Voices from Afar: Yuan Diplomacy between Ritual and Practice

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Abstract

In their expansion in Southeast Asia, the medieval Mongols encountered many challenges, and among them there was the necessity to legitimize themselves in the eyes of those polities which had long established relations with the Song dynasty. In building his authority the founder of the Yuan dynasty, Qubilai Qa'an, shaped his diplomacy capitalizing on the skills of his non-Mongol subjects. From Confucian scholars to state officials, envoys and generals, many individuals participated in the Yuan diplomatic machine, thus finding their own justification to belong to the Yuan imperial project. The present paper sketches the narratives and rhetoric used by some of these individuals in the case of the Mongols' long and challenging interaction with the neighboring kingdom of Đại Việt, in North Vietnam.

Keywords

Yuan diplomacy – Qubilai Qa'an – Yuan chancellery practices – Yuan-Vietnam interactions – Chinese southeastern frontiers – elites

1 Introduction¹

Before the founding of the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1260-1368), centuries of contacts with Inner Asia had already deeply influenced the ways of Chinese diplomacy. A series of shared practices, such as the exchange of hostages, gift-policy,

¹ I am thankful to Hans van Ess and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on a previous version of this paper. All shortcomings remain my own.

rituals for the reception of foreign envoys among others, had been widely implemented inside and outside the Chinese realm.² They constituted a common language of interaction between China and its neighboring countries, and one that has been defined, since Skaff's study of the Tang dynasty (618-907), as a system of "Eurasian diplomatic rituals".³

The Song period (960-1279) witnessed a further development of Chinese diplomatic practices, through the establishment of a system which Frederik Mote aptly defined as "ritualised inter-state relations".⁴ Surrounded by strong powers in the North, and adopting a soft approach with important commercial partners in the South, the Song employed a model of diplomacy famously labelled as "among equals".⁵ In the context of these interactions between countries which had *de facto* similar political relevance, the Chinese empire managed to maintain the appearance of supremacy by dictating the formal aspects of diplomatic interactions, on the basis of Confucian rites (*li* 禮).⁶ The political value and perception of these rituals underwent several changes at various moments in Chinese history,⁷ and it is particularly during periods of non-Han rule that this ritual system became an even more crucial means of legitimization and authority-building. So, for the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644-1911), for example, Evelyn Rawski stressed that the importance of rituals resided in their creational potential: they constituted a means for the creation of a "hegemonic

2 These elements have been recently analysed in the context of Sino-Burmese relations under the Yuan in Sun Laichen, "Imperial Ideal Compromised: Northern and Southern Courts Across the New Frontier in the Early Yuan Era", in Anderson, J.A. and Whitmore J. (eds.), *China's Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier over Two Millennia, Handbook of Oriental Studies*, xxii (Leiden: Brill, 2014): pp. 193-223. For gift-policy as a fundamental aspect of Inner Asian diplomacy see Kradin, Nikolay N., "Nomadism, Evolution, and World-Systems: Pastoral Societies in Theories of Historical Development", *Journal of World-Systems Research*, viii/3 (2002): pp. 368-88. Parallel to this, both in Inner Asia and in the East, tribute diplomacy played an important role, on which see: Schurmann, H.F. "Mongolian Tributary Practices of the Thirteenth Century", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, xix/3-4 (1956): pp. 304-89. See also the paper of Qiu Yihao in this volume for further examples.

3 Skaff, Jonathan K., *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors. Culture, Power, and Connections*, Oxford Studies in Early Empires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): pp. 148-54.

4 Mote, Frederick W., *Imperial China 900-1800* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003): pp. 378-89.

5 Rossabi, M. (ed.), *China Among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbours, 10th-14th Centuries* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983). See also the work by Wright, David C., *From War to Diplomatic Parity in Eleventh-Century China: Sung's Foreign Relations with Kitan Liao* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

6 Mote, *Imperial China*: p. 381.

7 For an overview see: Pines, Yuri, "Disputers of the 'Li': Breakthroughs in the Concept of Ritual in Preimperial China", *Asia Major*, xiii/1 (2000): pp. 1-41.

order, that is, a widely accepted system of beliefs concerning the origins of power and the ethical correctness of the social order".⁸ In the specific framework of diplomacy, the function of rituals was to represent the superiority of the imperial power as "authoritative and God-given".⁹ Similarly, often enough, however, ritual orthodoxy was advocated by opponents to Inner Asian powers to justify their loyalty to the old system.¹⁰

In the case of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, the rhetoric of rituals was used to claim loyalty in a system of competing powers in Southeast Asia. The gradual conquest of coastal China in the 1270s only formally sanctioned the end of the Southern Song (1127-1279) and its replacement by the Yuan: in reality, the two powers kept competing for a few decades, as remnants of Song loyalists moved to the opposite shores of Southeast Asia, becoming integrated among the local political and military elites, and building anti-Mongol resistance movements in the states that welcomed them.¹¹

Furthermore, with his conquest of East Asia, the founder of the Yuan dynasty, Qubilai (r. 1260-94), drastically changed the system of balance established by the Song, by implementing ways of diplomacy and a rhetoric of inter-state relations based on the precedents established by Chinggis Khan (r. 1206-27). Following these precedents, Yuan diplomacy was aimed at expanding the empire (as complementary to war), and at establishing direct control over the submitted territories. This was achieved, similarly to other periods of

8 Rawski, Evelyn S., *The Last Emperors. A Social History of Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): p. 197.

9 Rawski, *Emperors*: p. 197. For an earlier period, see the study by Hans van Ess, who shows how proper ritual protocol was at the center of diplomatic debates between the Xiongnu and the Han dynasty. Ess, Hans van, "The Ethos of the Envoy and His Treatment by the Enemy in Han History", in Fiaschetti, Francesca, Schneider, Julia and Angela Schottenhammer ed., *Ethnicity and Sinicization Reconsidered: Workshop on Non-Han Empires in China*, Special Issue: Workshop Proceedings: Crossroads – Studies on the History of Exchange Relations in the East Asian World (Großheirath: Ostasien Verlag, 2012): pp. 27-43.

10 An example is again provided by Rawski, in her analysis of Korean diplomatic correspondence with the Ming (1368-1644) and Manchu rulers, in Rawski, Evelyn S., "War Letters: Hongtaiji and Injo during the Second Invasion of Korea", in Fiaschetti, Francesca and Schneider, Julia (eds.), *Political Strategies of Identity-Building in non-Han Empires in China* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012): pp. 171-84.

11 See on this: Chan Hok-Lam, "Chinese Refugees in Annam and Champa at the End of the Sung Dynasty", *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, VII/2 (September 1966): pp. 1-10. The topic is analysed also in Lo Jung-Pang, *China as a Sea Power 1127-1368. A Preliminary Survey of the Maritime Expansion and Naval Exploits of the Chinese People During the Southern Song and Yuan Periods*, edited by Bruce A. Elleman (Singapore, Hong Kong: NUS Press, Hong Kong University Press, 2012): pp. 326-9.

non-Han rule, by substituting the language of rituals, as noted by Mote, with the language of law (i.e., in the specific case of the Mongols, the *jasag*).¹²

Countries in Southeast and East Asia, which under the Song had enjoyed an independent status, resisted the demands of Mongol diplomacy, such as the appointment of a local supervisor (*daruyachi*), which they saw as an imposition and a limitation of their independence.¹³ Thus, in moments of military weakness, for example following the Mongol defeats against Đại Việt (ca. 1054-1400) and Champa (192-1832) or Japan,¹⁴ Qubilai was forced to soften his approach towards foreign countries, and to include, alongside Mongol traditions, the ways and rhetoric of Confucian-oriented inter-state relations.¹⁵ This alternance of the Chinggisid rhetoric of “non-negotiation” with softer attempts to a diplomatic compromise had been witnessed also in the case of Ilkhanid relations with the Latin West.¹⁶

In Yuan China, the combination of Chinggisid practices with traditional Chinese ways of diplomacy led to the creation of a complex machine coordinating several layers of communication and different centres of decision-making: from the emperors and the scholars who penned their edicts, to the Central Secretariat (*zhongshusheng* 中書省), to the Censorate (*yushitai* 御史臺) and the provincial administrations (*xingsheng* 行省), to the individuals (envoys, generals, etc.) involved in the communication and interaction with foreign powers.¹⁷

Rituality remained the pillar and framework of diplomatic encounters at the centres of power, namely at the royal courts in the occasion of diplomatic meetings, as well as in the diplomatic correspondence. At the frontiers of the

12 Mote, *Imperial China*: p. 381. On the legal value of Mongol imperial edicts see Voegelin, Eric, “The Mongol Orders of Submission to European Powers, 1245-1255”, *Byzantion*, xv (1940-1): pp. 378-413. Reprinted in a Revised Form, with English Translation for All Texts, in Sandoz, Ellis (ed.), *Published Essays: 1940-1952* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2000): pp. 76-125.

13 The *Yuanshi* 元史 (*History of the Yuan Dynasty*) explicitly records the complaints of the ruler of Đại Việt in this regard. See Song Lian 宋濂, *Yuanshi* 元史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, repr. 1976): juan 209: 4637.

14 For a survey of these campaigns, see: Lo Jung-Pang, *China as a Sea Power*: pp. 284-307.

15 For an overview of Qubilai's diplomatic rethoric see Fiaschetti, Francesca, “Tradition, Innovation and the Construction of Qubilai's diplomacy”, *Ming Qing yanjiu*, xviii (2014): pp. 65-96.

16 As famously analysed by: Aigle, Denise, “From ‘Non-Negotiation’ to an Abortive Alliance. Thoughts on the Diplomatic Exchanges between the Mongols and the Latin West”, in Aigle, Denise, *The Mongol Empire between Myth and Reality* (Leiden: Brill, 2014): pp. 159-98.

17 The various layers and institutions of Yuan diplomatic communication have been recently analysed in: Miao Dong 苗冬, *Yuandai shichen yanjiu*, 元代使臣研究 (PhD Dissertation, Tianjin: Nankai daxue, 2010).

empire, instead, mediation became a fundamental strategy to avoid war and rebellions. Also in this regard, the Yuan capitalized on the skills of various individuals at the service of the empire: envoys from Korea were employed in diplomatic exchanges with Japan, local chieftains were put in charge of the administration at the Southwestern frontier, experienced generals and merchants dealt with the Southeast and maritime Asia.¹⁸

Thus, in the framework of Yuan diplomacy, envoys and scholars promoting a rhetoric of ritualised relations (*li*) cooperated with administrators and military personnel stressing practical interest (*li* 利) over form.

In this context, each institution and each individual had the own voice, biases, cultural traditions and contributed to the integration of those perspectives in the ways of Mongol diplomacy. Chinese documents from the period record a plurality of testimonies of the various personnel involved in the Mongols' interactions with their neighbours in Southeast Asia. The writings of these official elites help us reframe Yuan diplomacy not merely as a business of the state, but as the sum of different narratives and of the initiative of several individuals, all of whom contributed in shaping Qubilai's interactions with his neighbours. The present paper will briefly analyse a few of these examples, comparing the narratives and rhetorics used by the multiple actors of Yuan diplomacy, in order to show how the flexibility of the system implemented by the Mongols allowed for the accommodation of the interests and perspectives of both rulers and subjects.

2 The Troubled Frontier

At the Southeastern frontier of the Yuan realm, the difficult relations with the kingdom of Đại Việt required Qubilai's diplomatic and military efforts for more than thirty years. Relations with Đại Việt began with the Mongol victory over the ruler of the Trần dynasty (1225-1400) in 1258, and his formal submission

18 Examples of how Korean personnel were involved in Mongol-Japan relations, see: Lo Jung-pang, *China as a Sea-power*: pp. 248-51. For the Yuan attitude toward the Southwestern frontier see Anderson, James A., "Man and Mongols: The Dali and Đại Việt Kingdoms in the Face of the Northern Invasion", in Anderson J.A. and Whitmore, J. (eds.), *China's Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier over Two Millennia*, Handbook of Oriental studies, volume XXII (Leiden: Brill, 2014): pp. 106-34. For the mediation of generals at the Southern frontiers, as well as in maritime Asia, see the example of Yang Tingbi, analysed by: Mukai, Masaki, "« Yang Tingbi Pinkouji » zaikao – Hubilie chao haishang shili de yige shili yanjiu" « 楊庭璧平寇記 » 再考—忽必烈朝海上勢力的一個事例研究, *Yuanshi luncong* 元史論叢 14 (2014): pp. 251-9.

to the Yuan.¹⁹ Whereas tributes arrived regularly to the Mongol court, other demands, such as sending hostages from the royal family, the supply of human tributes, or of military aid to the Mongols' campaigns against Champa, were never respected.²⁰ The Mongols' interest in Vietnam, which had started in connection with the Mongol-Song conflict, was also very much related to the Yuan attempt to control the Southeast Asian trade routes, especially the ones passing through Champa.²¹ Thus, Qubilai's requests to the rulers of Đại Việt were not only a matter of diplomatic performance, but were meant to set foot in the country and allow for a more direct control of the Indochinese Peninsula. However, the interaction with Đại Việt developed during several decades in which Qubilai's expansion was directed towards various fronts at the same time. Thus, in moments of military and economic weakness, the Mongol emperor alternated punitive expeditions towards Đại Việt with repeated embassies and numerous written communications. The *Yuanshi* 元史 (*History of the Yuan Dynasty*: 1370) section on Annam (*juan* 209) testifies to this mixed strategy of menace and compromise, providing one of the most detailed accounts of the principles and forms of Yuan diplomacy.²² In the documents collected in this dynastic history, the struggle between the two powers is fought on the battlefield of diplomatic rituals and ceremonies, as Yuan envoys, scholars and officials complain about the mistakes and misunderstandings deployed in the interaction between rulers of Đại Việt and the Mongols.

Debate about the correct performance of ceremonies, as well as defense of the ideology beyond them, became an occasion for all the various agents in the Yuan diplomatic machine to express their own perceptions of world order and the division of tasks in the construction of the empire. For example, in

19 For a recent analysis of these relations see: Anderson, "Man and Mongols".

20 As analysed in: Sun Laichen, "Imperial ideal".

21 For a recent analysis see: Vu Hong Lien, "The Mongol Navy: Kublai Khan's Invasion in Đại Việt and Champa", Nalanda-Sriwijaya. Centre Working Paper No. 25 (June 2017), available at: <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/nscwps25.pdf> (last accessed, October 22th, 2019).

22 *Yuanshi*, 209: 4633-52. This chapter is the longest in the section on foreign countries (*waiyi* 外夷), and the only one with detailed records of diplomatic exchanges. Whereas the military descriptions are consistent with the records of the *Compendium for Governing the World* (*Jingshi dadian* 經世大典, compiled 1331), edicts and the descriptions of diplomatic missions are consistent with the documents collected in the "Brief Sketch on Annam" (*Annan zhiliue* 安南志略, 1280s) compiled by the vietnamese defector to the Yuan, Lê Tắc 黎則 (1263-1340). For the *Jingshi dadian* see Su Tianjue 蘇天爵. *Yuan wen lei* 元文類, (repr. Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1983): *juan* 41: 25-8. For the relevant sections of the *Annan zhiliue* see Lê Tắc 黎則, *Annan zhiliue* 安南志略, edited by Wu Shangqing 武尚清 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995): especially *juan* 2: 46-65 and *juan* 5: 104-32.

the edicts of Qubilai, the highest and most authoritative layer of communication, the correct ritual system is one rooted in Chinggisid diplomatic tradition. For example, it is notable that Qubilai insisted that the ruler should personally come to court to receive investiture directly from him.²³ This, as Jürgen Paul argues, was an important element of an even older Inner Asian tradition, thus showing that the main source of legitimacy for the founder of the Yuan dynasty still remained in these diplomatic practices.²⁴ The rulers of Đại Việt, in reply, motivated their resistance by appealing to the conventions of a Confucian-oriented system of vassalage. In this context, the *Yuanshi* reports the intervention of the Central Secretariat, the second highest organ issuing diplomatic correspondence after the emperor, which addressed the same issue from a different perspective. In the year 1273, in occasion of a Yuan embassy, it was reported that the ruler of Đại Việt had received the imperial edict without bowing, and that he was culpable of other mistakes in the ceremonial protocol. A written communication by the ruler Guang Bing 光昺 (Trần Quang Bính, r. 1258-78) to Qubilai justified this behaviour by means of Confucian rhetoric, claiming that, his role as king (*wangren* 王人) did not imply a need to bow.²⁵ To this, the Central Secretariat replied with a lengthy explanation:

In the past years, at their return, the envoys reported that every time the king received the orders of the Son of Heaven, he just stood respectfully and did not bow. During the audience with the envoys or in the occasion of a banquet, he sat in a higher position than them. Now we read, in the document that came here, that he himself says: having received the title of king, is this not the same²⁶ as being a “person of the king”? When we check the *Chunqiu* records that put the king’s representatives above the feudal lords, [Du Yu’s] *Explanations of Chunqiu Rules* say: “The king’s representative is the lower *shi* (士) rank”. So, while among the five ranks the ruler of a state is the noblest among the external subjects, the lower *shi* is the lowest of the internal subjects. That the lowest is placed above the

23 This was the first and most important request of the Yuan to their subjects (the “Six Duties”), as mentioned in: *Yuanshi* 209: 4635 and *Annan zhilüe* 2: 47. See also: Fiaschetti, “Tradition, Innovation”: pp. 79-80.”

24 Paul, Jürgen, “Sanjar and Atsız: Independence, Lordship, and Literature”, in Paul, Jürgen (ed.), *Nomad Aristocrats in a World of Empires*, Nomaden Und Sesshaften 17 (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2013): pp. 81-130.

25 Relevant passages in *Yuanshi* 209: 4636-7.

26 See: *Chunqiu Shili* 春秋釋例, *juan* 3, (“稱王人者，下士也.”), in: Ruan Yuan 阮元, ed., *Chongkan Songben Zuozhuan zhushu fu jiaokan ji* 重刊宋本左傳注疏附校勘記, vi of *Chongkan Songben Shisanjing zhushu fu jiaokan ji*, 重刊宋本十三經注疏附校勘記 Nanchang fu xue, 1815 carving, repr. Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1955), *juan* 8: 141-1.

noblest is perhaps because the king's mandate is considered important. It is only in later periods [i.e. after the Chunqiu] that "ranked king" became a title, the noblest among the feudal lords. Looking at this, how could the title of king be considered as [just] a "person"? Does the king not know this, that he speaks like this? Or are these words rather the mistake of the ministers, who write his speeches?²⁷

In this missive, the political struggle between two rulers is brought out of the realm of nobility titles and political hierarchy, into the realm of administration and bureaucracy. The rank of the ruler is diminished to a simple title, and the actual agents of diplomacy are here the ministers who write the edicts for the sovereigns, thus giving a more nuanced image of the rulers' authority in the diplomatic process. The closing sentence underlines that the actual debate of interstate relations is handled by scholars (*shi* 士) and ministers (*chen* 臣), who are also the ones who supposedly know the proper order of things and their ritual expression.

The stress on the correct ceremonial, and the debate around the proper interpretation of Confucian texts is possibly a way for the people involved in the Central Secretariat to highlight the importance of their role in maintaining and promoting imperial policies. It might be a way of finding their place, their justification to participate in a fast-changing political system, and one governed by a foreign dynasty.

3 Envoys

As testified by various sources from the period, and analysed by recent scholarly studies, envoys played a fundamental role in Mongol diplomatic communication, but often also a very dangerous one. As representatives of the imperial power, they were highly respected within the Mongol Empire, but often at risk of life in the countries where Mongol domination was not well received. Yuan

²⁷ 比歲奉使還者言，王每受天子詔令，但拱立不拜，與使者相見或燕席，位加於使者之上。今覽來書，自謂既受王爵，豈非王人乎？考之春秋，敘王人於諸侯之上，釋例云：王人蓋下士也。夫五等邦君，外臣之貴者也。下士，內臣之微者也。以微者而加貴者之上，蓋以王命為重也。後世列王為爵，諸侯之尤貴者，顧豈有以王爵為人者乎？王寧不知而為是言耶，抑辭令之臣誤為此言耶？ *Yuanshi* 209: 4636-7.

envoys to Southeast Asia, in fact, were often detained (as in the case of Đại Việt), wounded (as in the case of Java) or even killed.²⁸

Furthermore, alongside specialized personnel, the Yuan maintained the Mongol tradition of employing various categories of people (merchants, military personnel, etc.) as envoys. This was also due to the fact that these envoys were not all equal in rank, as they were sent by various offices and for different purposes: from the ones dispatched by the emperors themselves, to the representatives employed by the members of the imperial family, or by the various offices involved in diplomatic communication. The different backgrounds and personal interests of this variety of personnel also had an impact on diplomatic exchanges, as the envoys enjoyed a privileged status and a great deal of autonomy and power, which on occasion they even misused.²⁹

In the exchanges with Đại Việt, Chinese sources record the opinions of the professional envoys sent by the Yuan on such matters. As they were trained in diplomatic ceremonial protocol, they were aware of their political function and of the importance of maintaining proper conduct. This is voiced, for example, by Liu Yuanheng 劉元亨 (fl. 1311–20), a Yuan diplomat to the Đại Việt king active during the mid-Yuan period. Being presented with some gifts, most probably bribes, he refused them with the following words:

Yuan Heng again sent a notice, in which he complained that the decorated excuses of Annam were not honest, and that he could not be bribed with money: “Gold from the South, ivory from elephants, Your country has many treasures, but an envoy cannot be bribed with treasures. The treasures you offered will solely pay my travel back.”³⁰

Furthermore, the *Annan zhiliüe* (*Brief Sketch on Annam*) records the communication of another envoy to Đại Việt, Zhang Lidao 張立道 (d. 1298),³¹ a diplomat and scholar, who also authored a series of poems and records of his frequent travels to Vietnam and Yunnan.³² In a letter dated 1291, he addressed the ruler of Đại Việt as follows:

28 These examples are surveyed in: Miao Dong, *Yuandai Shichen*. On the role of envoys under the Mongols see also Broadbridge, Anne, *Kingship and Ideology in the Islamic and Mongol Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): pp. 20–6.

29 For some examples see: Miao Dong, *Yuandai Shichen* (section on Annam at pp. 194–207).

30 元亨復牒責安南飾辭不實，却其貨賂，且曰：「南金、象齒，貴國以為寶，而使者以不貪為寶。來物就付回使。」*Yuanshi* 209: 4651.

31 For his biography see *Yuanshi* 167: 3915–9.

32 *Yuanshi* 167: 3919.

When we respectfully received the imperial order to go as an envoy to [Your] distant country, on the day of the departure, the high ministers of the Court told us: “An Imperial command is just like Heaven and Earth are to the myriad beings, there is none who is not included in it. However, this little country is full of suspicion. You should proclaim even more to the prince: Great indeed is the Yuan dynasty! From the Three Eras on down, there has been nothing like it.”³³

Further, it continues:

[...] The Song state, after more than three hundred years, was swept away in a single day. Annam [and the Song] in the past were mutually dependent as son and father, as teeth and lips. “When the lips are gone, the teeth are cold,” and when the father is dead the son suffers; this is in the order of things.³⁴

Here again, the reference to images of traditional Chinese culture is used as the main argument for establishing a hierarchical order of foreign relations, thus revealing, on the one hand, the intellectual background of the author. On the other hand, Yuan personnel, by recurring to such notions, proverbs and elements of Chinese culture, appeal to a shared rhetoric, which the rulers of Đại Việt had acquired over longstanding contacts with China. This placed the Mongols – and their ways of diplomacy – as the legitimate successors of the Song, something that is stressed even further by inserting the Yuan in a Chinese representation of history (i.e. through the comparison with the “three Eras” of Xia 夏, Shang 商 and Zhou 周).

This narrative on the one hand justifies Zhang Lidao's service to the Mongols, as they are described as a legitimate dynasty of China, but even more so stresses his agency in contributing to the construction of the proper world-order. The envoy here is not simply conveying the message of his emperor, it is up to him to use his skills as a diplomat that there were previous military and diplomatic efforts which had failed to win over the suspicions of the ruler of Đại Việt.

33 我輩欽奉帝命，使此遐方。發乘之日，朝廷大臣有言曰：詔旨，猶天地之於萬物，無不包涵。雖然小國多疑，汝等更當宣言於世子。大哉，元朝自三代以降，未之有也。 *Annan zhilüe* 5: 106.

34 [...] 宋之有國三百餘年，一旦掃地俱空。與安南昔為父子之國，唇齒之邦，唇亡齒寒，父亡子單，理則然也。 *Annan zhilüe* 5: 107.

4 Generals

Another important category of individuals involved in the Yuan–Đại Việt diplomatic interactions is that of the local governors or generals appointed by the Mongols to supervise the frontier. They were often Han or Jürchen generals, whose knowledge of the local context would prove useful in mediating between the local population and the policies of the Yuan court.³⁵ Given their distance from the centers of power, frontiers were often troubled by revolts, rebellions and skirmishes with the government.³⁶ In this context, the rhetoric of ritual propriety was substituted by discourses of convenience, interest and common sense. The mediation of experienced officials was fundamental. In their communications, military officials stressed their strategic importance as mediators and as agents of change, depicting their geographical liminality (being at the frontier) as a central moment in the process of decision-making and governance. A notable example is the case of Liu Guojie 劉國傑 (1234–1305), a general who dealt, during most of his career, with rebellions of local minorities at the border between the Yuan and the Đại Việt realms.³⁷

The *Annan zhiliu* records a letter sent by Liu Guojie to the ruler of Đại Việt regarding the fact that he had granted asylum to Huang Shengxu 黃聖許 (fl. 1290s), a man from the Upper Tongking Gulf, who led a force of twenty-thousand anti-Mongol rebels in 1292 and, after its suppression, fled to Đại Việt, where he received asylum.³⁸ The ruler of Đại Việt refused to send him back to the Yuan court for judgement and punishment, a decision to which Liu Guojie replied as follows:

Because of this event, I am concerned for you: it is indeed just as raising a tiger at home to serve as a guard for oneself. It is like holding a sword as sharp as the Tai'e by the blade and to give it to somebody else by the handle. It is truly clear that there is no benefit in this for oneself. Even the most stupid person would know why this is so. [...] First tell me, our Holy

35 On the employment of Jürchen military personnel by the Yuan dynasty see Rachewiltz, Igor de, "Personnel and Personalities in North China in the Early Mongol Period." *JESHO* IX/1-2 (November 1966): pp. 88-144.

36 For some examples, see Buell, Paul D., "The Sung Resistance Movement, 1276-1279: The End of an Era", *Annals of the Chinese Historical Society of the Pacific Northwest*, III (1985-6): pp. 138-86.

37 For his biography: *Yuanshi* 162: 3807-12.

38 On the Huang clan and the episode involving Huang Shengxu, see Anderson, James A., "Commissioner Li and Prefect Huang: Sino-Vietnamese Frontier Trade Networks and Political Alliances in the Southern Song", *Asia Major*, Third Series, XXVII/2 (2014): pp. 29-51.

Dynasty with you or Huang Shengxu with you – which one of these alliances is strong, which one is weak?³⁹

And it continues:

[...] Why do I say this? To punish a rebel for his crime, does not count among [the crimes] for which there is no corresponding designation. If an army fights for the right cause, it will be strong, and victory or loss will make the distinction.⁴⁰

The rhetoric and arguments of the Yuan general are clearly different from the ways of expression of the diplomats mentioned above: the language is more direct, and the author appeals to the common sense of the foreign ruler, to matters of strength and weakness, more than to notions of ritual property and world-order. The legitimacy of the Mongols' requests is expressed through the rhetoric of "just war", which also motivates Liu Guojie's personal engagement ("why do I say this?") in this issue.

5 Conclusion

Yuan diplomatic communication was characterized by a plurality of discourses centered on legitimacy and world-order. It is exactly this plurality that allowed both subjects and rulers to see the imperial project of the Mongols as a righteous one. The examples presented here are but a small selection, and a more in-depth study of the sources is surely needed. Nevertheless, they illustrate the high degree of autonomy and agency of the individuals involved in the Yuan diplomatic machine (and in the Yuan system of government in general). The agency of various mediators in shaping the policies of the medieval Mongols is a widely researched topic.⁴¹ However, the sources reviewed here approach the matter from a different angle: they show how these elites, by using a variety of narratives, made the imperial project of the Mongols their own. Diplomatic exchanges, and the shifting reference to matters of ritual and

39 我故為執事憂之。如養虎於家，欲以自衛；倒持太阿，授人以柄；誠不為利於己也明矣，雖至愚亦知其所以然矣 [...] 初謂聖朝之與執事，而執事之與黃聖許，孰重孰輕？ *Annan zhilüe* 5: 108-9.

40 [...] 奚以言之？討叛以罪，不為無名，師直則壯，勝負乃分。 *Annan zhilüe* 5: 109.

41 A now-standard study is Allsen, Thomas, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

practice constituted a functional framework in which each one of them could express his own cultural traditions and personal biases, thus shaping their service to the Mongols as part of their own identity.

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