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Liam C. Kelley/Beyond the Bronze Pillars

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INTRODUCTION

This study is an effort to further our understanding of the historical politico-cultural relationship between the two polities that we now refer to as “Vietnam” and “China.” Although the topic has been treated countless times before, this study endeavors to revise some of the fundamental ideas that many people in the West harbor about this relationship.

While every scholar will acknowledge that Vietnamese culture and society were historically influenced by Chinese cultural practices, a good deal of scholarship in recent decades has nonetheless played down the importance of the Chinese elements in Vietnamese society. At times this has been achieved by explicitly emphasizing Vietnam’s ties with other lands in what we now call Southeast Asia, while at others it has come through more implicitly in discussions of the interaction between these two supposedly distinct traditions in which Chinese culture is depicted as somehow alien, and at times less organic, than indigenous Vietnamese traditions.

This study takes issue not only with these efforts to de-emphasize the degree of Sinitic influence in the Vietnamese past, but with the whole enterprise of seeking to draw a line between “Vietnamese” and “Chinese” cultures. It does so by examining a body of writings from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries known as Vietnamese “envoy poetry.” The various Vietnamese kingdoms that existed during this time period (the Le, the Tay Son, and the Nguyen) all acknowledged that their kingdom was a vassal of what we now call “China.” As part of this relationship, Vietnamese ruling houses were obliged to dispatch regular embassies to the Chinese capital to pres-

ent tribute. The envoys who served on these missions usually composed verse along the way, and many compiled these works into poetry collections upon returning home. This study examines some of this poetry as a means to gain an understanding of how Vietnamese envoys viewed the world they lived in as well as how they understood their kingdom's politico-cultural relationship with China.

While English-language research on Vietnamese history has often emphasized the sense of distinctness, and even equality, in both political and cultural terms, that the Vietnamese supposedly maintained through the centuries vis-à-vis the Chinese, the poetry that Vietnamese envoys composed while journeying through China suggests otherwise. Far from believing in their own cultural distinctness, Vietnamese envoys expressed in their poetry a profound identification with the cultural world which found its center at the Chinese capital. Further, while Vietnamese envoys felt that they were culturally part of a larger world, they expressed no opposition in their poetry to the fact of their kingdom's political subservience in that same world.

These two points—that Vietnamese envoys passionately believed that they participated in what we would now call the Sinitic or East Asian cultural world, and that they accepted their kingdom's vassal status in that world—are two of the main issues that this study seeks to discuss and illuminate through the examination of Vietnamese envoy poetry. In the process many other issues regarding the world and thoughts of Vietnamese envoys in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries will also be covered.

Although I believe that this work offers a considerable amount of documentation to support its claims, I suspect that many readers will wish to see the poems in this study better grounded in the socio-historical circumstances of their times. Such a task, however, is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Much of the poetry was composed during times of peace, so in all but a few instances, it is impossible to link individual poems to a specific historical event or context beyond the topic of the poem itself.

Nonetheless, I believe that this study compensates for its lack of historical specificity with the quantity and quality of documentation that it offers. In particular, I argue that when we see different Vietnamese envoys expressing the same sentiments over and over again, we can come to appreciate, albeit in a general sense, their ideas and the mental world that they inhabited. Further, it is this mental world

that I believe readers should come to appreciate, for it reveals aspects of the Vietnamese past which previous scholarship has not explicitly acknowledged.

Finally, while I am fully aware that the ideas of the small number of envoys examined here were not necessarily shared by all Vietnamese, or even by all members of the Vietnamese elite, however that category might be defined, I think this study offers insight into the depth of these men's beliefs. Further, I argue that such understanding will lead us to reconsider some of our basic ideas about the Vietnamese past. Is it useful, for instance, to see a division between "Chinese" and "Vietnamese" culture in the Vietnam of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries? Or was what we call "Chinese" culture simply a given to people in Vietnam during that period? The envoys whose poetry is discussed in the pages below did not think that what we today call "Chinese culture" was in any way alien or the possession of some other people. It was simply all that there was. How representative this attitude was of other members of the premodern Vietnamese elite remains to be examined. But the passion and depth of these envoys' beliefs suggests that they were probably not alone.