eldest sons to escape the growing influence of Trinh Tung. Rather than operate without the cover of a Le ruler, Trinh Tung sought out the emperor’s fifth son, the six-year-old Le Duy Dam, and enthroned him.<sup>10</sup> A *Great Pronouncement* was issued in his name. The preamble claimed the Mandate of Heaven and continued, “I rely on Trinh Tung and the civil and military officials to work together in assisting me, to keep the altars of the gods of earth and grain at peace.” The document also promulgated six items that reveal the Le dynasty’s desperate need for population:

1. Those people that experienced the military but lack perseverance will be forgiven their labor service.
2. Poor people with uncertain residences are permitted to return to their original places of registration, and are to be forgiven for doing work for the bandits [the Mac].
3. All those who committed crimes of banditry, who fled prison and their crimes, will be forgiven if they come forward to confess.

<sup>8</sup> TT, 862. See Li Tana, Nguyễn Cochinchina; Taylor, “Surface Orientations,” 958–964; Dror and Taylor, eds., *Views of Seventeenth Century Vietnam*, 91–92; Alistair Lamb, *The Mandarin Road to Old Hue: Narratives of Anglo-Vietnamese Diplomacy from the 17th Century to the eve of the French Conquest*, (Hamden CT: Archon Books, 1970).

<sup>9</sup> TT, 862–864. <sup>10</sup> TT, 869.

4. All those yamen in the interior should release prisoners who did not commit serious crimes.
5. Those civil and military officials who have performed well should be promoted one rank.
6. Those children and grandchildren of officials who have been held in a low-ranking position for a long time are to be given a salary.<sup>11</sup>

Manpower was needed for the army and the fields. Officials needed to be rewarded and retained. Trinh Tung hoped to lure Le subjects back to the Le realm by promising leniency. In the meantime, the former Le emperor and his four sons were soon found and brought back to Tay Kinh. They were all killed or forced to commit suicide. Le Duy Dam, though only a child, was made vividly aware of the consequences of opposing Trinh Tung.

The Le were able to gradually gain the upper hand after the Mac dynasty general Mac Kinh Dien died in 1580. Mac Kinh Dien was the third son of Mac Dang Doanh (and therefore Mac Phuc Nguyen's uncle). He had been a prominent force in the Mac government since the succession crisis of 1546, and with his death the Mac started to lose their military advantage. Even the Le-authored *Complete Chronicles* describes him positively: "He was honest and kind-hearted, brave and wise. He was intelligent, shrewd, and sensible. He faced hardship and danger, always hardworking and loyal."<sup>12</sup> Without Mac Kinh Dien at the helm, more authority fell to the emperor Mac Mau Hop. Mac Mau Hop came to the throne as a child when his father Mac Phuc Nguyen died in 1561. Although he was emperor for thirty years, Mac Mau Hop was a youth through the first half of his reign, and a poor leader as an adult. He was either sickly or unfortunate: he was once struck by lightning in the palace, and at another time suffered temporary blindness.<sup>13</sup>

As the Le went on the offensive, the Mac scrambled to repair and fortify the walls of Dong Kinh in the 1580s. These last-ditch attempts did not prevent Trinh Tung from taking the city, in the winter of 1591–1592. As he advanced on the city, Trinh Tung said to his troops, "We will take advantage of the time before the thunder reaches their ears and pluck them up like seedlings." His men set up at the northwest bridge by Dong Kinh and fired seven successive rounds of cannon shots. Houses burned, the flames reached the skies, and the city panicked. A terrified Mac Mau Hop fled the city. That night the city residents, old and young, male and female, vied with one another to cross the river to safety. Many thousands drowned. By dawn, the city had fallen.<sup>14</sup> Le troops burned down the

<sup>11</sup> TT, 873. <sup>12</sup> TT, 846. His military expeditions are listed in the DVTS, 88a–92a.

<sup>13</sup> TT, 877; 879. <sup>14</sup> TT, 889.

palace and flattened the earthen ramparts protecting the city. Later, Le Duy Dam was brought to Dong Kinh to take up residence in the traditional capital of Dai Viet. The Le had won an important symbol of their restoration.<sup>15</sup>

Mac Mau Hop fled the pursuing troops on foot and hid in a temple. Local villagers told the Le troops where to find him. A later account fleshes out the circumstances of his capture. Although this account is likely embellished, it can tell us how the story of Mac Mau Hop's ignominious end circulated in folklore. Mac Mau Hop and some of his followers shaved their heads and donned Buddhist robes, hoping to escape notice. Le troops, following the villagers' tip, went to the temple and detained Mac Mau Hop for questioning, asking him first, "Where are you from?"

Mac Mau Hop lied and said, "This lowly monk is from Thach Ha county in Nghe An. I have always loved the Buddhist way. I shaved my head and became a monk, traveled all over the place, lived simply, and gave up the world. I am not interested in the red dust [of the earthly world]. Why are you detaining me?" The soldiers saw through this answer. When Mac Mau Hop saw that he could not escape, he said, "I am Mac Mau Hop, I used to be considered the Son of Heaven. Even though it has come to this, you lowly soldiers have no right to insult me this way."<sup>16</sup>

The soldiers then rushed off to report to their superiors. A cage with wheels was constructed to convey Mac Mau Hop to Dong Kinh for punishment. His subsequent conversation with Trinh Tung displays the pathos of a man who lived his life as an emperor and is now being treated as a rebellious minister.

Mac Mau Hop refused to kneel. Trinh Tung reproved him sternly, "You should follow the way of a minister, but you plotted to be emperor. Your guilt is as deep as the ocean. It is heaven's retribution that you were captured. How can you defend yourself, much less refuse to kneel?"

Cornered with no hope of escape, Mac Mau Hop was still able to appeal to reason. He invoked the succession of both northern and southern dynasties since prehistory without distinguishing between the two:

Mac Mau Hop raised his voice and said, "Your words are wrong! Do you not know that the Xia, Shang, Zhou, Han, Tang, and Song succeeded one another in turn? The Le undertook [the mandate] when the Tran came to an end, the Mac continued when the Le declined – this is the constant principle of rising and falling. Who secretly plotted? Who is the ruler? Who is the minister?" When he finished speaking, he looked to the sky and laughed heartily.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The Mac were able to briefly retake the city several years later. <sup>16</sup> VNKQ, 30.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Mac Mau Hop returned to the perennial problem of the sparrow and the bamboo and transgression of proper hierarchies. For Mac, like his many supporters in the Red River Delta, the Le dynasty had come to a definitive end in 1527. Trinh Tung was the rebellious minister, using an illegitimate puppet emperor to mask his own total control of the government. In light of the situation, Trinh Tung could not respond with reasoned argument:

Trinh Tung furiously said, “You crazy fool. You do not deserve even the kindness given to animals, and you are still flapping your lips and wagging your tongue.”

As a warning to others, Mac Mau Hop was sentenced to the lingering death, also known as death by a thousand cuts. He cursed all the way to the execution grounds. The text continues:

At that time, all the Mac followers in his clan, male and female, young and old, were exterminated. The corpses piled up like a mountain and the blood flowed like a stream. That was the end of the Mac family.<sup>18</sup>

*The Complete Chronicles* records an even more gruesome end to Mac Mau Hop after his capture in the temple. He was dragged by elephants, kept alive for three days, and finally beheaded. His severed head was publically displayed for three days. Since the eyes of the severed head were still open, they had to be pinned shut to prevent him from frightening passersby.<sup>19</sup>

A poem that circulated at this time gives a hint of the turbulence of the times, and the Mac’s rapid fall from power:

The Mac army rose like a rushing torrent,  
 The forests and hills were full of the sound of war drums.  
 Trinh Tung’s might drove out the northern pretenders,  
 Mac Mau Hop shed his armor and fled Dong Kinh.  
 At night by the Red River<sup>20</sup> a solitary ape weeps,  
 In the deep night in An Thach, a single goose calls.  
 Perhaps the rabbit and the fox exaggerate their leaping,  
 Once they hear the tiger call their hearts are filled with fear.<sup>21</sup>

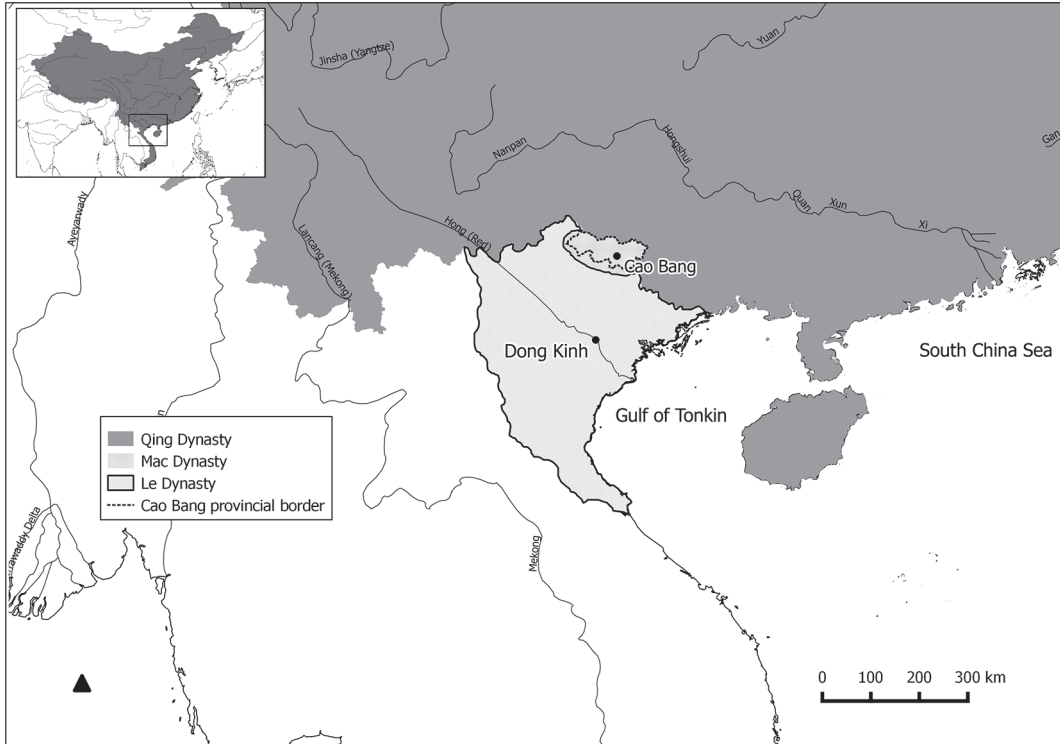
After five generations in power, the Mac seemed like nothing more than scared rabbits in the face of the Le onslaught.

Although 1592 is often given as the date of the fall of the Mac and the consolidation of the restoration of the Le, it was not the end of the Mac family. Fighting continued after the fall of Dong Kinh and the death of Mac Mau Hop. The Mac still commanded loyalty in the east of the Red

<sup>18</sup> VNKQ, 30–31.

<sup>19</sup> TT, 874. In keeping with the trope of the dissipated last emperor of a dynastic house, the TT records that “every day Mac Mau Hop lazed about, indulging in alcohol and sex,” even lusting after the wife of one of his advisers. TT, 892; DVTs, 91a.

<sup>20</sup> The river Nhi (珥河). This is an alternate name for the Red River. <sup>21</sup> VNKQ, 27.



Map 3 The Cao Bang Mac.

River Delta. Nguyen Hoang came up from the south to assist the Le in their fight against the Mac, bringing with him “powerful cannons.”<sup>22</sup> These cannons are said to have been procured from Portuguese shipwrecks, and certainly gave Dang Trong a military advantage over the north.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the early-seventeenth-century Jesuit Christoforo Borri observed that Nguyen Hoang “got together a great many pieces of cannon, of the wrecks of several *Portuguese* and *Dutch* ships, cast away upon those rocks, which being taken up by the country people, there are above sixty of the biggest, at this time, to be seen in the king’s palace.” Borri was impressed by the skill of the southern gunners, noting: “The *Cochin-Chineses* are now become so expert in managing artillery, that they perform it better than the *Europeans*, practicing continually to shoot at a mark, with such success, that being proud of their skill, as soon as any *European* ship arrives in their ports, the king’s gunners challenge ours, who being sensible that they cannot stand in competition with them, as near as they can, avoid this trial of skill, being convinced by experience, that they will hit any thing as exactly with a cannon, as another shall do with a firelock; which they are also very expert at, often drawing out into the field to exercise.” Perhaps due in part to the imbalance in firepower, the Mac were gradually pushed farther and farther north, until they settled in Cao Bang province, backed against the Ming border. Others fled south to the Mekong Delta, well beyond the reach of the Le state.<sup>24</sup> Once the Le under Trinh Tung had a modicum of control over the capital region, they turned their attention north, to China.

### A golden man

The events of 1597 set the stage for Phung Khac Khoan’s journey to Beijing. That year, half a century after Mac Dang Dung’s infamous surrender, the restored Le staged a similar event at the border. Chinese and Vietnamese annals unsurprisingly present the event in differing ways. Ming accounts focus on the inherently dishonest and contentious nature of the Vietnamese people. Vietnamese accounts accentuate the greed of their Chinese counterparts. Both accounts agree though on the necessity of negotiation.

<sup>22</sup> TT, 899.

<sup>23</sup> Dror and Taylor, eds., *Views of Seventeenth Century Vietnam*, 127; all italics in original.

<sup>24</sup> For more on the Cao Bang Mac, see Niu Junkai *Wang shi hou yu yu pan luan zhe: Yuenan Mo shi jia zu yu Zhongguo guan xi yanjiu*. Mac supporters also fled south, to what is now southern Vietnam. See Zottoli, “Reconceptualizing Southern Vietnamese History from the 15th to 18th Centuries”.

A cursory exploration gives the impression that following the fall of Dong Kinh in 1592, the Mac retreated to Cao Bang and ceased to be a threat to Le power. This is not the case. Bitter fighting continued, and the country remained deeply divided. As late as 1596, the Le were barely holding on to power in the north of Dai Viet. Receiving recognition from and reestablishing diplomatic relations with the Ming state were a high priority under such conditions. The Le and Mac courts competed with one another to persuade Ming officials of their version of events. The Ming government was thus again cast in the unwanted role of mediator between the feuding Le and Mac courts. Early in 1596, much to the anger of the Le camp, ministers of the Mac tattled to the Ming: "The Le troops are actually controlled by the Trinh family. They attacked and killed ambassadors from the Superior Country [China] and the sons and grandsons of the Mac family . . ." As a result, a string of Ming ambassadors were sent south to investigate.<sup>25</sup>

According to the Vietnamese annals, within a few weeks, several high-ranking Le officials, including the left vice director of the Ministry of Works, Phung Khac Khoan, proceeded to the border to attempt to clarify matters for the Ming court. They brought with them one hundred *jin* of gold and one thousand *liang* of silver to present to the Ming. Unsatisfied, Chen Dunlin, a Ming censor of the Guangxi circuit, insisted that the Le emperor Le Duy Dam come to the border in person. Le Duy Dam arrived at the Zhennan border pass between Lang Son and Pingxiang four days later, accompanied by "more than ten thousand officers, soldiers, and war elephants." According to the Vietnamese annals, the Ming dragged out the time and insisted that the tribute offerings be increased to include a gold statue of a man. They also requested the return of a gold seal that had previously been given to the Le. After waiting around for a month while the Ming stalled, Le Duy Dam returned to the capital.<sup>26</sup>

The Ming annals tell a different story. According to the *Veritable Records of the Ming*, while at the border, Le Duy Dam, though initially reluctant, bound himself, awaited instructions, and presented a golden man to the Ming. He reported that the gold seal had been lost and could not be returned. He spent several days at the border negotiating with the Ming. Then he fled with the statue in the middle of the night, abruptly ending talks with the Ming. According to subsequent Ming investigations, he was answering the summons of Trinh Tung, who feared the young Le emperor was using negotiations with the Ming to increase his own power in order to rid himself of Trinh supervision.<sup>27</sup> For the Ming

<sup>25</sup> TT, 907. <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>27</sup> Shenzong Ming Shilu, *juan* 298, *Scripta Sinica*.

officials, this only confirmed the Mac's earlier report that Trinh Tung held real power in the Le realm.

Cross-border negotiations at a hiatus, the two sides worked through their issues separately. In China, a Ming border official recommended sending troops to the border as a show of force.<sup>28</sup> In Dong Kinh, craftsmen created two statues of gold and silver, weighing ten catties each. They also fashioned two sets of silver vases and five silver incense burners to present as tribute.<sup>29</sup> Three months later, Le officials were dispatched to the border with the two statues. According to the *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet*, the Ming native chieftaincy leaders had received generous bribes from the Mac and therefore refused to welcome them.<sup>30</sup> Another mission sent three months later turned back when it encountered rebels.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, after more than fourteen months of planning and miscommunication, a formal ceremony was held late in 1597. Le Duy Dam and a retinue of high officials, soldiers, and war elephants escorted the Ming envoy Wang Jianli to the Nanjiao border pass in Lang Son. Trinh Tung, the de facto ruler of Dai Viet, remained safely ensconced in the capital. On the tenth day of the fourth month, in a scene "comparable to the earlier Mac Dang Dung affair"<sup>32</sup> – the 1540 surrender – Le Duy Dam crossed the border, met with a large delegation of Ming border officials, and conducted a ceremony to mark the initiation of friendly relations.

The goal of the presentation of this event in the *History of the Ming* is to dismiss Le Duy Dam as merely the latest iteration of a Vietnamese type: a dishonest ruler of questionable legitimacy worth recognizing only in order to avoid further hassle. Like Mac Dang Dung, Le Duy Dam had to satisfactorily explain and justify his position of authority and persuade Ming representatives to accept and legitimate him. In order to satisfy the concerns of the Ming government, interpreters asked Le Duy Dam six questions, recorded in *The History of the Ming*. First, they asked about the killing of Mac Mau Hop. Le Duy Dam assured his questioners that action was urgent and that "there was no time to ask for your permission" before executing him. Next he assured them that he really was a descendent of the ruler Le Y, who had once been recognized by the Ming government. The Ming representatives then asked him, through the interpreters, whether he was truly in control of the country and not Trinh Tung. Le Duy Dam replied, "[Trinh Tung's] family has long served the Le. He is not a rebellious minister." If that was the case, his interlocutors asked, why did you flee the border during the night during previous negotiations with Ming officials, presumably on the orders of Trinh Tung? Le Duy

<sup>28</sup> Shenzong Ming Shilu, *juan* 301, *Scripta Sinica*; MS, *juan* 322. <sup>29</sup> TT, 908

<sup>30</sup> TT, 909. <sup>31</sup> TT, 910. <sup>32</sup> ANZY, 23.

Dam replied that he did not flee, though he conceded that it may have seemed like it. Finally, he eased their minds about the missing gold seal and the accusation that he had improperly copied it.<sup>33</sup>

Although the representatives of the Ming were satisfied by his answers, they were still not willing to recognize the Le instead of the Mac. They said that the Le could have their perch in the south, so long as the Mac be allowed to control Cao Bang. Le Duy Dam agreed. Just as in 1540, negotiations complete, the two sides rehearsed the ceremony. Le Duy Dam requested to follow the more informal ritual of a host and guest. According to the *History of the Ming*, border officials resented his stubbornness and insisted on the full ceremony. Although it is not explicitly noted in the *History of the Ming*, it is likely that some of this stubbornness may have related to his insistence on being recognized as king, rather than as Pacification Commander. This request was denied. Le Duy Dam bowed four times, completed the ceremony, and returned home.

The similarity to the Mac surrender of 1540 was not lost on Chinese observers: "Annan was reestablished. There was an imperial order to accept Duy Dam as Pacification Commander, and to confer a calendar upon him and accept tribute, as had been done with Mac Dang Dung in the past. Prior to this, Le Loi and Mac Dang Dung had presented gold statues to substitute for themselves. They both had bound their heads." Likewise, Le Duy Dam presented a golden statue inscribed with the words, "The descendent of the Le family of Annan Le Duy Dam cannot prostrate himself before the Heavenly Gate. He respectfully presents this golden statue to substitute for himself. He regrets his crimes and begs your favor."<sup>34</sup>

For Ming officials, there was little difference between Le Loi, Mac Dang Dung, and Le Duy Dam. All had to be dealt with, but none were to be trusted. Requiring their symbolic surrender assured the Ming state that internal conflicts in Dai Viet could be contained and not spill over the border. Recognizing both the Le and the Mac, and therefore a divided Dai Viet, was advantageous to the Ming, because it ensured a weaker state with less ability to pull native chieftaincies of the borderlands out of the Ming orbit or to seriously threaten border territories. Moreover, according to the *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet*, the Ming realized a tidy sum in gold and silver, from both the Le and the Mac. Some of this wealth would have gone to line the pockets of Ming border officials.

In contrast, the Le-authored *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet* records this event as a celebration rather than as a humiliation. It leaves out the details

<sup>33</sup> MS, *juan* 321.    <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

of the interrogation, golden statue, and wrangling over the ceremony, simply noting, "Each side happily congratulated the other. From this time on the two countries south and north were again in communication."<sup>35</sup>

Why does *The Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet* present this event so differently from the Mac surrender fifty-seven years previously? After all, in both cases, this formal ceremony marked the renewal of friendly relations between the two states and Ming legitimation and acceptance of a southern state. Both were also highly ceremonial occasions in which the Vietnamese emperor bowed before edicts representing the Ming emperor, and possibly bound himself.

The most important reason for the discrepancy in the recounting of the two ceremonies, that of 1540 and that of 1597, is that the second exchange entailed no loss of land, change in name, or captive sons. Also significant is the Le dominance of historical writing. From the Le perspective, Mac Dang Dung was a usurper, and thus all of his actions were illegitimate by definition. In contrast, Le Duy Dam was part of the legitimate lineage of Le emperors, and his actions could not be incorrect. This is not to say that the Le ceremony should be remembered as a humiliating affair. Rather, the significance of the Mac surrender has been overstated by Le historians seeking to discredit the Mac, an emphasis that has been perpetuated in historical writing up to the present. The disproportional focus on the Mac ceremony has obscured the degree to which these ceremonies were a regular part of initiating diplomatic relations with the Ming empire.

<sup>35</sup> TT, 909.

## 7 The sparrow and the bamboo

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In 1597, the head of the resurgent Le court, Trinh Tung, deployed the elderly literatus Phung Khac Khoan (1528–1613) to negotiate a change of name and status for his country with the Ming court. Phung Khac Khoan's mission was to travel to Beijing in order to confirm Ming recognition of the Le state. He hoped also to restore the former titles of “country” and “king” to Dai Viet in place of the hated relic of the Mac surrender, “Pacification Commission” ruled by a “Pacification Commander.” This recognition and change of name would elevate the Le dynasty over the Cao Bang Mac and improve Le standing within Dai Viet. Although his mission was not successful in achieving the name change, Phung Khac Khoan made a positive impression in Beijing, engaging in “brush talks” with the Korean envoy Yi Sugwang and producing a book of poems.

Phung Khac Khoan's poetry and his literary friendship with Yi Sugwang were a triumph of southern self-fashioning. They were also a bid for inclusion in the larger community of scholars who revered classical culture. Poetry served as the language of political power, used to pry open the doors of the Ming court. Although the embassy is not well represented in Chinese sources, Yi Sugwang's diary, the poems of Phung Khac Khoan and his friends, and the Vietnamese annals afford a glimpse of the social lives of envoys in Beijing. The literary friendship of these two men from distant countries shows the extent and significance of classical culture beyond China's borders. That their friendship and literary prowess remains unremarked in the Chinese record suggests that cross-border flows of ideas may have engendered anxiety within China. These anxieties are borne out in the semi-imaginary world of an eighteenth-century text, *Stories about the Achievements of the Southern Court*, which allows us to trace changing Vietnamese views of history and its relationship with China by examining the evolution of Phung Khac Khoan's image over the centuries.

### Phung Khac Khoan's embassy to Beijing

After the 1597 friendship ceremony between the Le emperor and Ming border officials, “the left vice director of the Ministry of Works Phung Khac Khoan was appointed as the main envoy . . . to go to the Ming to present the annual tribute and to request enfeoffment.”<sup>1</sup> He was a good choice. Phung Khac Khoan was a student of Nguyen Binh Khiem, the foremost scholar of sixteenth-century Dai Viet. A staunch Le loyalist, Phung Khac Khoan refused to take the civil service examination until he could do so under Le auspices. The Le only resumed holding examinations in 1580, in Thanh Hoa. Phung Khac Khoan, at that time fifty-three years old, finally had the opportunity to sit the examination. He came in second.<sup>2</sup> Of proven erudition and loyalty, Phung Khac Khoan was selected for the important and sensitive task of persuading the Ming Wanli emperor to restore Dai Viet's former status as a country under the rule of a king. Phung Khac Khoan and his peers hated Mac Dang Dung for accepting the demotion to Pacification Commission, and rejected it as the title of the Le state. The title put Le Dai Viet on a footing similar to that of the native chieftaincies of the borderlands. In other words, it indicated that Dai Viet was marginal to the world of classical learning and a state not developed to the level of the Ming. Phung Khac Khoan's task was therefore both political negotiation and cultural diplomacy.

Once in Beijing, Phung Khac Khoan was housed in the Jade River Hostel (*Yuhe guan*), built specially for foreign visitors.<sup>3</sup> Likely it was there that he met Korean envoys from Choson, notably Yi Sugwang (1563–1628), the Korean general, literatus, and envoy most famous today for first writing about Catholicism in Korea, after reading the Jesuit Matteo Ricci's *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tianzhu shiyi*).<sup>4</sup> Yi Sugwang's curiosity about Christianity and Western science is well known, but he showed just as much engaged interest in Dai Viet. The two scholars used their shared knowledge of literary Sinitic to engage in “brush talks” and poetry exchanges despite their lack of a common spoken language.<sup>5</sup>

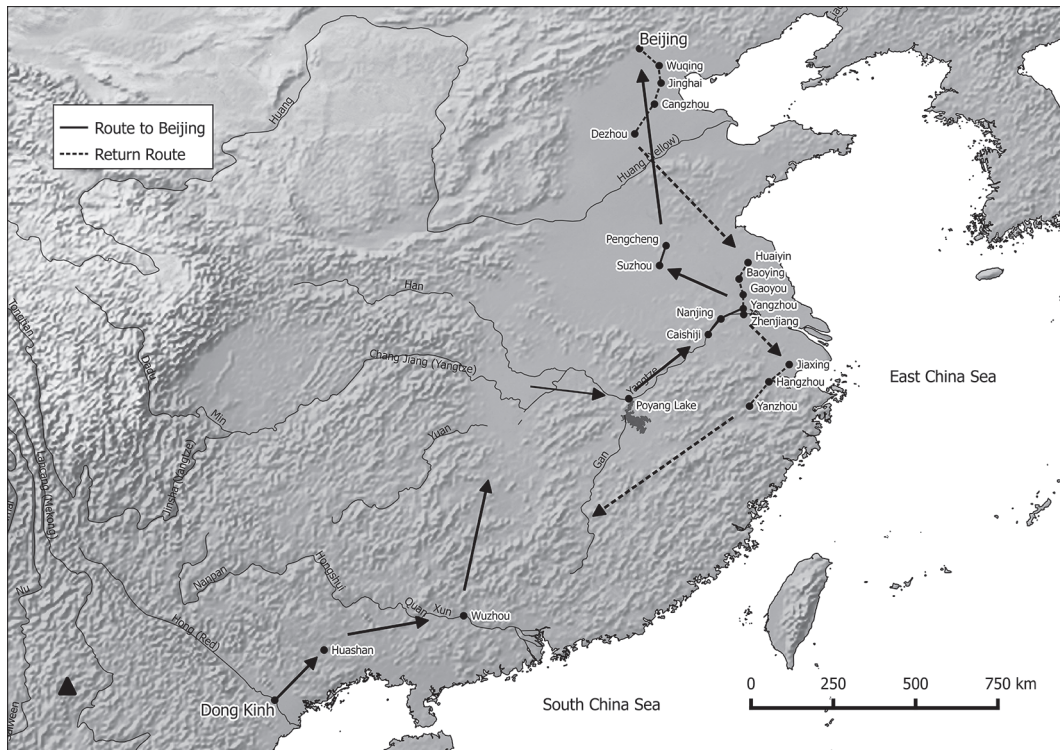
<sup>1</sup> TT, 909.

<sup>2</sup> Văn Giáp Trần et al., *Lược Truyện Các Tác Việt Nam, Volume 1* (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội), 262; *Yuenan Hanwen Yanxing Wenxian Jicheng, Volume 1* (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2010), 57; Đặng Việt Thủy, ed., *101 Chuyện Xưa-Tích Cũ: Việt Nam – Trung Quốc* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Quân đội Dân, 2005), 220.

<sup>3</sup> Also called the *Huitong guan* (會同館).

<sup>4</sup> James Huntley Grayson, *Early Buddhism and Christianity in Korea* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 65.

<sup>5</sup> A Vietnamese scholar who performed well would be a success at home. For example, Mac Dinh Chi's success was well known even in the nineteenth century. Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, 115.



Map 4 Phung Khac Khoan's route. It took the seventy-year-old Phung Khac Khoan four months to travel from the border to Beijing in 1597. After spending roughly two months at the Ming court, he departed. He spent ten months sightseeing in China before returning to Dai Viet.

Yi Sugwang plied Phung Khac Khoan with questions and recorded the exchanges in his works, gathered under the name *Chibong chip* (“The Collected Works of Chibong [Yi Sugwang]”). Parts of the brush talks are also contained in several manuscripts in the collection of the Institute of Han-Nom Studies in Hanoi.<sup>6</sup> These writings offer a rare glimpse of the conversations and friendships that occurred during the envoys’ moments of leisure.

Yi Sugwang asked Phung Khac Khoan a series of questions about the political situation in Dai Viet, revealing his own background knowledge about the Mac-Le conflict. Yi asked Phung, “What is the governing system and what are the customs of your state?” Phung Khac Khoan replied, “We study the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, *The Book of Poetry*, *The Book of Documents*, rites, and music. We study the essays of Tang and Song presented scholars.”<sup>7</sup> Phung Khac Khoan’s terse reply confirmed Dai Viet’s belonging in a larger classical cultural sphere, while avoiding descriptions of southern customs. He gave a more detailed reply to Yi’s next question, on examinations, explaining that Vietnamese examination candidates studied the *Five Classics* and *Four Books* (*wujing sishu*), imperial edicts, poetry, and statecraft. Yi’s questions show that he was trying to understand Dai Viet’s position in the world. Phung used the strongest language that he could – the language of a shared literary, philosophical, and pedagogical canon – to assert that Dai Viet was a true peer of the Ming and Choson.

Yi Sugwang was remarkably well informed about the Mac-Le conflict. In answer to his questions about how the Le family came back to power after Mac rule, Phung explained, “In the past, the Le family was enfeoffed to manage the country. Later it was usurped by the Mac family. Now the Le family has again taken up their former enterprise and seek enfeoffment.” Phung Khac Khoan confirmed that the Le had lost the country “for more than fifty years.” Yi Sugwang then got to the heart of the matter, asking, “Your country has a Pacification Commander. What is this position?” Phung answered, “Since my country has existed, we have never had this position of Pacification Commander.” He explained that the Ming “Celestial Court” had pardoned Mac Dang Dung for usurpation and allowed him to live, granting him that title. “Now we want to

<sup>6</sup> For example *Nghị Trai thi tập*, A.597. Three texts held at the Institute of Han-Nom Studies, A.2805, v188, and AB447, have been published in *Yuenan Hanwen Yanxing Wenxian Jicheng, Volume 1* (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2010). Hereafter cited as YHY.

<sup>7</sup> Yi Sugwang, *Chibong jip* (Seoul: Songgyun’gwan Taehakkyo Taedong Munhwa, 1964), 79. Pore, “The Inquiring Literatus,” 1–26.

restore the title of king.”<sup>8</sup> This passage is the best explanation of Phung Khac Khoan’s mission. It gives insight into why Mac Dang Dung’s 1540 surrender was condemned so harshly by later Vietnamese writers. The change of title from “king” to “Pacification Commander” had real implications, not least among them affecting Vietnamese prestige as far abroad as Choson.

Yi Sugwang startled Phung by asking about Mac Mau Hop by name. He also asked Phung what position he served in the Mac government. Phung assured him, “I have long been a Le partisan and never served the Mac.” After some questions about agriculture and geography, Yi asked Phung Khac Khoan where the bronze pillars were located. Phung Khac Khoan replied that the pillars used to be in Me Linh (the Trung sisters’ base), but were no longer standing.<sup>9</sup> The scholar William Pore thinks this question demonstrates the Choson ambassador’s “astonishing display of knowledge of Vietnamese history,” though Pore concedes that that knowledge was attained by reading the *History of the Han*,<sup>10</sup> by then a millennium and a half old. In fact, it seems that Yi’s questions rather show the persistence of tropes about the South, something that can be even more readily seen in the exchange of poetry between envoys.

### Holding rites and music dear

When Yi Sugwang and Phung Khac Khoan met in the Jade River Hostel, they passed the time by composing matching verses. This was a sort of literary performance, showing off each party’s command of the written language and classical texts, as well as their ability to compose poetry on the spot. Another envoy from Choson observed, “I met the Annanese envoy Phung Khac Khoan at the hostel. Phung was good at reciting poetry. We saw him compose dozens of matching verses, each one a perfect jewel.”<sup>11</sup> Both Phung Khac Khoan and Yi Sugwang preserved their written exchanges in their collected works, still extant. Both men were elites selected through civil service examinations in their home countries, and represented governments that officially privileged Confucianism over Buddhism – a relatively new phenomenon in the

<sup>8</sup> *Chibong chip*, 79; Pore, “The Inquiring Literatus,” 12–13. Yi Sugwang would go on to repeat the story of Mac Dang Dung’s loss of title in his encyclopedia, *Chibong Yusol*, published in Korea in 1614, though he also notes that the people continued to secretly call him emperor. Yi Sugwang. *Chibong yusol* (Seoul: Ŭryu Munhwasa, 1994), 509.

<sup>9</sup> *Chibong chip*, 79–80.

<sup>10</sup> Pore, “The Inquiring Literatus,” 17. This is reminiscent of the Yuan query about the pillars three centuries earlier. See Chapter 1.

<sup>11</sup> From Yi Chun, *Ch’angsok Sonsaeng Munjip*, *juan* 18, accessed through the *Database of Korean Classics*, db.itkc.or.kr.

two countries.<sup>12</sup> Their literary friendship demonstrates that the world of classical culture, reinvigorated thanks to intellectual trends of the late imperial period, extended well beyond the borders of the Chinese state. For both Yi Sugwang and Phung Khac Khoan, their deeply felt identification with classical culture did not interfere with their strong affiliation to their home countries.<sup>13</sup>

Yi Sugwang presented Phung with two rhyming eight-line poems, and Phung replied with two poems in a matching rhyme scheme. Yi's poems praise Phung, while still drawing on long-standing constructions of the South. Yi wrote:

You have traveled ten thousand miles from your homeland of miasmic  
pestilence,  
Using many postal stations to visit the ruler from a great distance.  
Bestowing anew the bronze pillars of the Han dynasty,  
Just as Yuechang once offered tribute to the Zhou.  
The mountains form exotic shapes, brimming with ivory,  
The steaming vapors of the earth produce dragon incense.  
At present, the Central Country has a sage ruler,  
For a thousand years like calm seas undisturbed by wind.<sup>14</sup>

Here, Dai Viet is associated with miasma, Ma Yuan's bronze pillars, exotic luxury goods, and strange geologic formations. These images, which were by this time hackneyed and antique, were not informed by Yi Sugwang's conversations with Phung Khac Khoan, but rather by his education in classic texts in literary Sinitic. Yi was aware of this himself,

<sup>12</sup> Ch'oe Pu, *Ch'oe Pu's Diary*, 83.

<sup>13</sup> This can be seen in many surviving Korean travel accounts, most famously the Korean official Ch'oe Pu's late-fifteenth-century account of being shipwrecked in southeast China and traveling back to Korea overland, with a stop at the court in Beijing and a stay in the Jade River Hostel. Ch'oe Pu's account has many similarities to the later experiences of Phung Khac Khoan and Yi Sugwang. Like them, he is interested in demonstrating the greatness of Korean scholars' mastery of classical knowledge, similarity of apparel, and equal participation in the world of classical culture. While emphasizing the centrality of the Ming emperor, he still implies that Koreans are more advanced than their Chinese counterparts in various aspects (such as placing filial piety above political loyalty, and Confucianism over Buddhism). He matches poems with his Chinese interlocutors, though he professes to think most poetry frivolous: 54, 60–62, 65, 79, 93. He is approached by Chinese officials who recite the poems of earlier Korean envoys – the novelty of poems about their homeland by foreigners was apparently as interesting to Chinese scholars in the 1480s as it was to Vietnamese in the early seventeenth century: 80. Like Phung, Ch'oe Pu was questioned closely about his own education and the examination system in his country, and his response highlights the centrality of the Four Books and Five Classics: Ch'oe Pu and John Thomas Meskill, *Ch'oe Pu's Diary: A Record of Drifting across the Sea* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1965), 79.

<sup>14</sup> Yi Sugwang, *juan* 8, 76. It is also recorded in YHYWJ, 98, with some minor differences noted below. Kelley translates and analyzes the Vietnamese version of the poem in *Bronze Pillars*, 185.

and clear that he wished to evoke a poetic scene rather than describe reality. Many years later, Yi Sugwang wrote in his diary, “When I went to the capital, I met the Annanese envoy Phung Khac Khoan. We got together to write matching verses. One of my lines said ‘The mountains form exotic shapes, brimming with ivory,/The steaming vapors of the earth produce dragon incense.’ Only Jiaozhi produced ivory and ‘dragon saliva’ incense and other kinds of incense. That is why I said this.” Later, he continued, when the Korean scholar Cho Wan Byeok returned from Dai Viet, he learned that Dai Viet truly had elephants (the source of the ivory the poem mentions) and dragon incense. In his diary, Yi expresses pleasure that he had unwittingly gotten it right, but assures the reader that “it was only a coincidence” that his poem happened to match reality.<sup>15</sup>

None of these tropes of southern exoticism are echoed in Phung Khac Khoan’s matching verse. He emphasizes *shared* culture:

Distant countries alike hold rites and music dear,  
I am glad we have met today while coming to the ruler.  
We all go to court wearing the caps and gowns of the Shang dynasty,<sup>16</sup>  
We see the country’s greatness in Shun’s crown and gown.  
Feasting at court, we bask in the emperor’s benevolence,  
Guests fill the hall and incense reaches to the sky.  
Only a gentleman can recognize a true gentleman,  
I am lucky to have received your praiseworthy poems.<sup>17</sup>

For Yi, his meeting with Phung Khac Khoan is remarkable because of the distance, both physical and cultural, that Phung traversed. Phung is for Yi a representative a distant and exotic land, and Dai Viet a living relic of the Yuechang state that offered China tribute in antiquity. Phung Khac Khoan, in contrast, is uninterested in tropes of southern exoticism. For him, the similarities between Dai Viet and Choson are more important than differences.<sup>18</sup> Rather than romantic images, Phung’s poem insists that he and Yi are both simply gentlemen, wearing the same robes that mark them as officials and holding the same “rites and music dear.” Though simple, the poem is unequivocal in its insistence on Dai Viet’s place in the larger scholarly community, thereby fashioning Dai Viet as a civilized country, equal to Choson and, not incidentally, worthy of titles such as country and king. The first emperor of the Ming once mused in a poem about Dai Viet: “When will the rites and music become engrained

<sup>15</sup> Yi Sugwang, *Chibong yusol*, juan 14, 546.

<sup>16</sup> Yin (殷), the end of the Shang dynasty, circa fourteenth to eleventh century BCE.

<sup>17</sup> YHY, 99; *Chibong jip*, 76.

<sup>18</sup> It is also possible that Phung Khac Khoan did not respond in kind because he was ignorant of the tropes of Choson.

custom?”<sup>19</sup> Phung Khac Khoan’s task was to demonstrate to the Ming court that this had long since been accomplished.

Incidentally, Yi Sugwang evidently did not agree that “we all go to court wearing the caps and gowns of Yin.” He declared in *Chibong chip* that Phung was very sprightly, even though he was over seventy years old. He was less impressed with his clothes: “his appearance is exceedingly strange: he has blackened teeth, loose hair, a long gown with narrow sleeves, and a black cloth that completely covers his head like a monk’s.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Vietnamese officials did not closely follow the clothing styles of the Ming until reforms of the early eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

In the second round of the poetry exchange, Yi Sugwang continued to draw upon his knowledge of southern exotica and especially the multitude of place names for Dai Viet while affirming his similarities with Phung Khac Khoan:

I have heard that you live in Cuu Chan,<sup>22</sup>  
 more than ten thousand *li* distant over mountains and sea.  
 Do not say that our style of clothing is different,  
 for we alike use the same script and the Classics.  
 You have come from the barbarian [Man] fringe to present a pheasant,  
 an elephant-drawn chariot carries your tribute of chestnuts.  
 As you turn your face towards the long road back to the fiery south,  
 who will make for you a south-pointing compass?<sup>23</sup>

Yi Sugwang is acknowledging his common ground with Phung Khac Khoan: dress, written language, classic texts, and a mission to bring tribute to the Ming court. At the same time, he emphasizes Phung’s distance from his “fiery” homeland and the difficulty of returning. It is as though Phung has stepped directly out of the past, emerging from the ancient territory of Cuu Chan to present a pheasant, the same gift the kingdom Yuechang presented to the Zhou dynasty in antiquity. The elephant-drawn chariot is pure fancy, though the south-pointing carriage is part of the traditional story of Yuechang envoys presenting a white pheasant to the Zhou king.

Phung Khac Khoan’s response again emphasizes conventional morality without drawing on any tropes of the exotic South. He writes:

If there is justice, what place could be unstable?  
 Where the rites are treated sincerely there will be much happiness.  
 Although we two come from different mountains and seas,  
 we take the same sagely books as our source,  
 just as neighbors take trust as their foundation

<sup>19</sup> See Chapter 2, SZL, 171–2. <sup>20</sup> *Chibong jip*, 78. <sup>21</sup> Trần Quang Đức, 188.

<sup>22</sup> *Jiuzhen* (九真), one of the administrative units of the Nan Yue kingdom.

<sup>23</sup> Yi Sugwang, *Chibong jip*, *juan* 8, 76.

and advancing virtue and thinking deeply take respect as their vehicle. Remember on the day you return to your country in your carriage the colorful “admiring the emperor” chariot of the Southeast.<sup>24</sup>

Both men express a deeply felt connection to one another in their poems. Phung Khac Khoan was evidently quite proud of their literary friendship; when he returned to Dai Viet, he circulated his friend’s poem widely. We know this from an unusual source – a Korean scholar abducted by pirates. Cho Wan Byeok was a Korean licentiate captured by Japanese pirates in 1597, during the Japanese invasions of Choson (1592–1598). Though surviving sources do not reveal why the pirates chose Cho Wan Byeok, it is possible that the pirates wanted to use his knowledge of literary Sinitic to communicate across regional ports. Cho Wan Byeok traveled to Dai Viet with a group of Japanese merchants. His later reflection on the place reveal that he saw Dai Viet as derivative – a mere imitation or echo of China and Choson, rather than as a full member of the sphere of classical culture. He wrote, “The people are gentle and agreeable by nature. Their education is based on the classics and they have a bureaucratic government. In this, they pretty much imitate China and Korea.” His next line echoes Le Tac’s observation that the Vietnamese met strangers with friendliness and ask them question after question. Cho wrote, “When they heard that I was an Easterner, they jostled one another to get a better look.” What happened next was remarkable. Cho’s Vietnamese audience vied with one another to recite poetry, calling out to him, “This is a poem by your compatriot Yi Chibong!” Yi Chibong was, of course, Yi Sugwang’s pen name. Then they recited Yi Sugwang’s first poem in full, beginning with, “You have traveled ten thousand miles from your miasmic pestilential homeland . . .” Yi Sugwang’s poem apparently circulated widely in Dai Viet, and did so very soon after Phung Khac Khoan’s return. At the time, Cho assumed that Yi Chibong was a person from an earlier era and paid little attention to the poem. When he returned to Choson, he wrote down and published everything he had seen and heard. That is how he was informed that Yi Chibong, aka Yi Sugwang, was a contemporary still living in Choson.<sup>25</sup> Cho’s extraordinary story even made it back to Yi. In Yi’s retelling of Cho Wan Byeok’s story, the Vietnamese audience told Cho, “Our country really does have elephants in the mountains. That is why the poem is so beautiful.” As mentioned above, Yi professed himself astounded at the coincidence – he was merely stringing together images when he wrote the poem, not trying to give an accurate depiction of Dai Viet.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* They exchanged several more poems that I do not have the space to translate here.

<sup>25</sup> Yi Chun, *Ch’angsok Sonsaeng Munjip*, *juan* 12 and 18.

Yi Sugwang's writings about Phung and Dai Viet, like his poems, rehearse tired stereotypes while still striking a positive tone about his actual interactions with Vietnamese individuals. Annan is the first country mentioned in the "Foreign Countries" section of the encyclopedia he produced in 1714, *Chibong Yusol*. Following the *Hou Han Shu*, he records that the Vietnamese are descendants of Panhu, a legendary dog who mated with an emperor's daughter, producing the race of Man people. He writes that "their nature is cunning, they cut their hair, and go bare-foot." He even cites the much-quoted lines from Le Tac's *A Brief History of Annan*, but like other appropriations of that text, the context expresses a meaning that would have saddened Le Tac: "they do not know propriety and duty" and "only people from Hoan and Dien are refined and fond of study." Yi then lists the products for which Annan is known: gold, pearls, various kinds of incense, rhinoceroses and elephants, apes, baboons, white pheasants, kingfisher feathers, and jackfruit. Some of these products were important trade and tributary items (incense, pearls), others were more fanciful but attested in ancient books (white pheasants, apes). He draws little from his personal experience, except to write, "When I went to the capital [Beijing], every time I met envoys from their country, with their dyed-black teeth and loose hair, [I found that] they really understood the written language, even though they spoke in their own way."<sup>26</sup>

Cho's experience of disembarking in Dai Viet gave rise to Yi Sugwang's fond remembrance of his brief friendship with Phung Khac Khoan in his personal writings. Yi compared Phung Khac Khoan favorably to the young poets of Choson. For him, Phung was an old-style poet of the first order, and therefore also a great diplomat. He reminisced about the "older generation" of poets:

We still esteem their elegance. When I was young I saw many of these writers whenever they gathered for a feast. They alternated raising the writing brush, wine glass, and food. They recited while feasting, going back and forth without a break. Those who had not finished would just keep going. They called it "imbibing words." Lately this style has been gradually replaced. When it is time to match verses, it sometimes takes a full day before it is completed. Even the envoys to Hua [China] do it this way. It is not the old way.<sup>27</sup>

Yi is a great symbol of the intellectual ferment of early modern East Asia. Like generations beforehand, he looked backward for authority and used poetic skills to assess status. At the same time, he traveled broadly, introduced Christianity to Korea, and stayed up to date with current events, as we can see from his encyclopedia, itself a noteworthy

<sup>26</sup> Yi Sugwang, *Chibong yusol*, 509. <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 546.

undertaking. His lamentation about the decline of poetic agility gives us an insight into the training and values of both Yi and his friend Phung: only after a grueling apprenticeship in the norms of classical poetry could one get drunk and still compose gem-like poems extemporaneously. These were the skills demanded of politicians and diplomats.

### A silver-tongued ambassador

Impressing Yi Sugwang was all very well and good, but Phung Khac Khoan's true test was to impress the Wanli emperor of the Ming, Zhu Yijun. Phung's conversation with Yi Sugwang would have occurred before his audience with Zhu Yijun. Indeed, the Ming court may have initially denied Phung Khac Khoan access to the emperor, because of confusion about the Le dynasty's status vis-à-vis the Mac.<sup>28</sup> Phung Khac Khoan then presented the emperor with thirty-one poems to honor him on his birthday, unlike other envoys, who each presented one.<sup>29</sup> After this, the story goes, he gained admittance. The assertive southern self-representation evident in Phung Khac Khoan's poems for Yi Sugwang persists in all of the thirty-one poems Phung presented to the Wanli emperor to celebrate his birthday. These fulsome poems reflected Ming glory while simultaneously confirming Dai Viet's place as a participant in the larger scholarly world.

Whether or not it was the poems that softened Zhu Yijun, there is no doubt that Phung Khac Khoan wrote them and that the emperor read and enjoyed them. According to the *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet*, "Khac Khoan reached Beijing just in time for the Ming emperor's birthday celebration. Khac Khoan presented thirty-one congratulatory poems. Zhang Wei (1538–1605), the Ming Wuying Palace Grand Academician Junior Guardian and Grand Guardian of the Heir Apparent and Minister of Personnel, gathered the birthday poems together and presented them to the emperor."<sup>30</sup>

The poems are more noteworthy for their quantity and consistency than their quality. All thirty-one poems consist of eight lines of seven syllables each, generally rhyming first, second, fourth, sixth, and final lines. Constrained by this structure, and by the goal of praising the emperor, the poems are essentially rote and sappy. Poem number nine, translated to preserve the rhyme scheme, is a representative example:

If one cultivates the sages' great way,  
a wise person is enriched day by day.  
A timely rain revives the nine regions,

<sup>28</sup> YHY, 74. <sup>29</sup> *Nhân Vật Chí*, 178. <sup>30</sup> TT, 909–910.

to the people a pure breeze is conveyed.  
 The mountains and fields have a springtime sheen.  
 In the palace lush seedpods are arrayed.  
 Are we not lucky to feast on wild greens,  
 Slowly enchanted as the song is played.

On the surface, this poem describes seemingly loosely connected pleasant scenes. An educated reader, however, would recognize the series of literary allusions that more or less constitute the poem. The allusions, to peaceful reigns of exemplary rulers, subtly flatter the Wanli emperor. For example, the poem compares Zhu Yijun to the sage emperors Yao and Tang. In the second line, the phrase “enriched day by day” evokes a laudatory description of Tang in the *Classic of Poetry*. As for the emperor Yao, legend held he was such a good ruler that natural portents spontaneously appeared, including grasses along the palace steps that dropped seedpods at a regular time every month.

Allusions to the Four Books are not neglected. The verbs in the first sentence are instantly recognizable as a quotation from one of the four, the *Da Xue* (“Great Learning”). This quotation defines cultivating morality and regulating the family as the foundation of a well-governed state and world peace. The implication is that this situation has been achieved under the wise rule of the Wanli emperor. The line “A timely rain revives the nine regions, to the people a pure breeze is conveyed” alludes to passages from two more of the Four Books, the *Mencius* and the *Analects*. *Mencius* likens a ruler to a “timely rain” that is welcomed by the people and that imperceptibly guides them. In the *Analects*, a gentleman is like wind and the common people are like grass – they must bend before his superior virtue. That is to say, a virtuous ruler (like the Wanli emperor) guides and directs the people toward the good, even if this instruction is too subtle to be consciously perceived by them.

The poem is also brimming with references to one of the Five Classics, the *Classic of Poetry*. A good example is the last two words of the poem, literally two kinds of birds, the ones responsible for the enchanting song. The passage it cites suggests the peace achieved under a virtuous monarch. The series of images and allusions pleasingly compare the reign of the Wanli emperor to the times of greatest peace under the most virtuous rulers in the classical tradition. They demonstrate Phung Khac Khoan’s literary education and could only be appreciated by those with a similar background.

Although the poem lacks a clear narrative, it is held together by a repetition of themes that is partially lost in translation. Although its images and allusions are drawn from a plethora of unrelated passages, they all work to achieve the same goal. A virtuous ruler is one whose

goodness spontaneously calls forth the abundance of nature. For example, the line “The mountains and fields have a springtime sheen” could be more literally translated as “From the Zhou fields to the Yu outskirts the mountains and rivers are lush.” They are literally “moistened” by the timely rain of the emperor’s virtue. This causes the land to burst forth with the magic seedpods of the palace, but also the more prosaic mountain greens (and in a fuller translation, also aquatic plants) feasted upon in line seven. The emperor’s benign influence also manifests itself in nature metaphors. The emperor is the pure breeze and timely rain that nurtures and replenishes the people. This suggests not merely that the people can live well on the earth, but that the emperor is gently and almost imperceptibly imparting moral guidance through his virtuous example.

The theme of the emperor’s virtuous guidance is elaborated throughout the thirty-one poems, perhaps most explicitly in a line in poem twenty-eight: “An edifying rain and humane wind reaches south of the sun.”<sup>31</sup> This line again evokes the timely rain of the *Mencius* and the virtuous wind of the *Analects*, stating directly that these influences reach as far as the South. The phrase “south of the sun” can also be transliterated as Nhat Nam, the southernmost region of ancient Vietnam. Since the Le court was based to the south of Mac, this location correlates with the Le as opposed to their Mac competitors. Phung Khac Khoan is stating that the benign influence of the Wanli emperor stretches beyond the southern borders.

The main purpose of poem nine, and the thirty-one birthday poems as a group, is to praise and flatter the Wanli emperor in the campaign to change Dai Viet’s status. An important secondary purpose is to showcase Phung Khac Khoan’s talent and thereby demonstrate the worth of southern scholars. Phung Khac Khoan had insisted to the Choson ambassador Yi Sugwang that the Vietnamese examinations were, like its northern counterparts, based on the Four Books and Five Classics. In this single poem, he alludes to four of these nine texts, showcasing his own deep knowledge of the classics. The poem cited above is just one of thirty-one; all of the poems draw from his extensive classical education. Phung Khac Khoan’s poetry writing was not merely a parlor game, but a deeply political pursuit.

All thirty-one poems have the same structure and intent as poem number nine. Various themes run throughout the poems, such as wishing the emperor longevity; describing the long path Phung Khac Khoan took to visit the majestic court; the auspicious number nine; and a welcome rain saturating the country, a metaphor for the salutary effect of the emperor’s virtue.

<sup>31</sup> YHY, 96.

Although he mentions his travels, Phung Khac Khoan writes little of the South in these poems. The words he uses for China are drawn from the classics and are highly allusive and ambiguous. He uses several names for China that illustrate his wide reading, but he never uses the term “Central Country.” For example, in poem nine translated above, he uses the terms *Jiuyou* (“Nine Regions”), *Zhouyuan* (“Plains of Zhou”) and *Yudian* (“Outskirts of Yu”). All three terms first appear in the *Classic of Poetry* and could be translated as “China.” Unlike the bounded country suggested by the term Central Country, these poetic terms evoke the ill-defined and porous borders of the world of classical culture. At the same time, the poems tend to affirm the centrality and significance of the Ming throne, as in poem twenty-six: “All countries whole-heartedly express their good wishes to you, one thousand generations, one hundred million generations continuously forever.”<sup>32</sup> The force of these poems is lost to time and translation. What can still be understood is the connection between poetical exegesis and political power. The rules of political engagement at times involved mastering a body of knowledge and conveying it through the medium of poetry.

According to the Vietnamese *Complete Chronicles*, the Wanli emperor Zhu Yijun was pleased with the poems. “The Ming emperor wrote comments in his own hand: ‘What place could lack men of talent? I have read this collection of poems; all manifest Phung Khac Khoan’s loyalty and sincerity. Their beauty is exceptionally praiseworthy.’ He ordered that they be published and disseminated throughout the empire. At that time, the Korean envoy Yi Sugwang wrote a preface.”<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, Zhang Wei of the Ministry of Personnel wrote his own poem praising Phung Khac Khoan:

The sage succession illuminates all places,  
 how fortunate to have this trusted aide!  
 This respected elder is a leading light among scholars,  
 a capable talent who serves as the ridgepole of the state.<sup>34</sup>  
 His virtue reaches to the ancient sages,  
 his attire is like that of the high officials of old.  
 He came with the intention of wishing the emperor longevity,  
 The pure breeze of the inner court will smell sweet forever.<sup>35</sup>

Surely this poem would have pleased Phung Khac Khoan. Rather than dwelling on differences as did Yi Sugwang’s poems, it describes Phung’s attire as the same as high officials of the past. This poem, however, is

<sup>32</sup> YHY, 95. <sup>33</sup> TT, 909–910.

<sup>34</sup> Although he is praising Phung, there is some condescension in Zhang’s word choice, perhaps because Zhang occupies a higher position.

<sup>35</sup> A.597, 19; YHY, 98; Nhân Vật Chí, 181–182.

found only in Phung Khac Khoan's own writings and is not attested in the Chinese record.

Like Le Tac and Le Nguyen Trung before him, Phung Khac Khoan used writing to fashion a place for southern scholars into elite consciousness in the Beijing. Unlike them, he was not trying to record Vietnamese history for posterity. Instead, he tried to capture the attention of the Wanli emperor and prove that Dai Viet, like Choson, was worthy of inclusion in the community of civilized countries. Dai Viet, with its classically trained officials, he seems to be saying, was not like the native chieftaincies of the southern borderlands or even the Mac dynasty. It was an inheritor of classical culture, and a country ruled by a king, not a Pacification Commission ruled by a Pacification Commander. This piece of southern self-representation made waves in the capital but did not achieve its ends. The emperor Zhu Yijun gladly accepted the poems but rejected the central premise and the Le court's request.

The *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet* recounts Phung Khac Khoan's disappointing audience with the Wanli emperor. In addition to the gift of thirty-one poems, the *Chronicles* says that Phung presented tributary gifts including a gold statue to substitute for a personal visit from the ruler, agarwood, and ivory. At that time, he submitted a request to resume diplomatic relations. The Ming emperor was very pleased at the poems and the gifts but he rejected the Le court's request that their ruler's title be changed to "king." Instead, the emperor granted the Le ruler a seal stamped with the title "Pacification Commander of the Pacification Commission of Annan." Then he tried to dismiss Phung Khac Khoan.<sup>36</sup>

However, simply receiving the seal of Pacification Commission would not fulfill Phung Khac Khoan's mission. He submitted a memorial to reiterate the injustice of the current situation:

I serve the Le family, the descendents of the kings of Annan. The resentful, rebellious minister Mac usurped the throne. We were not willing to bear one thousand years of enmity, and so we waited patiently for an opportunity for revenge in order to restore the line of the ancestral founder [Le Loi] and to carry on the ancestral lineage. This Mac was originally a minister of Annan's Le family; he killed his ruler and stole his country. He really is a criminal to the Superior Country, and he secretly sought to be granted this title of Pacification Commander. Now my ruler did not commit the crimes of the Mac, and yet he has received the same title as the Mac. How is that just? I request your majesty look into it.

The Ming emperor smiled and said, "Although your ruler is not Mac, but he only just regained the country. I am afraid that the people's hearts are not yet settled. When they have accepted him then we can add the rank of king and it will

<sup>36</sup> TT, 916.

not be too late. Respect this! Request declined.” Khac Khoan accepted this with a bow, then departed.<sup>37</sup>

In this passage, the Le’s frustration over the loss of titles that had been in use since independence in the tenth century, king of the country of Annan, is palpable. At the same time, they were not in a position to negotiate. Zhu Yijun and his court were not yet willing to give up their support of the Mac regime of Cao Bang, nor were they certain that the people of Dai Viet completely supported the restored Le dynasty. Although Zhu Yijun may have been impressed by Phung Khac Khoan’s poetic talent, restoring the title had no advantage for the Ming court. Keeping the Le and Mac in competition, and thus Dai Viet divided, on the contrary, did benefit the Ming.

Phung Khac Khoan is given merely one line in a December 1597 entry of the Ming *Veritable Records*, noting that he headed the Annan delegation and was rewarded according to precedent. Moreover, Phung Khac Khoan and the other Vietnamese who accompanied him are referred to by an unusual phrase, *qimu*, elders and chiefs, the kind of label that might be used for a chief of a native chieftaincy. It is certainly not a term they would have applied to themselves. Indeed, the passage does not record the title Phung Khac Khoan used to present himself, left vice director of the Ministry of Works.<sup>38</sup>

Although the embassy was not a complete success, Phung Khac Khoan was honored by the Le emperor for his efforts. In 1599, he was promoted to left vice director of the Ministry of Personnel and given the aristocratic title Marquis of Plum Mountain (*Mai Linh hau*).<sup>39</sup> As one of the most notable scholars of his era, Phung Khac Khoan acquired “a kind of mythic status in Vietnam.” As such, he was incorporated into later texts to grant authority to historical figures. For example, the eighteenth-century author Doan Thi Diem made him the literary companion of the goddess Lieu Hanh.<sup>40</sup> This was not to be his last literary transformation.

The reaction to Phung’s embassy in China was more ambivalent. Phung left barely a trace in the Chinese archives; his brush talks with Yi Sugwang are not mentioned at all. One might expect that the classical

<sup>37</sup> TT, 916–917. A nineteenth-century text, *Nhân Vật Chí*, records that Phung Khac Khoan returned to Dai Viet in 1598 after having secured the title King of Annan for the Le ruler. Other sources do not corroborate this, as that text acknowledges. Rather, it was part of his legend. *Nhân Vật Chí*, 178–179.

<sup>38</sup> *Ming Shenzong Shilu*, *juan* 316, accessed through *Scripta Sinica*. <sup>39</sup> TT, 917.

<sup>40</sup> Keith W. Taylor, “Literacy in Early Seventeenth-Century Northern Vietnam,” in Michael Arthur Aung-Thwin and Kenneth R. Hall, eds., *New Perspectives on the History and Historiography of Southeast Asia: Continuing Explorations* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 191. Olga Dror, *Cult, Culture, and Authority: Princess Liễu Hạnh in Vietnamese History* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 87–89, 93, 96–99.

education and literary prowess of Phung and Yi would lead to admiration within China. After all, premodern China is sometimes described as having a Confucian civilizing mission – the desire to spread Chinese culture and mores far and wide, at least within the borders of empire.<sup>41</sup> The story of Phung’s embassy shows that this mission became more fraught when civilization left the borders. In the case of Dai Viet, cultural and political similarities were perceived as threatening. Dai Viet’s elites, represented by Phung, were too close for comfort. The Ming government was well aware that at home the Vietnamese referred to their own ruler as emperor and claimed that their dynasty had the Mandate of Heaven – all prerogatives of the Ming state alone. Although Phung’s poems were flattering and loyal, who knew what he was really harboring in his heart? It was better to treat such men as *qimu*, elders and chiefs representing a Pacification Commission, not as kings and officials as they insisted. A history of the period published in Dai Viet in 1719 bears out some of the court’s worst fears.

### A southern mirror

This book opened with a history of Vietnam written from a northern perspective, Le Tac’s *A Brief History of Annam*. It closes with a history of Vietnam written from a southern perspective, Nguyen Khoa Chiem’s 1719 *Stories about the Achievements of the Southern Court*.<sup>42</sup> Just as Le Tac’s book culminated in praise of his Yuan patrons, Nguyen Khoa Chiem’s book, as the title suggests, recounts the historical events through the early eighteenth century as a tale of the achievements of the Nguyen court that he served.<sup>43</sup> Le Tac was writing the South into northern chronicles of history. Nguyen Khoa Chiem had a different goal. His book, a chronological account of the years 1568–1689, contextualized the rise of his clan, the Nguyen, within the Le dynasty’s long struggle for dominance over the Mac. It takes for granted the separation of the Nguyen realm from that of the Trinh-controlled Le court. Fighting

<sup>41</sup> Stevan Harrell, “Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them,” in Stevan Harrell, ed., *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1995). See also Kathlene Baldanza, “De-Civilizing Ming China’s Southern Border: Vietnam as Lost Province or Barbarian Culture,” in Jeff McClain and Yongtao Du, eds., *Chinese History in Geographical Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 55–70.

<sup>42</sup> In Vietnamese, the title is *Nam triều công nghiệp Dien chí*. I am following Keith Taylor’s translation of the title. See Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 328. The name was later changed to *Viet Nam khai quốc chí truyện* [越南開國志傳 “The Story of the Founding of Viet Nam”] once the Nguyen dynasty took power and changed the name of the country.

<sup>43</sup> He wrote under the pen name Nguyễn Bàng Trúng (阮榜重).

between the two realms had finally ceased in 1672, as both sides cut their losses and focused on ruling their own territories.<sup>44</sup> Though written decades earlier, *Stories about the Achievements of the Southern Court* presages the final break of 1744, when Nguyen Phuc Khoat officially declared himself king, ending the charade of Le sovereignty in the far south.

*Stories about the Achievements of the Southern Court* contains material similar to that in *The Complete Chronicles* and the *Dai Viet thong su*, though with more anecdotes and embellishments. It cannot be taken at face value as an unbiased account of events, nor is it a firsthand account. Nonetheless, it reveals the change in attitude and emphasis in the century that elapsed since Phung Khac Khoan's embassy, in particular the relative freedom of the Nguyen-controlled realm of Dang Trong. Although there is no evidence to suggest that the book was ever read by a Chinese audience, it bears out the worst nightmares of those Chinese who were anxious about the appropriation of certain kinds of privileged language abroad. Ming rulers and ministers anxious about China's image beyond the borders would not have enjoyed the depiction of the Wanli emperor within *The Achievements of the Southern Court*. Nguyen Khoa Chiem rewrote history, highlighting events important to the rise of the Nguyen lords, and embellishing stories to fit into a narrative of the greatness of Dai Viet's south. A case in point is his reinvention of the story of Phung Khac Khoan's embassy. In *The Achievements of the Southern Court*, Phung Khac Khoan is presented as a righteous remonstrator who is initially condescended to but ultimately succeeds in pointing out the errors of the Ming court.

In the words of Nguyen Khoa Chiem, "this Phung Khac Khoan was ugly. He had a base and puny appearance, with disheveled hair and a patchy beard." This is in contrast with Yi Sugwang's eyewitness account, which described him as "white of hair and slight of frame, about seventy years old."<sup>45</sup> *The Achievements of the Southern Court* continues:

He was naturally brilliant, and his knowledge exceeded that of other people. He had the talent of [the military geniuses] Zhuge Liang and Liu Bowen, and the learning of [Confucius' followers] Yan Hui, Zengzi, Zisi, and Mencius. His essays were the best of his generation and his courage and resource set him ahead of the pack. He came in first in the palace examination [making him Valedictorian].<sup>46</sup>

Phung Khac Khoan "scaled the cliffs and crossed the sea," traveling day and night. "He braved snow and charged through frost," finally arriving at the hostel for foreign envoys. When Phung was presented to the court, the Ming Wanli emperor was skeptical that such an ugly ambassador could

<sup>44</sup> Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 312–318. <sup>45</sup> *Chibong jip*, 77.

<sup>46</sup> Nguyễn Bàng Trùng, *Viet Nam khai quốc chí truyện* (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, 1987), 32–33.

possess talent or virtue. Phung Khac Khoan seemed instead to embody the inferiority of Annan. The bemused emperor implied as much, making Phung an object of fun:

When the Ming Son of Heaven saw Phung Khac Khoan's ugly face and puny body, he smiled and said, "In the past when Mu Sheng and Zhang Fu<sup>47</sup> returned from Annan, they said that the Southern Country possessed an abundance of worthy people and refined heroes. Now the envoy Khac Khoan has come here, and he would surely have been selected for his excellence. From this selection we can see the present state of people of talent."

The reader can almost hear the derisive laughter of the assembled courtiers. The emperor decided to put Phung Khac Khoan to the test. They engaged in a brush talk of sorts, with the emperor posing questions and receiving replies. In response to his queries, Phung Khac Khoan wrote, "I took the examination in the Southern Country and came in first place. I was appointed Minister of Revenue." The Ming emperor replied that since he was the Valedictorian in the palace examinations, than surely he had great understanding of the past and present. He proposed to test Phung's knowledge about the affairs of All-under-Heaven, asking which of these were most difficult and which most easy. Phung's response:

All human life in the world follows the pattern of Heaven: geography, human affairs, the three religions and the nine schools of thought,<sup>48</sup> every trade and skill. Those are what is easy. What is the most difficult are the two words "sensual pleasure,"<sup>49</sup> because it is hard to buy and hard to entreat.

If the Wanli emperor was impressed with this answer, he did not show it. Instead, he followed up with more difficult-to-answer questions: "What makes food and drink delicious? What makes an object valuable?"

Khac Khoan wrote in response:

Deliciousness is not better than plain salt, valuable objects are not better than a virtuous person. Plain old salt can be intense or mild, it can be flavorful or pleasant. It sticks to the ribs and lubricates the heart: that is its deliciousness. Virtuous people can be flexible or firm, they can support the state, they can create rebellion, they can accumulate for enjoyment, they can shore up the country's arteries, they can assist in setting the dimensions [of the state] for eternity . . . This is the real valuable object.

<sup>47</sup> Two Ming generals who led the invasion of Vietnam during the Yongle reign.

<sup>48</sup> The three religions are Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. The practitioners of the nine schools of thought are Confucianists, Daoists, Yin Yang, legalists, logicians, Mohists, political strategists, eclectics, and agriculturalists. This term could also be translated more generally as philosophical schools or even as trades.

<sup>49</sup> *Shengsi* (聲色). This phrase could be translated as "song and women," "sound and appearance," or "music and sex."

The emperor could only reply, “That is so.” The gathered officials “praised him endlessly” and the emperor called for a banquet. Making the best of it, the emperor remarked, “The envoy from the Southern Country is not much to look at, but his words flow quickly. When I tested him, I was able to display his talent.”<sup>50</sup>

In this story, Phung Khac Khoan, the underdog from the South, was able to overcome the prejudice of the Ming emperor and impress civil and military officials. Despite his scruffy appearance, he proved his worth and learning. Like Mac Dinh Chi, the Tran ambassador to the Yuan, he was able to show a decadent and complacent Ming court that plain old salt and virtuous people are more valuable than exquisite food and luxury objects. The subversive message underlying Phung Khac Khoan’s speech is that the Southern Country retained the root of virtue while the Ming lost the way. Here, Dai Viet is the bastion of classical culture, and is justified in upbraiding the Ming emperor.

If the story of Phung Khac Khoan’s encounter with the Wanli emperor seems too good to be true, it is because it is. Though captivating, the story is most likely apocryphal. This particular version of events is not attested in any other Vietnamese or Chinese records. It is also quite late, as it was written more than a century after Phung Khac Khoan’s embassy to Beijing. Another clue that the story comes from a southern imagination is the Wanli emperor’s repeated use of the term “Southern Country.” Dai Viet is never referred to by this term in Ming sources. To do so would imply a worldview alien to China, one that posits a Southern Country to counterbalance the Northern Country, rather than the Central Country of Chinese political ideology, ringed by lesser tributary states.

Although the *Stories about the Achievements of the Southern Court* should be taken with a large grain of plain old salt, it reveals changes in Vietnamese self-representation between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. This is especially apparent in this text originating in the Nguyen South, Dang Trong. It shows the burgeoning self-confidence of a state that has moved out of the shadow of China.

But *Stories about the Achievements of the Southern Court* leaves out some of the most interesting, and historically attested, aspects of Phung Khac Khoan’s embassy. Nguyen Khoa Chiem is simply not interested in what seems most fascinating to a twenty-first-century audience – the brush talks with Yi Sugwang, their copious output of poetry, and the cosmopolitanism their friendship implies. More glaring still, Nguyen Khoa Chiem neglects to mention the purpose of Phung Khac Khoan’s embassy: the failed attempt to attain formal recognition of the Le ruler as “King of Annan.”

<sup>50</sup> Nguyễn Bàng Trùng, 33.

*Stories about the Achievements of the Southern Court* contains several more anecdotes that use Phung Khac Khoan as a mirror to reflect Chinese artifice and immorality. This use is most clear in Nguyen Khoa Chiem's retelling of the story of Mac Dinh Chi's embassy to Beijing in 1308 (see Chapter 1). Mac Dinh Chi had amazed and chastened the northern court by ripping a canopy decorated with embroidered sparrows to shreds. Nguyen Khoa Chiem clearly takes inspiration from this story, but casts Phung Khac Khoan in the lead role. This borrowing explains why Phung Khac Khoan is mistakenly identified as Valedictorian, a title that rightly belongs to Mac Dinh Chi.

In *Achievements of the Southern Court*, several days after his initial meeting with Phung Khac Khoan,

the Ming emperor asked a skilled artisan to make an artificial sparrow. It could walk, hop, eat, and fly. It was placed on top of a clump of bamboo in front of the palace, where it flew, hopped, played, and ate just like a real bird; no one took notice of it. The Ming emperor summoned Phung Khac Khoan before him and asked, "Has the southern envoy seen this sparrow? I raised it for several years, and now it has no fear of people." Phung Khac Khoan looked at it for a moment and saw that it could fly and hop. It was difficult to examine its origin, so he went over to the clump of bamboo, grabbed the artificial sparrow in his hand and threw it on the ground, breaking it into four pieces of wood. Then he strode up to the palace, unafraid and with his head held high. He sent up a memorial that said, "Bamboo is the gentleman (*junzi*), signifying the health of the Son of Heaven; the sparrow is the petty person (*xiaoren*), signifying the commonness of mean people. Why are mean people permitted to roost on top of the gentleman? The servants of the Superior Country are defying the logic of the gentleman. Although my country is small, we can still distinguish the proper roles of lord and servant, the way of fathers and sons, the righteousness of older and younger brothers, the difference between high and low. We have not muddled, mixed up, and put them upside down like this. How could I not know that this is a fake bird!" When he was finished, he looked up and smiled. The emperor was shamefaced and fell silent. All the officials and prime ministers of the court gasped in astonishment; they all praised him ceaselessly. The emperor rewarded him, then permitted him to retire for the night. Phung Khac Khoan looked into the distance and paid his respects and then left the court, returning to the hostel.<sup>51</sup>

Nguyen Khoa Chiem clearly modeled his story of Phung Khac Khoan's triumph over artificiality on the earlier account from the *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet*. In the *Complete Chronicles*, the Yuan court disdained Mac Dinh Chi on account of his short stature and feeble appearance. This is probably the source of Nguyen Khoa Chiem's claim that Phung Khac Khoan was bad-looking. The two stories are the same in essence – a Vietnamese envoy destroying an artificial sparrow to restore proper

<sup>51</sup> Nguyễn Bàng Trùng, 33–34.

order to the world and receiving the acclaim of the northern court – and only differ in the particulars. Although the anecdotes about Phung Khac Khoan are rehashed and rewritten from other sources, there is a situational freshness and humor to their presentation in *The Achievements of the Southern Court*. Phung Khac Khoan, the ultimate underdog, not only a southerner but an ugly one, stands up to the astonished Wanli emperor in his own court. In contrast, Mac Dinh Chi did not directly challenge and amaze the emperor, only his courtiers.<sup>52</sup>

Why did Nguyen Khoa Chiem elide Mac Dinh Chi and make Phung Khac Khoan the hero of his story? Perhaps Mac Dinh Chi's reputation was sullied by his connection to his descendent, Mac Dang Dung. Nguyen Khoa Chiem's goal was to bolster the reputation of the Nguyen, nominal servants of the still-kicking Le court. As a scholar who had actively spurned the Mac and went to great lengths to serve the Le, Phung Khac Khoan was a more appropriate hero for the times than was Mac Dinh Chi.

Both the original story of Mac Dinh Chi, recorded in *The Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet*, and this later elaboration of the story echo the well-known story of the Tang dynasty chancellor Wei Zheng, first recorded in the Tang-era compendium *Sui Tang jiahua*. Wei Zheng earned a reputation as a forthright and persistent critic of the emperor Li Shimin. An anecdote records that Li Shimin once hurriedly hid his pet sparrowhawk in his wide sleeve when Wei Zheng made a surprise visit, in order to avoid being scolded for wasting his time on frivolous pastimes. The bird was smothered to death while Li Shimin waited through Wei Zheng's intentionally lengthy disquisition. Wei Zheng is an exemplar of an honored type: the high-minded official who is not afraid to reprimand the emperor. Remonstrating officials, if principled, tapped into a source of authority outside of the control of the throne. Li Shimin respected him and his role, even though it at times caused him grief. When Wei Zheng died, Li Shimin eulogized him as the mirror that held up the flaws of the court.<sup>53</sup>

*The Achievements of the Southern Court* marks a shift from Le Tac's appeal for inclusion, support, and recognition, to a more robust formation of a Vietnamese elite identity operating separately from that of

<sup>52</sup> Mac Dinh Chi's story veered into absurdity in the nineteenth-century text *Nhân Vật Chí*. In that text, which also recounts the sparrow and bamboo anecdote, Mac Dinh Chi is described as having a degraded appearance due to his mother's rape and insemination by a monkey. In this account, the emperor comments on Mac's ugly appearance, but Mac wins him over with his learning and the quality of his poetry. *Nhân Vật Chí*, 148.

<sup>53</sup> Liu Xu, *Jiu Tang shu, Scripta Sinica*. There is a similar story about the Song founder Zhao Zhuangyin in the Song-era text *Sushui Jiwen* by Sima Guang. Zhao was engaged with shooting at sparrows with a slingshot when his officials called him away to deal with state affairs. Initially enraged, Zhao came to admit that they were in the right.

China. This stance still affirmed classical culture, yet also evinces a willingness to assert Dai Viet's superior understanding of the world. Exemplifying this stance, Nguyen Khoa Chiem reframed history to reflect increasing concern for a politicized identity that distinguished the Chinese and Vietnamese more clearly.

Mac Dinh Chi's actions were an indictment of the Mongol Yuan – a foreign conquest regime that not only destroyed the Song dynasty but also attacked Dai Viet in three separate campaigns. Nguyen Khoa Chiem's criticism of the (by then defunct) Ming is even more assertive. He has Phung Khac Khoan engaged in dialogue with the emperor himself, and come out as the better partner. While Phung Khac Khoan's actual poetry evinces nothing more than a bid for inclusion in the world of classical scholarship, Nguyen Khoa Chiem goes a step farther, having his Phung Khac Khoan demonstrate again and again to the Wanli emperor Zhu Yijun that he and his court have lost the understanding of the essential and the inessential, and of high and low. Most striking though is Nguyen Khoa Chiem's rewriting of the account of Phung Khac Khoan's audience with the Wanli emperor contained in *The Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet*. This episode shows most clearly how Nguyen Khoa Chiem reinvented history to turn the tables on the supercilious Wanli emperor. In the *Chronicles*, the Wanli emperor silences Phung Khac Khoan with a smile before sending him away. In the later account, it is Phung who smiles triumphantly as the Wanli emperor falls into shamefaced silence.

An anecdote that occurs after his exploit with the wooden sparrow illustrates the degree to which Nguyen Khoa Chiem transposed the positions of emperor and envoy. The emperor sent someone to find two indistinguishable mares of the exact size and color. No one could tell which was the mother and which was the daughter.

The horses were led to the relay station and Phung Khac Khoan was asked, "Can the Valedictorian tell which of these two horses is the mother? Which is the offspring? If anyone can tell, it is the Valedictorian." Phung Khac Khoan listened with a bemused expression, and said, "The logic of this is very easy and not at all difficult. Why delay asking them ourselves?" Then he grabbed a handful of green grass, walked forward, clasped his hands in greeting, and smiled. The younger horse was impatient; when it saw the grass it stepped forward and tried to eat it. The mother horse was calm; she stood very still and did not move forward. Phung Khac Khoan laughed and said, "The one that stepped forward is the offspring, and the one that stood still is the mother. It is obvious and unmistakable." The Ming people were dumbstruck when they saw this, they all exclaimed, "He really is the Valedictorian!" Then they returned and reported what they saw at the palace. The emperor was amazed.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Nguyễn Bàng Trùng, 34.

Once again, it took a Vietnamese envoy to show the confused Ming court the order of nature. The story continues that the Wanli emperor wished to retain Phung Khac Khoan, but reluctantly agreed to let him return home. Before he left, he rewarded him lavishly and granted him the title “Valedictorian of Two Countries” – actually the nickname of Mac Dinh Chi.<sup>55</sup>

The stories about Phung Khac Khoan in *The Achievements of the Southern Court* are lighthearted; the riddles are good-natured and both sides end as friends. Yet there is a subtle posturing that is not evident in contemporary accounts of the embassy and certainly not in Phung Khac Khoan’s poems. The message of the later text is that Dai Viet, though small and overlooked, has not succumbed to vice and mistakes as has Ming China. Dai Viet’s scholars have retained the knowledge of the natural order of things. Though it is not explicitly stated in the text, the most significant mistake of the Ming government is recognizing the Mac and demoting the Le. Although the stories contained in *The Achievements of the Southern Court* cannot be taken as historically accurate, these anecdotes can tell us a lot about early-eighteenth-century Dai Viet, specifically the south, Dang Trong. While Phung Khac Khoan’s poems were concerned with demonstrating Dai Viet’s mastery of classical culture and inclusion in a larger Sinitic cultural sphere, *Achievements of the Southern Court* is more concerned with competing with China and jockeying for position as the rightful heir of classical culture.

A comparison of the official histories of both Vietnam and China and the later *Achievements of the Southern Court* show us both the tensions that held Dai Viet and the Ming in conflict and the connections that made it necessary for them to deal with one another. Excessive emphasis on Chinese aggression and Vietnamese resistance overshadows the status quo of the Sino-Viet relations: dialogue and negotiation. Phung Khac Khoan’s embassy was an incident of Dai Viet failing to negotiate their desired terms with the Ming government, but gaining recognition at all was a small step forward. The Ming government could not afford to ignore Dai Viet, and was frequently drawn into internal conflicts there, such as the conflict between the Le and the Mac, often reluctantly.

Phung Khac Khoan’s embassy reveals the clash between southern self-representation and Chinese views of Dai Viet. Phung Khac Khoan worked hard to present himself as a participant in the scholarly community, as an inheritor of classical culture just like his Chinese and Korean counterparts. For him, elite Vietnamese were educated in the same way and dressed the same way as their northern counterparts. His Ming

<sup>55</sup> This name, like other elements in the story, rightfully belongs to Mac Dinh Chi. It was the nickname given to him in Dai Viet following his successful mission to the Yuan court.

interlocutors, and most importantly, the Wanli emperor, were more resistant to seeing Vietnamese scholars as peers. In general, they preferred to see Dai Viet and the Vietnamese as exotic, alien, and more akin to southern indigenes. This is evident in the Wanli emperor's insistence that the Le realm remain a Pacification Commission. We can see this too in the poetry of Yi Sugwang, for whom Dai Viet was still associated with the miasmatic land of Yuechang. But neither the emperor nor Yi could ignore a remarkable fact. Their very ability to communicate their disdain or condescension to the Vietnamese – that is through the mutual understanding of literary Sinitic and the mastery of a shared corpus of texts – meant that the Vietnamese perhaps shared more in the way of culture and civilization than that disdain or condescension would allow. In other words, the universality of literary Sinitic was a double-edged sword: it gave the Ming a way to exercise moral authority broadly, but it also gave foreign states a tool to defend themselves and make their own claims, and to do so in just the mode that China most had to listen to.

To return to *Achievements of the Southern Court*, its triumphant account of Phung Khac Khoan's intellectual victory over the deluded Ming court is clearly very different from the obsequious poems actually penned by Phung Khac Khoan. We can account for this difference by looking to the intended audience: Vietnamese readers for the book, and the Wanli emperor for the poems. But it also shows how much Dai Viet changed between 1597 and when the book was written in 1719: Dai Viet in 1719 had colonized much of the South – and a Dang Trong writer like Nguyen Khoa Chiem was willing to take a more assertive stand vis-à-vis China, by arguing not just that Vietnamese scholars were masters of shared classical culture, but that they were *better* preservers of this shared classical culture.

*Stories about The Achievements of the Southern Court* also makes concrete the wrangling for position that was a constant if subtle part of Sino-Viet relations. Phung Khac Khoan's poems were a poetic bid for inclusion in the borderless world of classical culture. *The Achievements of the Southern Court* uses the metaphor of the artificial sparrow in bamboo to make this point even more forcefully by casting Phung Khac Khoan, the Vietnamese envoy, as a remonstrating official who holds a mirror up to expose the flaws of the Ming court.

## Conclusion: Dai Viet in the Ming-Qing transition

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The title of the ruler of the Le remained a bone of contention after Phung Khac Khoan's embassy to Beijing. The Le were not able to successfully negotiate a restoration of the title until they were in a better bargaining position. This took time. As late as 1640, the Trinh lord wrote to the Ming requesting that the title King of Annam be restored. His request was denied.<sup>1</sup>

The situation changed just six years later. In 1644, the last emperor of the Ming hanged himself on a hill overlooking his palace as rebel soldiers streamed into Beijing. Later that year, Manchu troops from the northeast claimed control of Beijing for the Qing dynasty. Ming loyalists rallied around an imperial relative and established the Southern Ming. The Southern Ming was continually on the run, pushed first into Fujian, then southwest to Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan, and finally across the border into Burma.<sup>2</sup> The Le contacted the Southern Ming while they were still located in Fujian, even sending an envoy to their court. In 1646, while the exile Ming court was still operating in Fujian province, Zhu Youlang, the last emperor of the Southern Ming, granted Dai Viet a gold and silver seal inscribed "King of Annam."<sup>3</sup> The title had finally been restored.

Both the Le dynasty and the Cao Bang Mac threw their support behind the Southern Ming. After all, they had long maintained relations with the Ming dynasty. In contrast, the Qing dynasty was merely a distant rumor.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Qing was a Manchu dynasty, considered by the Vietnamese to be outsiders to the world of classical culture. But they could not be avoided forever. When the Qing troops took control of Fujian in 1645, scattering the Southern Ming court, they captured two

<sup>1</sup> *Ming Chongzhen Shilu*, juan 13, *Scripta Sinica*.

<sup>2</sup> See Lynn A. Struve, *The Southern Ming, 1644–1662* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> TT, 950–951.

<sup>4</sup> Sun Hongnian, *Qingdai Zhong Yue zongfan guanxi yanjiu* (Harbin: Heilongjiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 2006), 6–7.

Le ambassadors who had been sent to the Southern Ming. They were sent back to Dai Viet with the message that the Qing had inherited the Mandate of Heaven. The Le court continued to have close relations with the Southern Ming, putting off recognizing the Qing.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually, the Sino-Viet borderlands provided haven for the Southern Ming, just as it had for so many other refugees, rebels, and fallen regimes, including the Mac. In 1647, the embattled Zhu Youlang wrote a long missive to the Le court. Though the change in tone is a remarkable contrast to that of earlier Ming rulers, it is not surprising that the struggling Southern Ming regime was desperate for allies. In the letter, Zhu Youlang writes that the first duty of an emperor is to reassure distant people and reward supporting kings and praises the Le for their loyalty. He continues, "I think that your Annan alone undertook a renowned transformation. The rites and music and caps and robes gradually become your custom." This is a marked contrast from earlier Ming writers, who placed Dai Viet outside the circle of classical culture and Hua customs.<sup>6</sup>

The newly established Qing dynasty also took time to curry favor with the Le. The Qing Shunzhi emperor issued an announcement to ambassadors from the Le dynasty who arrived in Beijing in July of 1647: "I have settled the Central Country, and look upon all under heaven as one family. I know that [Annan], from ancient times to the present, has served the Central Country generation after generation . . ." He wished to continue this relationship unchanged, despite the change in dynasty.<sup>7</sup> To demonstrate his goodwill, the Shunzhi emperor increased the value of gifts bestowed upon the Le envoys, even when that entailed parting from the protocols set in the *Da Qing Hui Dian* ("Collected Statutes of the Great Qing"). For example, the emperor read the Ministry of Rites' recommendations for rewarding the Le's first embassy and responded, "Jiaozhi inclines its heart towards transformation and breaks up the nest of bandits – it is truly praiseworthy. Your ministry is using the Ming standards for foreign countries; it is not appropriate. Discuss this again." Only when they increased the value of the gift by five times the initial amount did the emperor approve.<sup>8</sup> In light of the Le dynasty's support of the Southern Ming, it seems that the Qing was interested in winning Le support of the new Qing regime through diplomacy and lavishly expressed goodwill.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Sun, 3. <sup>6</sup> TT, 951. <sup>7</sup> QSL, 3. <sup>8</sup> QSL, 4.

<sup>9</sup> The Shunzhi emperor was adamant about these changes. On February 11, 1664, and again in 1668, the Ministry of Rites wrote that the tribute sent by Annan did not match the *Hui Dian*. An imperial edict written in response said, "when foreign countries are influenced by our culture and offer tribute, we should just take what they present, without necessarily following the *Hui Dian* . . ." QSL, 6.

By 1651, the Southern Ming was in even more desperate straits. The Ming court had moved to Nanning in Guangxi and requested to receive supplies and support from the adjacent Le. The Trinh lord, Trinh Trang, fulfilled the requests, and envoys traveled back and forth between the passes. In a move that demonstrates just how far past scrupling about the Trinh's hold of power in the Le realm, they were the Southern Ming granted Trinh Trang the title "Assistant King of Annan" (*Annan fu guowang*) in gratitude.<sup>10</sup>

The Cao Bang Mac were located on land adjoining Guishun subprefecture in Guangxi. In 1659, the Southern Ming controlled this area, spurring them to nurture diplomatic relations with the Mac. When the Qing troops entered Guishun, the Ming emperor and some of his followers passed into Mac territory to escape them, prompting the Qing court to command the Mac to hand the refugees over. Since the Mac had received support from the Ming in the past, they did not comply.<sup>11</sup>

Despite Vietnamese support, the Southern Ming was pushed farther south, into Burma, away from even the weak protection of their Dai Viet allies. By 1659, the Qing had control of Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan, and Zhu Youlang had fled into Burma with his small court. At this point, the Le and the Cao Bang Mac had to face the reality of the Qing state. That year, the Mac took advantage of the chaos in China to occupy land in the border region. Qing troops retook it, obliging Mac Kinh, the current ruler, to apologize and express "sincere submission."<sup>12</sup> After some discussion, the Qing government decided to continue to recognize the Mac as protectors of Annan, at a lower rank than that of the Le kings.<sup>13</sup>

Zhu Youlang was captured and executed by the Qing in 1662. The Le entered into regular tributary relations with the Qing, though the *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet* continued to mark the Ming reign date through 1667, well after Zhu Youlang's death,<sup>14</sup> a sign of their continuing skepticism about the legitimacy of the Qing dynasty. Although the title "King of Annan" was confirmed by the Qing from their first communication with the Le, the Le were not happy that the uneasy power-sharing arrangement with the Mac, a relic of Ming Dai Viet policy, was continued under the new regime of the Qing.

The struggles of the Southern Ming court reveal an underemphasized aspect of Sino-Viet relations: mutuality. In times of strength, the Ming invaded Dai Viet. In times of weakness, they relied on Dai Viet for assistance. The Ming government appealed to Dai Viet in their struggle against the Qing, just as the Mac and Le had sought outside support from

<sup>10</sup> TT, 953. <sup>11</sup> Sun, 5–6. <sup>12</sup> Sun, 9. <sup>13</sup> QSL, 3. <sup>14</sup> TT, 979.

the Ming in their own bloody conflict. The Qing dynasty too sought to nurture close relations with the Le and the Mac in order to discourage them from aiding the Southern Ming.

Once the Southern Ming ceased to be a force in Vietnamese politics, the Qing dynasty quickly became the new mediator in the Le-Mac struggles. In 1667, the Mac royal family was expelled from Cao Bang by the Le and fled to Nanning in Guangxi. The following year, the Kangxi emperor (r. 1661–1722) spoke on behalf of the Mac, and in particular Pacification Commander Mac Nguyen Thanh, to the ruler Le Duy Ky. He insisted that since the Mac and the Le now lived in different places, there should be peace between them. He continued, “the members of the Mac family who rebelled are all dead, and besides, this all happened during the reign of the Ming emperor Jiajing, many years ago. Mac Nguyen Thanh previously sent tribute and expressed his sincere submission. I accepted him in the position of Pacification Commander, and then you also sent tribute and sincerely submitted, so I made you king.” Kangxi then wrote that despite this situation, the Le attacked the Mac without asking permission of the Qing court, actions that are “inappropriate in the extreme.” Finally, Kangxi demanded that the Le return part of Cao Bang to the Mac and cease making war with them.<sup>15</sup>

In 1673, the court learned the effect of this letter. Mac Nguyen Thanh wrote to complain that the Le Duy Ky only returned two of the four subprefectures, and requested further aid from the Qing to recover the other two. The Qing court decided that they were not interested in interceding further on behalf of the Mac. The Mac were not alone in trying to enlist the Qing government to their cause. The king of the Le sent tribute goods and a letter insisting that Cao Bang was part of his country, and that the Mac were rebellious ministers. The Ministry of War was assigned to look into the issue, reviewing letters from Mac Nguyen Thanh and asking for clarification from the Le.<sup>16</sup>

This uneasy situation would only be resolved with the outbreak of the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories (*sanfan zhi luan*) in 1673. The origins of the rebellion lay with three Ming turncoats granted generous fiefs in the South to reward them for their service to the Qing, the so-called “Three Feudatories.” Wu Sangui was in control of Yunnan and Guizhou, Shang Kexi in Guangdong, and Geng Zhongming in Fujian. These three also received massive amounts of the Qing government’s revenue, partly to maintain their armies. The spark that ignited the rebellion was the Kangxi emperor’s decision that it was time for these three to retire, allowing the Qing to rule the South outright.

<sup>15</sup> QSL, 6–7.   <sup>16</sup> QSL, 9–10.

Since Dai Viet was contiguous with the area in rebellion, it could not help getting drawn into the fray. In fact, it was the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories that resolved the power imbalance in Dai Viet. In 1677, the Qing court sent a letter to the Le asking for their support in putting down the rebellion. The Le seized this opportunity to win Qing support against the Mac by suggesting that the Mac had joined the rebels. According to the *Veritable Records of the Qing*, in December 1679, a letter from the Le ruler arrived that said:

The treacherous bandit Wu Sangui has been making mischief for several years. He blocked the route we use to send tribute. He has also sent phony ministers several times, ordering us to submit. I am loyal and do not dare stray. Now the treacherous minister of my country, Mac Nguyen Thanh, has turned his back on gratitude and followed them. He has close relations with Wu Sangui, and sent them men and horses, and secretly entered Cao Bang.

After deliberating, Qing advisors suggested that soldiers be sent to capture Mac Nguyen Thanh. The Kangxi emperor agreed.<sup>17</sup> Thus, when Mac Nguyen Thanh fled across the border into Guangxi, he was detained by Qing officials. In this way, the Le regained Cao Bang, and the Qing received Mac refugees.<sup>18</sup>

In 1681, the Revolt of the Three Feudatories was brought to an end, and southern China first brought under more than nominal Qing control. The Mac and their entourage, numbering more than one thousand people, passed into Guangxi, but were sent back. According to *The Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet*, the Le government pardoned them and relocated them within Dai Viet.<sup>19</sup> The Le took full advantage of the Revolt of the Three Feudatories to eliminate their enemies and expand their territory. In addition to reporting the Mac's collusion with the rebels, they also managed to seize forty *li* of territory along the border.

The Qing's concern with maintaining friendly tributary relations with both Vietnamese regimes was not merely a matter of ritual practice. While Dai Viet did not pose an existential threat to their northern neighbor, cross-border raids and conflicts were a constant headache for China's central government. These disputes were relatively minor, but sending troops to the far south was an expensive undertaking. Even understanding the cause and identifying the instigators of border disturbances taxed the information-gathering apparatus of the northern government. The Qing government, like their Ming predecessors, hoped to save money by delegating the task of stabilizing the borderlands to their Vietnamese

<sup>17</sup> QSL, 10. <sup>18</sup> Sun, 12. <sup>19</sup> TT, 1010–1012.

partners.<sup>20</sup> Seen in this light, we can see that both the Ming and the Qing were eager to forge partnerships with Dai Viet to effectively manage the borderlands.

The story of Chinese relations with Dai Viet is more complicated than one of opportunistic aggression. Northern governments strategically deployed rhetoric of cultural and historical difference when they wanted nothing to do with Dai Viet. When they needed aid and support, they admitted Dai Viet into the shared world of classical culture, accepting it as a center of rites and music and caps and gowns.

At the same time, Dai Viet states frequently called upon the Ming and Qing for assistance, while fiercely resisting uninvited attempts to intervene in their affairs. The existence of two rival regimes – the Mac and the Le – complicates simple narratives of state-to-state relations. The use of a shared vocabulary of classical culture obscures the many ways in which Vietnamese and Chinese scholars' underlying assumptions differed. The use of this shared vocabulary seems to imply Vietnamese passive acceptance of "Chinese" cultural influence, an implication contradicted by Dai Viet's insistence on claiming classical culture on their own terms as their own heritage. Still, it remains impossible to recount a history of Vietnam independent of China.

Looking back on the Mac crisis of the Jiajing reign, the Ming scholar Luo Yuejiong concluded in 1591: "Annan is a torpid, wild land ten thousand miles distant: if we released it, it would be a tiger crouching beyond the borders; if we retained it, it would be a maggot consuming us from within."<sup>21</sup> His comment sums up Ming officials' frustration in weighing Hongwu-era renunciation against Yongle-era intervention. From either perspective, Dai Viet was a problem. This simple fact punctures the selective forgetfulness of nationalist historiography and the myth of Vietnamese weakness, reminding us of the threat Dai Viet posed to its superpower neighbor. Dai Viet continued to be a problem into Qing dynasty. The Qing was compelled to court both the Mac and the Le dynasties, and to mediate between these contentious neighbors. The Qing had as much trouble mediating the Le-Mac conflict as had their predecessors, but they continued to do so nonetheless. This need to cooperate existed before and persisted well after the Le-Mac conflict.

<sup>20</sup> Requests to capture specific pirates or bandits were a regular feature of Qing-Le correspondence; the Le frequently complied with Chinese requests to arrest and execute these disruptive elements, but perhaps only when it served their own interests of maintaining internal stability and eliminating threats to Le central control. For several examples, see Niu Junkai, "Wanli nianjian Qinzhou shijian yu Zhong Yue guanxi," *Haijiao shi yanjiu*, Vol. 2 (2004): 71.

<sup>21</sup> Luo Yuejiong, *Xian bin lu*, 132.

The Qing government maintained a vigilant attitude toward Dai Viet, even as that state embarked on its own colonial adventures. Neither tiger nor maggot could be accepted with complacency. This is why despite tales of China's unilateral domination and Vietnam's cunning self-defense, in fact the most persistent theme of Sino-Viet relations is negotiation.

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### Abbreviations

ALT	Annan laiwei tuce jilue
ANZY	Annan zhiyuan (Ngan-nan tche yuan)
AZ	Annan zhilue
DNTL	Dai Nam thuc luc
DVTS	Dai Viet thong su
ML	Nan weng meng lu/Nam ong mong luc
MS	Ming shi
MSL	Ming shilu
QSL	Qing shilu
SZL	Shuyu Zhouzi lu
TT	Dai Viet su ky toan thu
VNKQ	Viet Nam khai Quoc chi truyen
YHY	Yuenan hanwen yanxing wenxian jicheng
YJS	Yue jiao shu
YS	Yuan shi

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