Chapter 8

Northern Relations for Đại Việt: China Policy in the Age of Lê Thánh Tông (r. 1460–1497)

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Introduction

By the middle of the fifteenth century, the frontier between the northern regime of the Ming and the realms lying in the southern half of the Đông world had re-formed. Stretching across this world from the newly re-independent Đại Việt through Tai realms all the way to Myanmar, this frontier became a territory in which both northern and southern courts sought to deal with each other. Reaching across this frontier, as well as striving to affect events within it, these courts interacted culturally as well as politically in order to shape it. By now, the fear inflicted, first by the Mongols, then by the Ming, had dissipated after their defeats. With the political situation stabilized, how did the confident southern courts, beyond the frontier from the northern court, react to Ming cultural expectations? To what extent did these regimes reject or accept Ming cultural assumptions?

In Đại Việt, at a time of great internal change, the Vietnamese were led by their scholars to join the Sinic “domain of manifest civility” and to merge with the Ming cultural approach. They thus acknowledged its rightness, all the while resolutely insisting on their autonomy and the newly re-established position of the border to their north. Where other courts farther west (as in Ava) bristled at having to play the game of foreign relations, quite new to them, the Vietnamese were both old hands at Chinese diplomatic procedure and now, at least in part of the Thăng Long court, coming to believe firmly in the values underlying it. Feeling confident and secure with their firearms and their northern border, the Vietnamese proceeded to act as they saw fit within their increasingly prosperous and strong realm as well as along this frontier to the west.

1 This paper was originally presented at the Association of Asian Studies Annual Meeting, Chicago, 2005.

2 L. Kelley, Beyond the Bronze Pillars (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 30–1.
How had the people of Đại Việt conceived of themselves vis-à-vis the varied regimes of the Central Kingdom (Zhongguo) lying immediately adjacent to them? Their South (Nam) had been dealing with the distant Sinic North (Bắc) since the forces of Qin Shihuangdi (r. 221–210 BCE) had united the Chinese states and moved southeast into the coastal maritime regimes, those of the Yue peoples. The far reach of these territories, known to the Chinese as the Southern Yue (C. Nan Yue; V. Nam Việt), had come to exist as the southern frontier of the Northern sphere from the late third century BCE into the tenth century CE. At some times the far southern fringe of great empires (Han [206 BCE–220 CE], Tang [618–907]), at others one regional territory competing with other such fragments of the Northern empire, this distant edge of the Sinic realm (at first Jiaozhi; later Annan) had teetered on existence within or without that realm and its culture.

This existential question, in or out, had numerous facets to it: political, diplomatic, cultural, economic, etc. The indigenous decision would set the location of the Sinic southern frontier at its eastern end. This had occurred in the tenth century as the realm of Đại Việt grew and developed through the mid-eleventh. It and the Song regime (960–1279) to the north had carved out political structures on top of the existing local socio-economic systems and in the process formed this segment of the frontier. These local patterns had carried forth both their own indigenous cultural elements and those they gained from the imperial system and Sinic civilization. As the Lý of Đại Việt (1009–1225) established their dynastic monarchy in the Vietnamese capital of Thăng Long (now Hà Nội) during the eleventh century, its rulers constructed a royal tradition that secured the realm’s place in both time and space, apart from, yet sharing in, the northern realm.

Carrying on the regional culture that combined the local and the Sinic imperial presence, the constructed tradition of the Lý developed a spiritual

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