CHAPTER 2

Constructing Local Narratives: Spirits, Dreams, and Prophecies in the Medieval Red River Delta

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Introduction

Here we examine spirits in the medieval Red River delta and stories that were written about them. By “medieval,” I am referring to the long period of time stretching roughly from the eighth or ninth century of the Common Era to the end of the fifteenth century. In this time, the majority of stories about spirits in the Red River delta were created. The people who created these stories constituted a diverse group, including provincial administrators, Buddhist monks, and local monarchs and their officials. However, they all created stories about the spirits for a similar purpose, to control the spirits of that place and the people who worshipped them. These local narratives appeared as different sets of regional powers sought dominance over the localities and their spirits.

These tales have been examined before. In 1986, Keith Taylor published a pioneering and detailed article entitled “Authority and Legitimacy in 11th Century Vietnam.” In that article, Taylor employs stories about the spirits to argue that the Lý dynasty (1010–1225), the first Vietnamese dynasty to endure for a considerable period of time, was not a centralized state and did not employ Sinitic forms of governance. Instead, Taylor argues that the Lý tapped into the power of something which he labels “Lý Dynasty religion” and used this power to hold their realm together. This Lý Dynasty religion was not an organized religion, but something more akin to an informal understanding and relationship between local spirits and rulers whereby the spirits would grant their support to rulers they approved. To understand how it worked, it is probably best to cite Taylor directly.

... the Lý kings posed as men, not gods, whose superior moral qualities, broadly defined in Buddhist terms as compassionate and humanitarian, stimulated and aroused the supernatural powers dwelling in the terrain of the Việt realm (mountains, rivers, trees, fields) and in the historical memory of the Việt people (deceased heroes); these powers were aroused by royal virtue to declare themselves as protector spirits of the realm.
Ideas from Chinese classics and histories were occasionally cited as textual authority of explaining or justifying this process of “declaring the unfathomable.”

In other words, Taylor argued that the spirits of the Việt realm “declared” their support for Lý Dynasty rulers and that this declaration of support was recorded in stories about the spirits which were compiled starting around that time. Further, he also argues that this phenomenon where spirits offered their support to rulers actually began during the millennium of Chinese rule and that two Chinese administrators, Shi Xie in the early third century and Gao Pian in the ninth, had each received such support. Therefore the Lý Dynasty kings, Taylor argues, were tapping into a local tradition of rulership which relied on the assistance of the spirits.

In contrast to the continuities in a style of rulership which Taylor detected in stories about the spirits, Olga Dror has more recently argued for different phases in the manner in which spirits were depicted. Employing the same sources which Taylor did, Dror contends that from an early writing which focused on describing spirits as objects of devotion, spirits were later appropriated by the elite and explained back to the folk in terms favorable to the elite’s perspective of what constituted good and bad behavior. In other words, stories about the spirits became, as Dror states, “anti-folk stories” employed by the elite in an effort to mould and control the common people. Finally, Dror also sees a process of historicization in the fifteenth century where mythical information about antiquity was combined with stories about spirits.

In this paper I examine some of the same stories about spirits which Taylor and Dror have discussed, but put forth a different argument. Like Taylor, I see a continuity in the importance of the spirit-ruler relationship. However, in partial agreement with Dror, I see the stories created about the spirits as anti-folk stories. In particular, rather than contending that the spirits “declared” their support for rulers, I argue that it was more likely the case that rulers created stories in which the spirits were said to have declared their support in order to convince local people that they too should support the ruler. Where I differ

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1 Keith W. Taylor, “Authority and Legitimacy in 11th Century Vietnam,” in Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries, ed., David G. Marr and A.C. Milner (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Canberra: Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1986), 146.