Introduction

“On August 28, 1730 in Sicheng, southwest Guangxi, a man stood trial.” His name was Mạc Kính Thự, and he had been arrested by Qing soldiers on charges of collaborating with a wanted man named Li Buweng, also known as Li Jinxing (‘Golden Star [=Venus]’ Li) and Li Panwang (‘King Pan’ Li). Li Buweng was apparently the leader of a covert syndicate that had disseminated documents of seditious intent throughout the Guangxi-Yunnan border region. In addition, Li had apparently also developed close ties with two Qing frontier officials, Cen Yinghan of a longtime local Tusi (native chieftain) family and the magistrate Shen Zhaoqian. Both men were subsequently removed from office. Mr. Li remained at large. Mạc Kính Thự would spend the remaining part of his life as a political refugee in Sicheng, likely under the intense scrutiny of Qing local authorities.

Who was Mạc Kính Thự? What was the precise nature of his relationship to the other characters in the narrative painted hitherto? Here we are using information drawn mainly from published Qing archival sources to examine that relationship within the context of the Qing southern frontier between 1677 and 1730. In exploring the dynamic networks forged among different groups within the Chinese Deep South, I argue that, following their abandonment of Cao Bằng in the northwest mountains of Đại Việt in 1677, remnants of the formerly royal Mạc (1528–92) power established a new political base in the Guangxi-Yunnan borderlands, where they had been resettled. From there they could travel with ease to and from Đại Việt in their bid to restore their fallen dynasty. This essay is divided into three parts. I first trace the history of the royal Mạc clan up to 1677, when it was permanently expelled from its last Vietnamese stronghold of Cao Bằng and eventually resettled in Guangxi. I then examine the clan’s development in relation to the Qing conquest of China during the mid-seventeenth century. The third and final section looks at the early eighteenth century, during which Mạc associations with popular religious sectarianism caught the attention of newly active Qing officials serving in south and
southwest China. Such cross-border politics and heterodoxies represent the kinds of dilemmas these officials faced in the frontier region at the precise time of increasing state action there and which they hoped to rein in through their culturally transforming acts.

The Mạc and Đại Việt up to 1677

Mạc Kính Thự was a descendant of the Mạc royal clan of Đại Việt (1528–92) who had controlled much of the Red River delta from their power center Thăng Long (modern-day Hà Nội) after its founder Mạc Đăng Dung (r. 1528–40) deposed the twenty-year-old Lê monarch Cung Hoàng (r. 1522–27). The Lê (1428–1527, 1592–1788), however, continued to hold out against the Mạc in the mountains of Thanh Hoá, southwest of the capital, for over six decades, supported by the Trịnh and Nguyễn warlord families. In 1592, the Lê army led by General Trịnh Tùng launched an assault on Thăng Long. The Mạc ruler Mậu Hợp (r. 1562–92) reportedly fled the capital in trepidation, but was eventually captured and killed by his pursuing adversaries. Thereafter, members of the Mạc royal clan continued to resist the restored Lê monarchy from different parts of northern Đại Việt, including territories within what are today the provinces of coastal Hải Dương and highland Lạng Sơn, Thái Nguyên, and Cao Bằng. By 1598, however, Mạc power had become largely concentrated in the hands of one warlord, Mạc Kính Cung (?–1625), whose forces were mainly stationed in Thái Nguyên and Cao Bằng. The role of Cao Bằng as the last bastion
