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"Confucianism" in Vietnam: A State of the Field Essay

This is an essay on a topic that I have great difficulty in defining but that I immediately recognize when I see it. I cannot adequately explain what it is, but I can find it almost everywhere in the recorded history of Vietnam. It is there in Lý Công Uẩn's decision to move the capital in the eleventh century, and it is also there in the words of the mediums who recorded messages from the goddess Liễu Hạnh in the early twentieth century. Gia Long employed it to justify his ascension to power in the early nineteenth century, and Trần Thái Tông did the same to explain his decision to step down from the throne to become a monk in the thirteenth century. And, last but not least, it was Lý Văn Phức's fervent belief in it that led him to record his outrage over a sign that he saw outside a hostel in Fujian Province in the 1820s.

The topic that I cannot clearly define or adequately explain but that I will discuss at length in this essay is "Confucianism," and Confucianism in Vietnam in particular. The reason I have difficulty in defining and explaining this term is because, as one scholar has aptly stated, Confucianism is "an invented signifier that bears a problematic relationship to the thing it signifies."[1] The problematic character of this relationship stems from the fact that although Confucianism emerged in China, there is no term in Chinese for which "Confucianism" is a translation. Instead, this term is partially of Western manufacture and mold, and it tends to essentialize a rather disparate set

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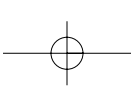
of practices and beliefs.[2] Nonetheless, scholars agree that this disparate set of practices and beliefs that Confucianism problematically signifies did exist in the past, and to some extent it still exists today. The difficulty lies in finding the vocabulary to describe and identify it.

In recent years some scholars of East Asian history and culture have begun to employ the concept of a "repertoire" to discuss "religions" such as Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. I place "religion" in scare quotes here precisely because it is the inability of this Western term, with its connotations of doctrinal adherence, to adequately explain the form and function of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism in East Asia's past that has led scholars to seek out more appropriate terminology. Seeing Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism as repertoires, or more specifically as "repertoires of resources," from which individuals marshaled different ideas and practices at different times and in different circumstances but which never constituted an all-encompassing ethos, or cultural system, is one technique that some scholars are currently proposing.[3]

In the introduction to a recent conference volume entitled "Rethinking Confucianism," for instance, the authors define Confucianism as a "repertoire of world-ordering devices," or, alternatively, as a "repertoire of common techniques or tactics," that "included techniques . . . for remaking and reproducing state and society on the model of a Confucian golden age in the distant past."[4] These scholars recognize that although there was a historical individual whom we refer to as Confucius, the elements that make up the Confucian repertoire did not begin with Confucius, for much of his intellectual output was produced in reference to earlier periods of history when, he believed, state and society had enjoyed a greater degree of prosperity. And although information about antiquity therefore constituted a critical resource in this repertoire, countless other resources were also incorporated in the centuries after the time of Confucius, from death rituals to reading techniques. Therefore, in discussing Confucianism it is impossible to demarcate any clear bounds of an enduring entity, as a term such as "religion" urges us to do, for the elements in this repertoire have constantly changed and their use has never been exclusive.

A phenomenon that is equally difficult to describe is the spread of this repertoire to a land like Vietnam. Some scholars have referred to this as a



process of "Confucianization."[5] However, in doing so, they have employed a definition of Confucianism that is much narrower than the concept of a Confucian repertoire. A term that can encompass a wider range of beliefs and practices is "Sinicization" (or "Sinification"), yet this term is also problematic. In particular, the fact that under conquest dynasties certain cultural practices in China changed while they were upheld in lands like Vietnam and Korea calls into question the value of a term such as "Sinicization" for describing the appropriation of the Confucian and other repertoires by people like the Vietnamese and Koreans.[6]

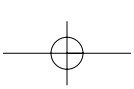
Part of the issue here is again that, as with the term "Confucianism," the signifiers "Confucianization" and "Sinicization" are modern Western terms for which there is no exact original indigenous equivalent. However, prior to the twentieth century there was an understanding that there were two main categories of people—"Efflorescents" and "Barbarians"—and that it was possible to move from one to the other. "Efflorescent" [*Hoa*] is a term that is now usually translated as "Chinese," but it was originally more of a cultural than an ethnic label. Efflorescents were people who maintained what they believed was a sophisticated and interrelated system of ritual and governance that had first taken form in distant antiquity, a system that Confucius later looked back to as a model for the people of his day to follow. The Efflorescents judged the sophistication of their system to be superior to the practices of both the peoples on the peripheries of the Efflorescent culturo-ritual sphere and those within the Efflorescent realm who did not follow these practices, called "Barbarians" [*Di*]. Nonetheless, the border between these two categories of people was theoretically amorphous. Efflorescents could journey to Barbarian areas and work to transform local practices, and Barbarians could move into the Efflorescent realm and by learning the proper ritual practices, become Efflorescents themselves. Indeed, it was held that two of the most revered Efflorescent emperors in antiquity, Shun and Zhou Wenwang, had both originally come from Barbarian areas.

Educated Vietnamese upheld this view of the world throughout much of the history of imperial Vietnam. They were convinced that they maintained the same interrelated system of ritual and governance that had first become manifest in distant antiquity, and that they also upheld the many beliefs and cultural practices that had adhered to this original system in the centuries

subsequent to that time. Chinese, on the other hand, did not necessarily view the Vietnamese in this same light. Hence, when the Nguyễn Dynasty scholar-official Lý Văn Phức journeyed to Fujian Province on a diplomatic mission in the 1820s, he found that the hostel where he was scheduled to lodge had a sign posted outside that read, "Hostel for the An Nam Barbarians" [*An Nam Di Quán*]. Outraged, Lý Văn Phức vented his anger in a document where he defended his home by stating the following:

> As for the laws for governing the kingdom, they are based on those of the Two Emperors and the Three Monarchs [of antiquity]. With regard to the transmission of the way, it takes as its root the Six Classics and the Four Books, the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, and those of Zhu Xi and Cheng Yi. As for learning, it springs forth from the *Zuo Commentary* and the "Odes of the States," and can be traced back to Ban Zhao and Sima Qian. As for writing, poetry and rhapsodies, there is the *Collected Writings of the Zhaoming [Reign]*, and reliance on Li Bo and Du Fu. For calligraphy, it is the six scripts in the *Rites of Zhou*, with Zhong You and Wang Xizhi taken as models. In employing worthies and selecting scholars, the Han-Tang exam system is employed, while sashes and caps follow the garments of the Song-Ming. How numerous are the examples. If all of this is called Barbaric, then I know not what it is that we call Efflorescent![7]

Lý Văn Phức did not make reference to "Vietnam" or even "our kingdom" in this passage. Nor did he employ any term to indicate that everything and everyone that he mentioned came from China. He did not draw any distinctions because—unlike the Chinese officials who prepared his lodgings for him, men who had shaved their heads like the Manchus and who no longer wore robes in the style of the Song and Ming—Lý Văn Phức did not believe there were any distinctions. How then do we describe the process by which Lý Văn Phức came to understand himself as Efflorescent? Had he been Sinicized? This document can also be read as a critique of the Chinese under Manchu rule for not following Efflorescent ways, so clearly that term is inadequate. At the same time, there is no question that everything that Lý Văn Phức valued originated in the place that we now refer to as China. The difference is that where we today see a nation called China with its own distinct cultural heritage, Lý Văn Phức saw the "Central Efflorescence" [*Trung Hoa*], that is, the fount of the teachings of the ancient sages; the land of Confucius, Mencius, Zhu Xi, and Cheng Yi; the birthplace of the Han-Tang

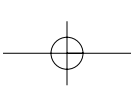


examination system; the world where Li Bo and Du Fu composed verse for all to emulate, and where Wang Xizhi and Zhong You's brushstrokes set calligraphic models for others to follow.

In what follows, I will examine scholarship on Vietnam that deals with some of the very elements that Lý Văn Phức listed in his essay. While Lý Văn Phức did not have a way to label all of these people and practices, the fact that he listed them together suggests that he felt that they were related. Indeed, it is precisely elements such as these that scholars today refer to when they speak of the Confucian repertoire. In examining scholarship on the Confucian repertoire in Vietnam, I will make no effort to be comprehensive. Most of the following discussion will look simply at studies published in English, and even here I examine only a selection of the existing scholarship. Nonetheless, the works that I do examine here are those of the leading scholars in the field. Based at top universities in North America and Australia, these scholars have produced the main arguments concerning the role of the Confucian repertoire in Vietnam, arguments that have in some cases stood unchallenged for decades.

Much of the scholarship that I examine here argues for a limited role of the Confucian repertoire in Vietnam's past. This concord is understandable; to some degree each of the scholars discussed in this paper has been influenced by similar concerns. In particular, they have all to some extent sought to counter the descriptions by colonial-era scholars of Vietnam as a lesser imitation of its northern neighbor, that is, a "little China." One can also detect that many of the scholars examined here, as members of the relatively young field of Southeast Asian studies, consciously took up John Smail's call to pen "autonomous histories."[8] Although thus informed by noble objectives, the works that these scholars have produced have nonetheless not always proved convincing.

To the contrary, I make the argument in this article that the dominant paradigm we have created in the field of Vietnamese studies is flawed. By publishing study after study that points to the supposed limited influence of the Confucian repertoire in Vietnam, or that argues for the existence of Vietnamese practices that countered the Confucian repertoire, scholars have established a discourse on Vietnam that now goes largely unquestioned. I argue here, however, that the evidence supporting this discourse is



highly problematic, and I demonstrate this point by considering comparative information from China and by offering an alterative reading of some source materials. I argue that these are necessary measures because distorted or uncontextualized readings of the textual record in the scholarly literature, specifically in the work that I examine here, are too frequent to disregard. Finally, at the end of this essay I briefly introduce some of the vast amount of material pertaining to the Confucian repertoire in Vietnam that remains unexamined, and I discuss some of the many topics that thus remain unexplored. In doing so, I point out that although this is supposed to be a "state-of-the-field" essay, at present there really is no field of the Confucian repertoire in Vietnam, for scholars have yet to engage in research on core elements of this topic.

Lý Dynasty Religion

In examining the role of the Confucian repertoire in Vietnam, I will move in a roughly chronological manner through Vietnamese history and examine works as they deal with different periods, starting with the time of the first major autonomous Vietnamese dynasty, the Lý (1010–1225). Keith Taylor has examined this period more thoroughly than any other scholar and has put forth some unique arguments about Lý Dynasty statecraft. These arguments build on Taylor's 1976 dissertation, which he revised and published in 1983 as *The Birth of Vietnam*.[9] This work covers the "Chinese period" of Vietnamese history—that is, the roughly thousand years prior to the tenth century during which Vietnam was part of various Chinese empires. Although Taylor acknowledges in this work that at least the Vietnamese elite had appropriated aspects of the Confucian repertoire by the tenth century, he also argues that precontact beliefs and sensibilities endured as well, and in his work on the Lý Dynasty, Taylor focuses more closely on this latter topic.[10]

In an extremely important and well-researched article published in 1986 entitled "Authority and Legitimacy in 11th Century Vietnam," Taylor challenges previous claims that the Lý Dynasty had established a Chinese-style bureaucratic centralized state that exerted temporal control over the land, arguing to the contrary that the Lý Dynasty was legitimated more by religious or supernatural powers than by administrative orders. More specifically,

Taylor argues that supernatural powers announced themselves to Lý Dynasty rulers in recognition of their virtue, and that the Lý Dynasty kings allowed these spirits to help protect the realm. The effectiveness of this relationship in turn encouraged regional clans to support the Lý kings, for they believed the spirits' confirmations.

Taylor came to these conclusions through a close examination of one of the earliest extant Vietnamese works, the *Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm* [*Việt điện u linh tập*], a work that I will refer to several times in this essay. The *Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm* is a fourteenth-century collection of biographies of spirits around which cults emerged to honor their protective powers. This text is in turn based on several earlier works, the majority of which are no longer extant, and some of which were compiled by Buddhist monks. The biographies tell the histories of these spirits and give evidence of their powers. Some of the information they contain records dates from the early centuries CE, but there is also a considerable amount that corresponds with the ninth through eleventh centuries, and Taylor persuasively argues that the work as a whole reflects Vietnamese perceptions from that time period.[11]

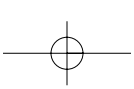
For lack of a better term, Taylor labels this phenomenon of local spirits announcing their support to Vietnamese monarchs as "Lý Dynasty religion." We can perhaps gain a fuller understanding of what "Lý Dynasty religion" was if we let Taylor describe it himself:

> [T]he 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 the Chinese classics and histories were occasionally cited as textual authority for explaining or justifying this process of "declaring the unfathomable." This process appears to be a distinctive aspect of "Lý dynasty religion," being a form of "self discovery" for the Vietnamese after several centuries of Chinese overlordship, which denied and attempted to suppress "subversive" elements of popular Việt culture related to a separate (i.e., non-Chinese) sense of Việt cultural identity and political history. It seems to me that the sort of religious or supernatural sanction that the Lý kings

> derived from this role was the primary ingredient in establishing and maintaining their legitimacy and authority; they were obeyed for what were perceived as their moral and spiritual qualities, not because they commanded an administrative system that could enforce compliance.[12]

From this quote we can see that Taylor envisions something "non-Chinese" occurring in Lý Dynasty Vietnam. Although the millennium of Chinese rule left some traces in the continued, but limited, use of "ideas from the Chinese classics," what was really important in Lý Dynasty Vietnam was the sanction that indigenous spirits gave to the Lý Dynasty kings. These were spirits that Taylor suggests were part of a "separate (i.e., non-Chinese) sense of Việt cultural identity and political history" that the Chinese had sought to suppress but that now, after a thousand years, was reemerging. Further emphasizing the "non-Chinese" aspects of this style of rulership, Taylor argues that it reflected "patterns of thought shared with other Southeast Asia peoples."[13]

While Keith Taylor was researching and writing this paper, Valerie Hansen was examining the same phenomenon in her dissertation on Song Dynasty (960–1276) China. Published as a monograph in 1990, Hansen's *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127–1276* demonstrates that this process whereby spirits proclaimed their presence and rulers or officials acknowledged the spirits' powers was unfolding all over China at precisely the same time as in Vietnam, as the Chinese empire experienced a move toward localization.[14] Subsequent works, such as Terry Kleeman's study of the emergence and spread of the Wenchang cult and Ellen Neskar's examination of the emergence of local cults to "Confucian worthies" and their eventual recognition by officialdom, have further illuminated the similarities between Vietnam and China in the emergence of spirit cults and their appropriation by government officials.[15] Works such as these call into question the extent to which "Lý Dynasty religion" was distinct from the Confucian repertoire. To the contrary, after examining what we now know about medieval China, one can easily argue that the information that we find in a text such as the *Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm* reveals precisely the opposite, namely, that the ruling elite in Lý Dynasty Vietnam were doing exactly what Chinese officials from Sichuan to Fujian were doing—adding the official control of spirits to the Confucian repertoire.



We can see this first and foremost from the simple fact that one of the earliest figures found interacting with the spirits in the *Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm* is the ninth-century Chinese administrator Gao Pian [Viet., Cao Biền]. Sent by the Tang Dynasty (618–907) to quell the Nanzhao rebellion, which had engulfed the southwestern extreme of the empire, Gao Pian remained for a time in Vietnam, employing his knowledge of geomancy and the spirits to bring order to the land. Taylor's article does not highlight Gao Pian's contributions but instead emphasizes the fact that some of the information in the *Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm* comes from Buddhist texts, thereby suggesting that in Vietnam this practice of incorporating the spirits took on a uniquely Buddhist approach.[16]

This latter point, however, is also similar to what was transpiring in China at the time. Indeed, as the late Michel Strickmann noted, Buddhists were often "powerful agents of sinification."[17] What Strickmann referred to here was the fact that Buddhism was quickly indigenized in China and in the process adopted many ideas, particularly those concerning morality, from the Confucian repertoire.[18] Further, it was often the case that Buddhists would precede government officials in moving into territories where such ideas were not known. There they would either suppress or incorporate local spirits and begin to teach people ideas about proper behavior, which government officials had little trouble building on when they later arrived. That this same pattern is manifest in early Vietnam is strongly suggested by the fact that the *Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm,* though it contains passages from pre–Lý Dynasty Buddhist accounts, was not compiled until the Trần, when the spirits were granted official titles, many of which labeled the spirits with the Sinitic title of "king" or "monarch" [*vương*].

Fragmenting the Confucianist Corpus

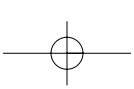
Although Taylor's observations of the Lý will benefit from being placed in a larger context, his core research remains solid and valuable. For anyone wishing to understand the importance of the spirits for the Lý Dynasty, "Authority and Legitimacy in 11th Century Vietnam" is an informative and authoritative source. Much more problematic is the scholarship by the late O.W. Wolters on the subsequent Trần Dynasty (1225–1400). Wolters was a pioneering scholar who engaged in pathbreaking scholarship on the topic of

localization in Southeast Asia. Arguing against the views of colonial-era scholars who emphasized the importance of outside influences on the region, Wolters sought to illuminate the existence and importance of a Southeast Asian "cultural matrix" that informed the actions of individuals. By taking into account this cultural matrix from within which people in Southeast Asia acted, Wolters was able to return agency to Southeast Asian peoples and reveal, for instance, that a phenomenon that colonial-era scholars had labeled "Indianization" can really be better understood as a process of "self-Hinduization" on the part of various peoples in Southeast Asia.[19]

While Wolters' examination of the Southeast Asian cultural matrix as a whole is multifaceted, there is one issue, repeatedly discussed in his work on Vietnam, that directly relates to the role of the Confucian repertoire, namely, the question of how to interpret classical Chinese texts written by scholars during the Trần Dynasty. Writing was central to the Confucian repertoire, for its upholders believed that it was through writing that the ideas of the repertoire had originally brought order to the world.[20] It is understandable, then, that literati in later centuries sought to comprehend the true meaning of the most ancient texts in the repertoire, what we today often refer to as the "Confucian classics."[21] And although there was a long history in China of textual exegesis in which scholars debated the meaning of certain specific terms and passages in the classics, there was also wide agreement about the majority of the material in these works, for the commentaries that scholars read along with these texts agreed on far more than they contested.[22]

Wolters' work does not maintain, however, that this shared understanding of the classics extended to Trần Dynasty Vietnam. It argues instead that even though the Vietnamese and Chinese both wrote in classical Chinese, quoting the main texts in the Confucian repertoire when they did so, Vietnamese writers did not necessarily seek to convey the ideas that were contained in the Confucian repertoire but, instead, expressed ideas that were distinct from, and at times even in opposition to, some of the most basic and widely accepted concepts in that repertoire. Here it is perhaps best to let Wolters explain this point himself:

> In China the Confucianist classics were venerated as a coherent blueprint for political, social, and moral behavior, a blueprint sanctioned by what was believed, in spite of different interpretations, to be the example



> of the sage-rulers in China's golden age. In Vietnam the Confucianist texts were certainly consulted, but they enjoyed prestige for another and more practical reason. The texts were read as records indicating useful precedents in a miscellany of unrelated fields of human activity; they embodied timeless and tested experience, available when the Vietnamese, always disregarding the totality of the norms of civilized conduct in China, chose to take into account specific instances of such experience. Their tradition was to ignore the moral and historical framework that, in China, gave coherence to the text's contents. Instead, they localized the Confucianist corpus by fragmenting it and detaching passages, drained of their original contextual meaning, in order to appropriate fragments at their discretion and fit them into the context of their own statements. In this way, their statements were furnished with additional authority, derived from the experience of antiquity.[23]

Wolters thus firmly contends that in Vietnamese hands, the "Confucianist corpus" was put to novel uses, and he provided arguments in support of this claim. These arguments are often based on extremely detailed readings of texts. Therefore, to fully appreciate Wolters' arguments, and their flaws, we need to examine some of the minutiae that they are based on.

In 1979, Wolters published an article in which he looked closely at a thirteenth-century Vietnamese history, Lê Văn Hưu's *Historical Records of Đại Việt* [*Đại Việt sử ký*]. Although it is no longer extant, we know of this work because the fifteenth-century historian Ngô Sĩ Liên noted that he incorporated some of Lê Văn Hưu's history into his own *Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt* [*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*]. However, the only parts of Lê Văn Hưu's history that we can positively identify in this later work are some of the personal comments that Lê Văn Hưu made regarding certain historical events and personages, for these are clearly indicated in the text. It is through a reading of a single comment of Lê Văn Hưu's that Wolters sought to demonstrate how Vietnamese and Chinese texts differed.

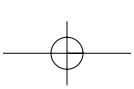
Ngô Sĩ Liên's *Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt* begins in distant antiquity with the mythical Chinese emperor, Shennong, and then traces a line of descent from that mythical ruler to the Hùng kings. Lê Văn Hưu's *Historical Records of Đại Việt* reportedly began later, with the exploits of a Chinese official by the name of Zhao Tuo (?–137 BCE), or Triệu Đà in Vietnamese, who established a kingdom called Nanyue [Viet., *Nam Việt*] in

the second century BCE in the area of what are today the Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi as well as part of northern Vietnam.

Looking back on Zhao Tuo's achievements from the perspective of the late thirteenth century, a time when the Vietnamese had maintained a separate kingdom for some three centuries and had recently fought off a Mongol invasion, the historian Lê Văn Hưu wrote the following:

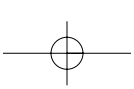
> If Liaodong had lacked the Viscount of Ji, it could not have established the [correct] customs for wearing caps and robes. If Wugui did not have Taibo, then it would not have been able to establish a powerful royal enterprise. The great Shun was from among the Eastern Barbarians, and became the most distinguished of the Five Emperors. King Wen came from among the Western Barbarians, and became the most virtuous ruler of the Three Dynasties. From this we can see that being adept at governing does not depend on the size of one's land or whether one is an Efflorescent or a Barbarian. Instead, it is all determined by moral virtue.
>
> Emperor Zhao Tuo was able to open up [the land of] We Việts, empire over his own realm, and hold his own against the Han [Dynasty]. In his writings he referred to himself as the Old Grandee. He was the founder of the royal enterprise of We Việts. How great was his merit! As for those who subsequently empired over the Việts, if they modeled themselves after the Martial [Emperor], Zhao, and maintained the border, put the proper military and administrative affairs in order, engaged in [the correct] relations with neighboring realms, and governed with benevolence, then they could protect the realm for a long time, and Northerners would have no cause to act without restraint again. Acting without restraint contravenes decorum.[24]

Lê Văn Hưu began this passage by discussing four individuals who represent two kinds of people, Efflorescents and Barbarians—that is, people who represented the two main divisions of the world that Lý Văn Phức referred to in his response to the derogatory hostel sign. The Viscount of Ji and Taibo were Efflorescents who lived during the Zhou Dynasty (1045–256 BCE) and transmitted Efflorescent ideas and ritual practices into previously Barbarian territories. Shun and King Wen (i.e., Zhou Wenwang), meanwhile, were Efflorescent rulers from the third and second millennia BC, respectively, who both originally came from Barbarian regions. Lê Văn Hưu's intent in mentioning these individuals was to point out that the distinction between Barbarian and Efflorescent regions was not absolute. Instead, it could be transcended through the presence and



actions of individuals who harbored a great deal of moral virtue. Zhao Tuo, according to Lê Văn Hưu, had enjoyed such a reserve of virtue and therefore was able to establish a kingdom in a previously Barbarian area. In so doing, Zhao Tuo set a standard for later rulers in that region, the Vietnamese, to follow. Hence, from these comments we can see that Lê Văn Hưu envisioned the imperial tradition beginning in Vietnam with the arrival of moral virtue, and in particular, with a type of moral virtue that was shared by some of the most famous individuals of what some today would label "Chinese" antiquity.

Wolters, however, views the advent of an imperial tradition in Vietnam differently. He does this by stating first that: "Chinese history, written by scholars of the 'Confucian persuasion,' was seen as a record, generation by generation, of mankind's performance in living up to the moral standards taught by the sage rulers of high antiquity. Chinese historians contemplated a golden age of the sage rulers, whose moral principles supplied canons for interpreting the behavior of subsequent generations of rulers and subjects."[25] Having thus explained that Chinese history takes as its starting point the "moral standards taught by the sage rulers of high antiquity," Wolters then argues that Lê Văn Hưu did not see history beginning that way. Wolters informs his readers that Lê Văn Hưu did not "specifically mention the Chinese primeval golden age—when the sages were ruling," but that his comments nonetheless "show that he [was] familiar with the sages." Wolters, however, only partially indicates to his readers how exactly it is that Lê Văn Hưu showed his familiarity with the ancient sages. While he acknowledges briefly that "[Zhao Tuo]'s *virtus* is compared to that of Shun and Wen Wang, ancient sage rulers," Wolters never mentions here, or anywhere else in the paper, that Lê Văn Hưu began his commentary on Zhao Tuo by linking him with the ancient precedents set by the Viscount of Ji and Taibo, two Efflorescents who in antiquity journeyed to Barbarian lands, transformed the people there by teaching them the moral standards of the Central Efflorescence, and served as exemplars of the power of moral virtue for centuries afterward. Instead of informing his reader about this opening passage of Lê Văn Hưu's commentary, Wolters translates only its ending, starting with the sentence "He was the founder of the royal enterprise of We Viêts" (see above), therefore skipping the information about moral virtue and antiquity.[26]



Having ignored this critical section of the commentary, Wolters then contends that because Lê Văn Hưu's history began with Zhao Tuo, "Vietnam's golden age is depicted not in terms of cultural excellence but of imperial independence, when the court's style was exactly the same as that of the Han court. Here is a reconstruction of a golden age that seems to caricature the Chinese view of the most ancient past."[27]

Hence, in disregarding the way in which Lê Văn Hưu clearly linked Zhao Tuo with the "cultural excellence" of "Chinese" antiquity, Wolters can now argue that Vietnamese history, for thirteenth-century scholars like Lê Văn Hưu, was seen to begin not with the culture and morals of China but with the political independence of Vietnam. This is critical for Wolters; Vietnamese scholars saw their golden age beginning with the political independence that Zhao Tuo brought in the second century BCE, and thus when they cited texts from China's golden age, those citations did not have the same meaning or resonance to Vietnamese scholars as they did to their Chinese counterparts. The Chinese, Wolters argues, saw the texts of antiquity as "the *point d'appui* for affirming the cultural identity of the Chinese people," whereas Vietnamese scholars saw their golden age beginning with Zhao Tuo's much later establishment of an independent kingdom, and thus such texts could "not be read as the sacred overture to Vietnamese history."[28]

While Wolters suggests here that by contrast Zhao Tuo's establishment of an independent kingdom *did* serve as a sacred overture to Vietnamese history, in another article he describes signs of another, and earlier, non-Sinitic golden age that Vietnamese recalled a century after Lê Văn Hưu. Ironically, what leads Wolters to discover this non-Sinitic Vietnamese golden age are comments by literati in the fourteenth century, such as Trưởng Hán Siêu and Lê Quát, in which they criticize the baneful influence on the peasantry of Buddhism and the lack of schools. Aware that in making such criticisms these literati "seem to be speaking as Confucianist advisors," Wolters questions the veracity of such a conclusion and sets off to uncover what these statements really mean. Engaging in an intricate process of linguistic association, he concludes that these men were simply seeking "to restore Vietnam's traditional way of life and not to propagate Confucianist moral values."[29]

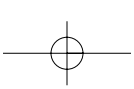
The process of linguistic association that leads to this conclusion begins with Wolters' examination of a poem that the scholar-official Phạm Sư

Mạnh composed in the 1360s while patrolling the northwestern border region. In this poem, Phạm Sư Mạnh mentioned Văn Lang, a kingdom that reportedly existed in the region prior to Zhao Tuo's Nanyue. After mentioning Văn Lang, Phạm Sư Mạnh then wrote two lines that state, "With writing and chariots for myriad leagues, the border is now quiet/But in this universe over a thousand years, incidents have been numerous."[30]

The combined characters for "writing" and "chariots" [*thư xa*] refer to a concept that is loaded with meaning from the perspective of the Confucian repertoire. This concept was employed to celebrate unity, but unity of a culturally specific kind. In particular, it celebrated a world that traveled in carriages of the same axle width, and thus a world that was politically unified. This world also used the same written script, classical Chinese, and therefore was intellectually and morally unified as well, for in employing the same script people were understood to be reading the same texts, the "Confucian classics."[31]

Wolters does not note the connotations that link this expression firmly to the Confucian repertoire, instead stating more generally that "Chariots, standardized by their axles, and a standardized script were symbols in China of a well-regulated State." More important for Wolters is the simple fact that Phạm Sư Mạnh mentions Văn Lang and writing and chariots in the same poem. This is evidence to him that Phạm Sư Mạnh is associating "the border region in antiquity with the norms of good government when it was ruled by Văn-lang's kings."[32]

To describe more exactly the "norms of good government" in ancient Văn Lang, Wolters turns to an undated and anonymously authored history from the Trần period, the *Outline of Việt History* [*Việt sử lược*], to quote a passage about Văn Lang: "Its customs were of a simple and pure substance. For purposes of government knotted cords were used."[33] From the perspective of the ideas found in the Confucian repertoire, "knotting chords" [*kết thằng*] is the antithesis of "writing and chariots." The *Classic of Changes* [*Yijing*], for instance, contains a passage that notes that the period in high antiquity when people knotted chords as a means to record information and aid in governing was also a time when people "lived in grottoes and in the wild." The subsequent invention of writing by the sages not only brought more order to the land, but it also allowed people to move from "grottoes" to "palaces."[34]

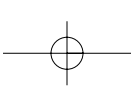


Wolters is aware that "knotting chords" refers to a preliterate society, but he disregards the negative connotations that this term carried and contends instead that:

> The Văn-lang rulers were therefore able to govern equally successfully by means of a form of government which . . . could owe nothing to the Chinese script because Văn-lang flourished long before any question of a Chinese political and cultural influence arose. Văn-lang's image towards the end of the fourteenth century was that of a well-regulated State, inspired by independent cultural traditions.[35]

What Wolters has discovered here are two radically different conceptions of Văn Lang. The *Outline of Việt History* depicts it as a world that had yet to come under the sway of the teachings of the sages, while Phạm Sư Mạnh sees it as already transformed by those teachings. Wolters, however, ignores the powerful and diametrically opposed connotations of these statements. He argues instead that the knotting chords can be combined with the writing and the chariots, without contradiction, to describe a unified image of Văn Lang generally held among Vietnamese literati in the late fourteenth century. From his reading of this poem and brief passage, Wolters asserts that literati in late fourteenth-century Vietnam looked back nostalgically to Văn Lang as a time when there were no "royal advisors" and when the "sage-like and heroic Văn-lang rulers, inventors of Vietnamese civilization, needed only obedient servants."[36] According to Wolters, this image was powerful because it represented precisely what literati like Trương Hán Siêu and Lê Quát wanted. Although they acted the role of "Confucianist" royal advisors in condemning Buddhism and promoting education in the countryside in an effort to bring calm to the land, they in fact wished to be "relieved of their unwonted and self-imposed responsibility for critical commentary."[37] They were thus not "speaking as Confucianist advisers," Wolters contends, for they only wanted "to restore Vietnam's traditional way of life." They desired a return to a world where there was no need for "Confucianist advisors," a world where "customs were of a simple and pure substance" and "for purposes of government knotted cords were used."[38]

These are admittedly only two examples from Wolters' writings on Trần Dynasty Vietnam. However, I would argue that these examples are eminently representative of Wolters' style of scholarship. As core arguments in

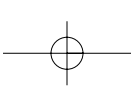


two important articles, these examples demonstrate the degree of detail that one must delve into in order to follow, and unravel, Wolters intricately interwoven line of argumentation. They also demonstrate the degree to which Wolters relies on a selective and partial reading of source materials, as well as the degree to which he imposes his own ideas onto texts that loudly proclaim contrary views, to say nothing of his highly questionable logic.

In the first example, Wolters employs a comment recorded by Lê Văn Hưu to argue that Vietnamese and Chinese texts differed in meaning because the Vietnamese did not share the same golden age with the Chinese. Yet Lê Văn Hưu himself makes no such distinction. He says nothing about a Vietnamese golden age but speaks only of Barbarians and Efflorescents, placing the Vietnamese firmly in the latter category thanks to the fact that Zhao Tuo had brought to the region the type of moral leadership that figures like the Viscount of Ji and Taibo had exemplified in distant antiquity. How, then, do we know that this idea of a Vietnamese golden age was so important if it was not expressed? And how do we reconcile this contending concept of a world divided into Barbarians and Efflorescents with Wolters' insistence on the importance of a China-Vietnam divide? Similarly, how can we follow Wolters when he equates concepts that the Confucian repertoire loads with antithetical meanings to imagine a unified fourteenth-century ethos in which literati made anti-Buddhist statements but actually meant that they wanted to become obedient servants in a world untouched by the Confucian repertoire? And even if these concepts were not antithetical, how can one line in one poem and a comment in an undated history reveal an ethos so powerful and all-encompassing that it causes straightforward statements to take on radically novel meanings?

Literati Cycles

No scholar from the field has seriously challenged Wolters' work.[39] Instead, historians like John Whitmore have built on Wolters' ideas, placing them in a larger temporal context. An expert on the Lê Dynasty (1428–1788), Whitmore has sought to explain how it is that the elite of that time appear to have valued the Confucian repertoire much more than their counterparts during the Trần, as characterized by Wolters. Whitmore has concluded that



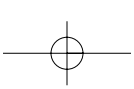
they did so because a transformation took place between the late Trần and the early Lê from "classical scholarship" to "Confucian belief."

Whitmore proposes that the period from the Lý to the early Trần was "an overwhelmingly Buddhist era" in which "Chinese classical learning appeared . . . as part of a peripheral Court cult."[40] According to Whitmore, the upholders of this "court cult," the literati, gained exposure over time to new Confucian ideas coming from China and gained influence within the court, until by the fourteenth century they were pressing Vietnamese monarchs to promote certain administrative and social changes that were inspired by ideas in the Confucian repertoire.[41]

At this point Whitmore's ideas tenderly break with those of Wolters, for while Wolters argues that to view these men "as masterminding a step forward in the direction of a Confucianist State would be to drain the fourteenth century of intelligibility," Whitmore contends that in the fourteenth century we see the beginning of belief and adherence to the ideology that was "attached" to the "forms" of Chinese literary and historical writing.[42] Nonetheless, there are a couple of instances from the fourteenth century where Trần monarchs rebuked the proposals of scholar-officials, denigrating these literati as "pale scholars" [*bạch diện thư sinh*], and Whitmore interprets these to indicate that although the literati were starting to believe the ideas that attached to the forms of Chinese literary and historical writing, these ideas still remained largely alien to Trần Dynasty monarchs and the aristocracy from which they came.[43]

Aware that roughly a century later, historical and literary sources from the reign of Lê Thánh Tông (1460–1497) provide clear evidence for belief in Confucian ideas, Whitmore has posited that there was a dramatic transformation that took place in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Here he posits that the Ming occupation (1407–1427) was instrumental in bringing about change. In particular, Whitmore argues that the Chinese imposed on the Vietnamese a new bureaucracy and ideology, neo-Confucianism, and that it was through this aggressive imposition of the "Chinese model" that a major transformation of Vietnamese society began.[44]

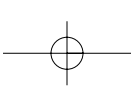
John Whitmore's assertion that the appeal of ideas from the Confucian repertoire during the Lý and Trần was largely limited to a small group of individuals in Vietnam whose advice was not necessarily heeded by



Vietnamese monarchs is one that Keith Taylor shares to some degree. While Whitmore usually refers to this group as the literati, Taylor has recently employed the untranslated term *nho* [Chn., *ru*], a term that he states "indicates a class of people unambiguously associated with what we think of as Confucian thought and practice."[45] Further, in his earlier work we find Taylor seeking to trace the fortunes of this supposedly discrete group from "the first indication that there may have been advisors with Confucian ideas at the court," when Lý Thái Tông (1028–1054) "honored the God of Agriculture by personally plowing three furrows.[46]

Like Whitmore, Taylor sees the literati becoming more activist in the fourteenth century, but he notes that it was not until the reign of Lê Thánh Tông in the second half of the fifteenth century that their voices were truly heard.[46] Further, this influence was short lived; both Whitmore and Taylor argue that over the course of the following centuries in "successive eras of warfare and political change" the *nho* were "challenged by actors favoring more personalized, non-bureaucratic modes of government," namely, "warrior regimes."[47] In Whitmore's rendering of this period, with the passing of each era of warfare, the literati reestablished their dominance. Given this, we can view the period of Vietnamese history from roughly the fifteenth through the early nineteenth centuries as one of "the establishment and re-establishment of literati culture."[48] Taylor, meanwhile, offers a more nuanced picture of these transformations in acknowledging that the warrior elite also upheld some Confucian ideas, and noting that during periods of warfare, the literati kept alive their learning and cultural practices in their home villages. Thus, although Taylor still writes of a "literati revival" in the seventeenth century, for instance, he presents such a change in terms that are less stark than Whitmore's.[49]

This idea of the emergence and re-emergence to prominence of the literati is one that the late Ralph Smith made years ago. Smith's argument, however, was much more mechanical than those of Whitmore and Taylor. Smith spoke not specifically of the literati, but of a related concept—a "cycle of Confucianization" in Vietnam. Smith defined Confucianism in narrow and abstract terms as "an aspiration to have order obtain at all levels of society," arguing that the extent to which such order was obtained could be measured by discerning the times "when Vietnamese rulers were insisting on propriety" and

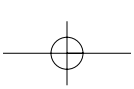


when they "ordered the compilation of historical records," as well as through the "presence or absence, and relative power of Confucian scholars."[50] The periods of Confucianization that Smith mapped out roughly accord with those that Whitmore and Taylor argue for. Recently, George Dutton has offered a corrective to Smith's claim that the Tây Sơn period (1788–1802) marked a low point in the cycle of Confucianization in Vietnam.[51] However, Dutton leaves the concept of a cycle of Confucianization intact.

While the work of Whitmore and Taylor contributes a great deal toward our understanding of the period from the Lý through the Lê dynasty, the linking of the Confucian repertoire to the fortunes of a supposed discrete group of individuals is a problematic enterprise, particularly when that group is referred to as the *nho*. Michael Nylan has noted that in China this term had a wide range of meanings, from a "master of state ceremonial" to "anyone who attempted to live by Confucius's teachings," and that while some of these meanings changed over time, it is unlikely that there was ever a period when a single meaning completely dominated.[52] More important is the fact that while a term like *nho* indicates that there were individuals who privileged at least some aspects of the Confucian repertoire enough to be labeled separately, all of the available repertoires overlapped to some degree. Further, the adherents of different repertoires were never in a zero-sum contest with each other, where the increase in the numbers of one therefore indicated a decline in the influence of the ideas of another.

This is a topic that Edward Davis has recently addressed in a work on spirit-possession and exorcism in the Song Dynasty. Davis challenges the idea that medieval Chinese history should be understood as the story of the victory of neo-Confucianism over Buddhism and Daoism, and he also challenges the practice of associating what he calls "cultural categories" with "social categories," such as associating Confucianism with officialdom. For, according to Davis, Buddhism and Daoism never "declined," as some authors have alleged, and "social categories" were not necessarily constituted of individuals who shared exclusive beliefs. Instead, Davis pictures Song Dynasty society as follows:

> At the top we find a group broadly defined to include the emperor, the court, and the bureaucratic and religious hierarchies (civil and military officials and their families, Daoist priests, and Buddhist monks); at the



> bottom are village spirit-mediums and Buddhist acolytes, local landowners (large and small), tenants and servants, and sub-bureaucratic servicemen and functionaries. In the middle I place a new and expanding group of Daoist exorcists called "Ritual Masters" (*fashi*), Esoteric Buddhist monks, doctors, ritual experts and religious specialists (*shushi*, *xiangshi*, *daoren*, etc.), and those who passed one or more of the examinations but were without official posts (*shiren*).[53]

Davis then argues that in Song Dynasty China, tensions were more likely to occur between different classes of the adherents of a given repertoire, such as between Daoist priests and Daoist exorcists, than between adherents of separate repertoires. Meanwhile, Davis points out, there was a great deal of symbiosis across repertoires at various class levels, so that Buddhist priests and government officials, for instance, held much in common.

This vision of Song Dynasty China can help us understand early imperial Vietnam and, in particular, can enable us to put into perspective an artifact such as the Khai Nghiêm inscription. This inscription was composed by the Trần Dynasty scholar-official, or *nho*, Trương Hán Siêu, one of the literati whose anti-Buddhist statements Wolters contends we should read to indicate his desire to live in an ideal Vietnamese state where there were no royal advisors but only obedient servants. Trương Hán Siêu was asked in the 1330s to commemorate the renovation of Khai Nghiêm temple in what is today Bắc Ninh Province. While Trương Hán Siêu did provide information about the temple renovation in this inscription, he also made the following comments:

> Renovating a temple that has fallen into disrepair does not [reflect] my intent, so in inscribing and erecting a stele, why ask for my comments? At present the Sagely Dynasty wishes for the imperial mores to prosper so as to eliminate depraved customs. Heterodox teachings must thus be rejected so that the royal way can be revived. For literati, if it is not the way of Yao and Shun, then they should not promote it; and if it is not the way of Confucius and Mencius, then they should not record it. Therefore, were I to stick to conventions and babble on about the Buddha, who would be deceived by that?[54]

Putting aside Wolters' assertions about how we should read these statements, if we imagine *nho* as an unambiguously separate group with antithetical beliefs toward others, then it is difficult to understand why Trương Hán Siêu would be asked to compose a text for an inscription at a Buddhist

temple, much less why such a disparaging inscription would be displayed. The key here is that this inscription likely points to precisely the kind of society that Davis describes in his discussion of Song Dynasty China. Yes, Trưởng Hán Siêu had strong ideas about the importance of the Confucian repertoire, but these ideas did not preclude him from providing his assistance to the Khai Nghiêm temple. Similarly, the head abbot of this temple certainly had the ability to discern what Trưởng Hán Siêu was saying in his inscription, but that did not prevent him from allowing it to be erected on the temple grounds. This was the case because these men shared commonalities as members of the elite, but it was also probably the case that they shared ideas as well. Although Trưởng Hán Siêu criticized Buddhism in this inscription, the fact that he agreed to compose it might indicate that he also sensed the power of this temple and the teaching associated with it, and was thus unwilling to completely decline. At the same time, the head abbot of the Khai Nghiêm temple probably also understood the value of promoting the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, for as mentioned above, Buddhism in East Asia had long come to terms with these ideas.

Actually, as early as the tenth century, when Vietnam became autonomous, the "three teachings" (or what I would label the "three repertoires") of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism had in many ways already come to terms with one another, as they had undergone a great deal of interaction and would continue to do so over the succeeding centuries. Two of the clearest examples of this cross-fertilization are the emergence during the Song Dynasty of the Learning of the Way [*Đạo Học/Daoxue*], or neo-Confucianism as it is often labeled in English, and the "Three in One" religion in the Ming.[55] While some scholars have referred to this intermixing of ideas as syncretism, others, such as Timothy Brooke, caution against using such a term, pointing out that the merging of different teachings did not necessarily result in a unitary worldview, for even those who championed the commonalities of the three teachings still often privileged one of the three.[56]

We can see an example of this in the comments that the scholar-official Phan Huy Ích wrote in 1796 in his preface to friend and fellow scholar-official Ngô Thì Nhậm's work on the Buddhist Trúc Lâm sect, the *Great Pronouncement of the Essential Teachings of the Trúc Lâm Sect* [*Trúc lâm tông chỉ nguyên thanh*]:

> Although the teachings of the Sak[yamuni] clan state that everything is empty and immaterial, their main point is [to encourage people] to eliminate barriers and comprehend the suchness of existence; to concentrate on clearing one's mind in order to discover one's true nature. In comparing this with the learning of we *nho* [which promotes] making one's intent sincere and extending one's knowledge, there is nothing here that is contradictory. I have heard that our Master [i.e., Confucius] stated that "In the West there is a great sage." He therefore never denigrated the Brahma sect as heterodox.[57]

In this passage we find Phan Huy Ích noting that there is an essential commonality between the two teachings, but he justifies his comments through the Confucian repertoire, and by reference to Confucius in particular.

We can see a similar instance of this in the 1258 decision of the Trần Dynasty monarch Trần Thái Tông to pass the throne to his son and become a Buddhist monk. In a later writing he justified this decision by stating that he sought "to seek the teaching of the Buddha so as to understand the secrets of life and death and to repay the debt of parental love."[58] Hence, Trần Thái Tông became a Buddhist monk, but he justified doing so in terms of filial piety.

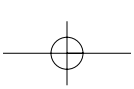
What examples like these point to is the centrality of ideas from the Confucian repertoire even in contexts that appear to be dominated by other repertoires. That a Trần Dynasty monarch became a Buddhist monk or composed Buddhist poetry does not mean that he did not value various elements of the Confucian repertoire. Unfortunately, scholars have overlooked this important point, tending instead toward more categorical interpretations. For example, in the case of Trần monarchs labeling officials as "pale scholars," Whitmore suggests that this indicates a significant rift in perspectives—a "pale scholar" was someone who exclusively upheld the Confucian repertoire, while the monarch who disparaged such a person was conversely grounded in an indigenous, and separate, ethos.[59]

The fact, however, is that the term "pale scholar" referred simply to a young and inexperienced scholar.[60] Its use did not indicate that these monarchs viewed literati as possessing a separate creed. Thus, although we can find literati encountering opposition to some of their proposals in the fourteenth century, this does not mean that their ideas were alien. To the contrary, I would argue that ideas from the Confucian repertoire were always of

central importance to the ruling elite in premodern Vietnam, as these were the ideas that were employed to legitimate the monarch's rule.

Indeed, from the information that we have about events as early as the founding of the Lý Dynasty, we can see that even though Vietnamese monarchs lived in a world that was infused with elements from each of the various repertoires, ideas from the Confucian repertoire held central importance. Information in the sources regarding Lý Công Uẩn, the founder of the Lý Dynasty, illuminates this point perfectly. Although Lý Công Uẩn was raised in a Buddhist monastery and advised by monks, we see these same monks explaining his rise to power in terms that come directly from the Confucian repertoire. In particular, they interpreted various signs—such as an arcane poem revealed by cracks in a tree struck by lightening and the birth at their temple of a white dog with black hair in the shape of the characters for "son of Heaven" [*thiên tử*]—as indications that the mandate of Heaven was passing to Lý Công Uẩn.[61] Similarly, after Lý Công Uẩn came to power and decided to move his capital to Thăng Long, he justified this, first, by citing the *Venerated Documents* [*Shangshu*], and then also by noting the new location's auspicious geomantic position, as well as the fact that Gao Pian had previously recognized its potency.[62] Thus, although we find here mention of Buddhist monks, oracular poetry, and geomancy, they all serve to support more central expressions of legitimacy for Lý Công Uẩn's rule that come from the Confucian repertoire.

This "unequal" coexistence of elements from different repertoires calls into question the efforts that some scholars have made to trace the fortunes of "Confucianism" or "literati culture" in Vietnam by linking these phenomena to a discrete social group, the *nho*. It may be true that "military skills, concepts of personal loyalty, and the blood oath of allegiance" were valued by some individuals during times of warfare, as Whitmore argues. But does this mean that these individuals did not believe in the mandate of Heaven, and that they did not teach their sons to be filial and their daughters to follow the three submissions?[63] Similarly, when Taylor speaks of a "popular efflorescence of Buddhism" in the seventeenth century, are we to assume that literati had nothing to do with it?[64] Were there no *nho* at the time who saw value in this teaching, as Phan Huy Ích did in the late eighteenth century?

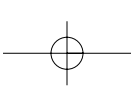


A New Way of Being Vietnamese

In the previous section I have sought to point out some of the contributions that scholars such as John Whitmore and Keith Taylor have made toward our understanding of the Vietnamese past, at the same time that I have suggested that there is a need to build on their findings and take our understanding of imperial Vietnam to a new, more complex and nuanced level. In this section I will make the same argument about research that has recently been conducted on the southern half of the Lê Dynasty realm. In the sixteenth century the Lê Dynasty came to be dominated by two powerful clans, the Trịnh and the Nguyễn. The Trịnh based themselves in Hà Nội and ruled over northern and parts of north-central Vietnam on the Lê Dynasty's behalf. Meanwhile, the Nguyễn clan initially performed the same function in areas further south, but then over time became increasingly autonomous. Simultaneously, the Nguyễn also extended their control further southward toward the Mekong Delta. As they did so, the Nguyễn clan came to incorporate Cham, Khmer, and Chinese into their domain, and thus they found themselves governing over a land that was quite unique.

In governing over a frontier region, it was probably inevitable that the Nguyễn would develop a style of statecraft that was different from that of the Trịnh clan in the north. Exactly how it differed is an issue that some scholars have recently begun to examine. In particular, Keith Taylor, Li Tana, Nola Cooke, and Choi Byung Wook have all written on this issue, and although they have focused on different aspects of this topic in their studies, they have all argued that in Đàng Trong, as the southern region was known, fewer components of the Confucian repertoire were employed than in its northern counterpart, Đàng Ngoài.[65]

Of these historians, the one who has made the strongest argument for the uniqueness of Đàng Trong society is Li Tana. Her *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* is a pioneering work that examines numerous aspects of life in Đàng Trong, from trade to material culture, and that is today the starting point for anyone who wishes to seriously examine Đàng Trong society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While the majority of Li Tana's work deals with issues pertaining to social and economic history, from currency and taxes to population statistics, the fifth chapter, "Life in Đàng Trong: A New Way of



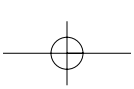
Being Vietnamese," turns to ideas and addresses directly the role of the Confucian repertoire in Đàng Trong. In this chapter, Li examines what she envisions were efforts by the Nguyễn to "differentiate themselves from their own ancestral people in the north in order to secure their own political survival."[66]

In particular, Li Tana argues that the Nguyễn engaged in a process of localization whereby they adopted diverse religious and cultural practices from the area as a means of establishing their legitimacy. They did so because, according to Li Tana, the Confucian repertoire was inappropriate for achieving these goals. To quote:

> But it is clear that the basic premises of Chinese political theory and Neo-Confucian philosophy, if studied in any depth, would not serve Nguyễn needs. They would have potentially focused attention northward, to the captive Lê emperor, instead of inwards and southwards, on to the expanding separatist state itself, and the Nguyễn needed an inclusive ideology, not one that would highlight qualities distinguishing the Vietnamese from the other peoples of the region. Of necessity, therefore, Confucianism in Đàng Trong played a political and social role that was relatively minor compared to its role in the north, where the Chinese-style examination system ensured Neo-Confucianism never lost its grip on the literati elite.[67]

In place of the Confucian repertoire, Li Tana argues that "the principle means by which the Nguyễn successfully domesticated their regime was through an eclectic weaving of indigenous spirits and beliefs into a syncretic (Vietnamese) Buddhist framework, a hybrid religious system that bestowed moral legitimacy on Nguyễn authority in Đàng Trong."[68] As evidence of this she cites the fact that the first Nguyễn ruler in Đàng Trong, Nguyễn Hoàng, constructed a pagoda in 1601 at a site that was home to powerful spiritual forces that were perhaps identified locally with the Cham spirit, Po Nagar, a spirit that the Vietnamese adopted and referred to as Thiên-Y-A-Na. Li also notes that Nguyễn Hoàng and his successors renovated old Buddhist temples and constructed new ones, a clear sign of their patronage of that religion and its institutions.[69]

According to Li Tana, this "hybrid religious system," created through a process of localization, increasingly served to differentiate Đàng Trong from the Trịnh-controlled north. Citing an anecdote from the late eighteenth



century to elucidate this point, Li Tana states: "Just how far from northern tradition Đàng Trong had moved is illustrated by an anecdote concerning a Tây Sơn general in Nghệ An, who laughed at *xã tắc* (*she ji* in Chinese), the god of land and crops and thus an important Confucian deity, exclaiming: 'a dog is more useful than *xã tắc*.' The southern general was not being consciously iconoclastic: he was simply ignorant. *Xã tắc* was basically unknown in Đàng Trong under the Nguyễn.[70]"

The *xã tắc* is a very early example of the kind of appropriation of local spirits into an official discourse that, as we saw above, would eventually become widespread around the time that Vietnam first gained autonomy. The characters for *xã* and *tắc* literally mean "soil" and "grain," respectively. In China there were originally separate spirits for each of these entities, but by the time of the Zhou Dynasty they were joined and sacrificed to together. We can logically think of the *xã tắc* as a single deity from that point onward. There was also a tradition that associated this spirit with Hou Ji [Viet., Hậu Tắc], a mythical ancestor of the Zhou. Throughout the rest of imperial Chinese history, regular, usually biannual, sacrifices to the altar of the "Spirit of Soil and Grain," as I prefer to translate this term, did indeed play an important role in the Confucian repertoire, for they were meant to secure abundant harvests, the lifeblood of the empire.

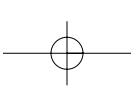
At the same time, however, the sacrifices to the Spirit of Soil and Grain also fulfilled another important function, namely, to reaffirm hierarchies of space and power. During the Zhou Dynasty, the emperor would enfeoff his vassals or underlords by giving them a lump of earth from the altar to the Spirit of Soil and Grain in the capital. The vassals would then take these satchels of earth back to their domains and place them in an altar to the Spirit of Soil and Grain in their own capital as a symbol of their submission to the Zhou emperor. In late imperial China this practice continued, albeit in altered form, having undergone numerous transformations over the centuries.[71] During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), for instance, there was a main altar to the Spirit of Soil and Grain in the capital, and then altars to the same spirit in all of the provincial capitals. The biannual sacrifices were carried out simultaneously at all of these altars. However, in the manner in which these sacrifices were performed, there were clear distinctions that reinforced the centrality of the imperial capital and the subordination of the provinces.[72]

The Spirit of Soil and Grain was also honored in Vietnam. The anecdote that Li Tana cites comes from a nineteenth-century edition of the *Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm*, the work Keith Taylor employed to examine techniques of rulership during the Lý Dynasty. The earliest versions of that work provide a biographical entry on the Spirit of Soil and Grain, referring to it as Hou Ji, the mythical ancestor of the Zhou. The entry in the nineteenth-century edition includes added commentary by a scholar-official named Cao Huy Diệu, and it is in this commentary that the anecdote cited by Li Tana appears.

Prior to relating this episode with the Tây Sơn general, Cao Huy Diệu's commentary indicates that the Lê Dynasty realm terminated in Nghệ An Province, where there was an altar to the Spirit of Soil and Grain. This indicates that Cao Huy Diệu did not consider Đàng Trong to be part of the Lê realm. Since the Tây Sơn emerged from Đàng Trong, it is possible that the Tây Sơn general mentioned in this passage was from that region. The episode in question, however, appears to take place after the Tây Sơn had defeated the Lê, and so this Đàng Trong man was now able to visit places such as Nghệ An Province, where the southernmost altar to the Spirit of Soil and Grain in the former Lê realm was located. This commentary to the *Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm* then states:

> The Tây Sơn usurpers had established their capital at Phú Xuân, but Nghệ An defense command still maintained its altar. Nearby there was a literatus who was fond of joking and adept at painting. After the usurping commander of the defense command [i.e., the "Tây Sơn general"] offered sacrifices to the Spirit of Soil and Grain, he ordered this literatus to paint a picture using the altar as his model. The literatus painted a picture of a dog eating the sacrificial remains, and wrote on it "Hopefully of benefit to the Soil and Grain [Altar]." This was extremely derisive. Since the spirit is perspicacious and upright, would it accept an offering which is not in accordance with propriety?[73]

While the Tây Sơn general in this anecdote did not laugh and say that "a dog is more useful than *xã tắc*," this passage does mention the caption of a painting that stated, "Hopefully of benefit to the Soil and Grain [Altar]." What I have translated here as "hopefully" is a character (*cẩu*, 苟) that rhymes with a character for "dog" (*cẩu*, 狗). Therefore, if one heard the sounds of this phrase without seeing the characters, it could sound like,



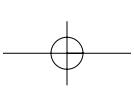
"The dog is of benefit to the Soil and Grain [Altar]." Paired with the content of the painting, this double meaning became easily apparent—the punch line to the painter's joke.

More importantly, however, the person who wrote this derisive line was not the "southern general," but a "northern" resident of Nghệ An, and a literatus at that. What is more, the "southern general" was clearly not ignorant of the Spirit of Soil and Grain, for he made offerings to this very spirit. This being the case, what was the reason for this irreverent exchange? I would argue that the answer to this lies in the terms that were used to describe these two individuals—"usurping" and "fond of joking." What the author describes in this anecdote is an exchange between a Tây Sơn official and a literatus who most likely did not support the Tây Sơn, and who expressed his dissatisfaction through the derisive painting that he created. His derision was therefore directed not at the Spirit of Soil and Grain but at the "usurping" Tây Sơn official, albeit at the spirit's expense.

This example of a "northern" literatus joking at the expense of a spirit who plays an important role in the Confucian repertoire, while a "southern general" makes offerings to this spirit, complicates Li Tana's claim that beliefs and practices in Đàng Trong significantly differed from those in the Lê heartland to the north. To her credit, Li Tana acknowledges that key elements of the "hybrid religious system" that the Nguyễn created also existed in the north. However, she argues that even such shared practices took on a different tone or significance in Đàng Trong.

An example of this would be the official recognition of local spirits. As noted above, Li Tana points out that in 1601 Nguyễn Hoàng erected a pagoda at a site that might have been associated with the Cham spirit Po Nagar. Some scholars suspect that worship of this same spirit had earlier spread to the north, with Cham war captives, and that by the sixteenth century Po Nagar had undergone a process of Vietnamization in the north by which it came to be worshiped by Vietnamese as a female spirit known as Liễu Hạnh.[74] Li Tana follows this account and then adds the following:

> Legends surrounding this new female cult suggest that Confucian-trained officials opposed the spread of her cult during the seventeenth-century literati revival in Đàng Ngoài and vainly tried to expel her, but at last the court was forced to acknowledge her power by officially bestowing titles.



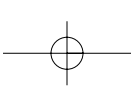
> This Confucian effort to tame a goddess not only contrasts with the ready acceptance of Po Nagar/Thiên-Y-A-Na by both rulers and people further south, but also with the welcome the Nguyễn accorded all useful local spirits, whatever their background.[75]

Li's understanding of the reaction of "Confucian-trained officials" toward the cult of Liễu Hạnh is based on her reading of two secondary sources that present information, in abbreviated form, from the main historical source on Liễu Hạnh, Đoàn Thị Điểm's "Story of the Vân Cát Goddess" [*Vân Cát thần nữ truyện*].[76] The legend, as recorded in this primary source, demonstrates that "Confucian-trained officials" and the spirits were not necessarily in opposition to each other. In fact, in this legend we find Liễu Hạnh interacting with literati and even engaging in a long a poetic exchange with one of the most famous and erudite "Confucian-trained officials" in Vietnamese history, the sixteenth-century scholar-official Phùng Khắc Khoan.[77]

After relating detailed information about Liễu Hạnh's history, Đoàn Thị Điểm records that in the seventeenth century the court heard of a mysterious power at work in the land and sent a magician to exercise it. The cosmic battle that ensued created hardship for the people living in the area. Liễu Hạnh then appeared and urged the local residents to tell the court that she was a goddess and to erect a temple in her honor. If the court did, she promised to transform calamity into prosperity.[78] Here the earlier information about Liễu Hạnh's friendly interaction with literati would have signaled to readers that she was in fact benevolent and that the court's decision to officially recognize her was therefore justified.

In comparing this story with that of Nguyễn Hoàng's recognition of Po Nagar, it is essential to place the confrontation between the court of "Confucian-trained officials" and Liễu Hạnh's spirit in the context the full legend provides. It is also important to keep in mind that scholars working on this same topic in China have found that official interactions with the spirits could take on an "astounding range of variations," from outright recognition or suppression to an initial contest followed by a delayed recognition.[79] Hence, that these single examples differ is not necessarily significant.

What is significant is the fact that Nguyễn Hoàng established a Buddhist pagoda at the site where Po Nagar's spirit was active. Li Tana argues that the "hybrid religious system" that the Nguyễn employed to "secure their own



political survival" involved incorporating indigenous spirits into a Buddhist framework, and that this was part of the "new way of being Vietnamese" that the Nguyễn established in Đàng Trong. However, if we follow Michel Strickmann's characterization of Buddhists as "agents of sinification" and consider that according to Li Tana there was a "shift towards civil government" in the eighteenth century in Đàng Trong, then Nguyễn Hoàng's recognition of Po Nagar comes to represent a very old way of being Vietnamese (and Chinese), for it likely marked the first step in the incorporation of spirits into the Confucian repertoire, just as it had in the Red River Delta centuries earlier, during the Lý and Trần Dynasties.[80]

Li Tana, however, does not envision such changes taking place in Đàng Trong. Although she recognizes that there are signs that the Nguyễn established institutions associated with the Confucian repertoire in the eighteenth century, she plays down these developments as "highly symbolic in nature."[81] She argues instead that during the eighteenth century, and in keeping with what Wolters characterized as the religious nature of kingship in Southeast Asia, the Nguyễn "acted to provide a religious coloration to their position as rulers." She contends that they did this in relation to their "Southeast Asian neighbors," such as the Khmer. In particular, Li Tana notes that when the Đàng Trong ruler Nguyễn Phúc Khoát officially ascended the throne in 1744 and implemented certain reforms that were part of the shift toward civil government, he nonetheless stated that Đàng Trong's "Southeast Asian neighbors" should continue to refer to him as *thiên vương*, a term that Li Tana translates as "king of heaven" and that she argues was distinct from the "son of heaven" moniker employed by the Trịnh and Lê to the north, "who continued to accept the Confucian concept that the emperor could only be the son of heaven, not heaven itself."[82]

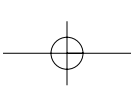
Nguyễn Phúc Khoát's statement is recorded in the official chronicles of the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–1945), a work compiled in the nineteenth century and known as the *Veritable Records of Đại Nam* [*Đại Nam thực lục*]. Just preceding the statement about the term *thiên vương* in the *Veritable Records of Đại Nam* is an edict that Nguyễn Phúc Khoát issued upon ascending the throne. It briefly relates the history of his ancestors' rule over Đàng Trong and mentions some of the circumstances surrounding his own ascension to the throne. The edict then ends with a wish that the new mandate of

Heaven that he had received will bring with it the moral virtue that will allow for the establishment of a realm like the land of Gong Liu and Hou Ji—one filled with the peace and harmony that had prevailed during the time of You Yu and Cheng Zhou. Although all of these figures are significant personages from antiquity and thus clearly place this edict within the ambit of the Confucian repertoire's privileged treatment of the rulers of antiquity as models for later ages to follow, what is particularly important for our purposes here is the mention of Hou Ji, that is, the very same figure whose spirit was honored as the Spirit of Soil and Grain, the spirit who Li Tana states was "basically unknown in Đàng Trong under the Nguyễn."[83]

Following this edict, the *Veritable Records of Đại Nam* then offers information about certain administrative changes that this new ruler implemented. First, Nguyễn Phúc Khoát ordered that when officials submitted documents to him, the verb that they used for this act would be changed from "submit" [*thân*] to "memorialize" [*tấu*]. Second, while all documents were to continue to use the reign year of the Lê Dynasty emperor, *hạ thuộc quốc*, that is, "dependencies" or "tributaries" and not "Southeast Asian neighbors," were to refer to Nguyễn Phúc Khoát as *thiên vương*.[84]

What is evident from this passage is that Nguyễn Phúc Khoát was attempting to expand his power by employing techniques found within the Confucian repertoire. The edict records that his ascension to the throne marked the start of a new mandate of Heaven, a divine charge that only emperors received. His administrative changes likewise elevated his status, for officials memorialized only the emperor. Finally, the term *thiên vương* had relevant precedents in the Confucian repertoire as well. The *Record of Rites* [*Liji*], one of the "Confucian classics," noted that *thiên vương* was a title by which a son of Heaven was to be referred when he visited the domains of his vassals [*chư hầu*] and invoked the spirits there.[85] Thus, although this term did have a religious coloration, it was informed by the Confucian repertoire and resonated with connotations of difference and hierarchy.

Li Tana presents her effort to demonstrate a "new way of being Vietnamese" in Đàng Trong in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as an attempt to counter simplistic conceptions of the southward migration of Vietnamese as a direct extension of political and cultural practices long established in the Red River Delta. She argues instead that "The localized



Nguyễn state was no simple continuation or mere regional variant of northern Vietnam but, on the contrary, the product of numerous differing—and often quite heterodox—forces and influences."[86] However, in examining her comments in dialog with the primary sources, I am struck by precisely the opposite point, namely, that even though the Nguyễn found themselves ruling within and over a novel human environment, they continued to operate primarily through recourse to practices that had been established in the north, from appropriating spirits and patronizing Buddhist establishments to justifying their political position by reference to ideas from the Confucian repertoire, such as the mandate of Heaven.

Li Tana is correct in noting that ideas from the Confucian repertoire were probably inappropriate for establishing a separate kingdom, as they inevitably focused attention northward, but what is so fascinating about Đàng Trong is that the Nguyễn employed these ideas anyway. More specifically, they sought to enhance their own power through employing aspects of the Confucian repertoire at the same time that they allowed this repertoire to restrict their power in relation to that of the Lê. Their continued use of the Lê dynastic calendar is one clear example of a limitation on their authority. Less clear is the question of the role of altars to the Spirit of Soil and Grain in Đàng Trong. If it is true, as Li Tana argues, that there were no altars to the Spirit of Soil and Grain in Đàng Trong, it may very well have been because the Nguyễn understood that the establishment of such altars was the perquisite of the Lê Dynasty emperor they served, for clearly Hou Ji, the mythical figure associated with this spirit, was known and revered in Đàng Trong. Perhaps they declined to establish their own altars out of deference to the Lê emperor. A countertrend to this, at the least, is indicated by the decision to have neighboring lands refer to their rulers as *thiên vương*, an alternative form of *thiên tử* [son of Heaven] and a term perhaps reserved for the Lê emperor, and the decision to order their own officials to memorialize. In any case, what is significant is that all of this transpired by employing the Confucian repertoire.

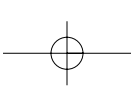
Vietnam and the Chinese Model

The impulse to highlight the limitations of the Confucian repertoire in Vietnam that we find in the above-mentioned studies is also apparent in a work that simultaneously emphasizes the extensive reach of the Confucian

repertoire throughout Vietnamese society. Alexander Woodside's *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* has long stood as the premier study in English of the early years of the Nguyễn Dynasty. This work is based on a broad reading of nineteenth-century sources, and as Woodside states in the first sentence of the book, it deals with "Chinese cultural influences and their limitations in the politics, literature, education and society of early nineteenth-century Vietnam."[87] Through discussions of such topics as the Nguyễn Dynasty bureaucracy, educational system, and foreign relations, Woodside makes it clear that the "Chinese model"—by which he means everything that I am including here in the Confucian repertoire, from the structure of the bureaucracy to an emphasis on filial piety in children's primers—was dominant in nineteenth-century Vietnam. Nonetheless, according to Woodside, this Chinese model did not monopolize the Nguyễn world, for it always sat unsteadily on top of a "Southeast Asian infrastructure."[88]

I have contended in this essay that many scholars have played down the role of the Confucian repertoire in Vietnam's past, but Alexander Woodside stands out as a clear exception to this observation. Nonetheless, I would still argue that the manner in which Woodside presents information about the role of the Confucian repertoire in nineteenth-century Vietnam deserves further consideration. In particular, while I agree with Woodside that the Chinese model played a dominant role in Nguyễn Vietnam but did not monopolize Vietnamese society, I question the value of seeing this entity as a "Chinese model" in opposition to a "Vietnam" that stands on a "Southeast Asian infrastructure." This is admittedly a minor critique, but I argue that it affects our broader perspective on Vietnam during this period.

By the time that the Nguyễn Dynasty came to power, an autonomous Vietnam had partaken of the Confucian repertoire for close to one thousand years. Just as mention of Buddhist monks interpreting the hair patterns of a temple dog and Lý Công Uẩn's citing of the *Venerated Documents* to justify moving the capital demonstrate this point for the eleventh century, so does all of the information in *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* about the Nguyễn bureaucracy, examination system, and foreign relations indicate the same for the nineteenth. In Woodside's rendering, however, the fact that prior to the



Nguyễn Dynasty there were centuries of institutional growth within Vietnam, as well as institutional borrowing from China, is rarely discussed in any detail. Instead, Woodside gives his readers the impression that the Nguyễn were able to look to a complete and still unfamiliar Chinese model in the nineteenth century, suggesting that the Chinese model was somehow alien to Vietnam. He notes, for instance, that: "In general, Vietnamese institutional borrowing from China was conditioned by the sequence of evolution of institutions in China itself. The older a Chinese institution was, the more important it was considered to be. Gia Long created the Nguyễn Six Boards, but a Nguyễn Grand Secretariat was not completely constructed until 1830."[89]

Such an impression is misleading. Although it is true that Gia Long established the Six Boards, the Lê Dynasty had set up this institution far earlier, in 1675. And although it is also true that it was not until Minh Mạng's reign that a Grand Secretariat was established, there was an internal institutional development in the early nineteenth century that led up to the creation of this office.[90] This is not to say that the Nguyễn did not seek out information about institutions in China. At times they did, and Woodside does a wonderful job of examining some such instances. However, these efforts must be seen in the long historical context of which they are a part. Such a view makes it clear that the Chinese model was in no way alien to Vietnam.

This is an important point because in viewing nineteenth-century Vietnam as a time and place when a court largely embraced a Chinese model while the peasantry lived mainly amidst a Southeast Asian infrastructure, Woodside contends that the distance between the court and the peasantry was greater in Vietnam than in China. Hence, after quoting a derogatory comment that emperor Minh Mạng made in 1840 about village operas, Woodside notes that "Such an outburst was more than a conventional expression of disdain similar to utterances made by Chinese emperors about the Chinese 'little tradition.'"[91] It was more than this because unlike Chinese emperors who sought to impart the elite ideas and practices of the Chinese model on the Chinese people, Minh Mạng attempted to do so to a Southeast Asian people. And while Minh Mạng and the other Nguyễn rulers "feared that Vietnamese village communities embraced a host of

Southeast Asian folk customs which, if allowed to flourish, would undermine the village pedagogue's attempts to uphold sinicization and the behavior recommended in Chinese books," they persisted nonetheless, thereby creating a tension in Vietnamese society that Woodside suggests was more severe than that between the court and peasantry in China.[92]

The foreignness of the Chinese model contributed to the tension between the court and countryside, but according to Woodside, so did the pull of indigenous beliefs, for at the same time that the Nguyễn elite upheld foreign ideas and practices, Woodside also points to an awareness and valuation among this same elite of Vietnam's own cultural traditions, thereby suggesting that while the elite sought to impose the alien Chinese model on the peasantry, there were also beliefs among the peasantry that resonated with the elite. Thus, Woodside sees two main "streams of thought" influencing educated Vietnamese in the nineteenth century, one indigenous and one foreign. He contends that these two streams of thought coexisted and that their manifestation could be found in such phenomena as a "dual theory of sovereignty," where the Vietnamese ruler was simultaneously an aloof Chinese-style emperor and a more earthy and accessible "protector figure," who protected the Vietnamese from, among other things, Chinese political and cultural domination.[93]

Woodside's main evidence for this dual theory of sovereignty is the existence in the Vietnamese language of a word for king [*vua*], which he argues is non-Sinitic in origin, and which was employed alongside the Sinitic term *hoàng đế* [Chn., *huangdi*], meaning "emperor." According to Woodside, not only were the origins of these terms distinct, but they also referred to different types of rulers, with *hoàng đế* signifying an aloof Chinese-style emperor, and *vua* a more earthy and accessible protector figure.

Woodside bases this claim on an uncontextualized reading of anecdotal evidence, such as a Chinese traveler's comments about the behavior of Vietnamese officials in the presence of their monarch, and by making reference to the *Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm*.[94] It is in this Trần Dynasty collection of biographies of protective deities that Woodside argues we can find the model of the type of leadership that the term *vua* signified. This is an extremely problematic assertion, however, for the *Departed Spirits of the*

Việt Realm was compiled when the Trần Dynasty officially recognized these spirits and bestowed upon them official titles, many of which label them as *vương* [Chn., *wang*], a Sinitic term meaning "king" or "monarch."[95] Thus, if the prototypes for this supposedly distinct Vietnamese form of kingship are spirits that we know about because the ruling elite appropriated them and bestowed upon them the Sinitic title of *vương*, how can we argue that they represent a non-Sinitic form of kingship, and that this ideal was still valid in the nineteenth century?

While I would thus offer the limited critique that Woodside overemphasizes tensions between a "Chinese model" and a "Southeast Asian infrastructure," and that we should consider ways to repackage the valuable contribution that he has made to our understanding of nineteenth-century Vietnam, other scholars have charged that Woodside does not go far enough in emphasizing the non-Sinitic elements at work during this period. In particular, Nola Cooke has argued that Woodside does not take adequately into account the influence on the Nguyễn family's style of rulership of their long history in the supposedly much less Sinicized/Confucian region of Đàng Trong. In an article entitled "The Myth of the Restoration: Đàng-Trong Influences in the Spiritual Life of the Early Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–47)," Cooke challenges the view of Woodside that the Nguyễn Dynasty constituted a restoration, after the tumultuous years of the Tây Sơn period, of the Sinicized/Neo-Confucian political ideas that had prevailed in northern Vietnam under the Lê. While Cooke does not deny that "Chinese ideas and administrative models" did influence political thought in nineteenth-century Vietnam, she argues that the early Nguyễn were more powerfully "galvanized" by a belief system that was quite distinct, and rooted in the much more non-Sinitic/non-Confucian world of Đàng Trong.[96]

To make this point, Cooke examines passages from edicts that were issued in the early years of Nguyễn rule that helped justify the Nguyễn rise to power. Examining these documents in the Vietnamese vernacular [*quốc ngữ*] translation of the original classical Chinese official records of the Nguyễn Dynasty, *The Veritable Records of Đại Nam*, Cooke finds that the first Nguyễn emperor, Gia Long, honored the nine generations of ancestors that preceded him—dating back to Nguyễn Hoàng, the member of the Nguyễn family who first took up a post in Đàng Trong in the sixteenth

century—as "sovereigns of the past" [*liệt thánh*] whose "miraculous spirit power" [*thiêng liêng*] had provided him with assistance in establishing a royal enterprise.[97]

Here the mention of "miraculous spirit power" is particularly important for Cooke, for its root, *thiêng*, she notes, is a Vietnamese term that can only be rendered into writing through the demotic script, Nôm. According to Cooke, this term "does not refer to human morality" and is thus distinct from Confucian concepts, referring instead "to the mysterious, divine forces inhabiting the natural and supernatural realms."[98] That the first Nguyễn Dynasty ruler, Gia Long, would cite the importance of this "miraculous spirit power" is evidence to Cooke that what the Nguyễn were "restoring" to prominence was not the Confucian orthodoxy of the Lê Dynasty, but more likely the unique beliefs of Đàng Trong.

This issue of how the Nguyễn justified their ascension to power is a fascinating one. Unfortunately, this particular argument about the importance of a "miraculous spirit power" that was not part of the Confucian repertoire is seriously compromised in two major ways. First, while the term *thiêng* does appear in the Vietnamese vernacular translations that Cooke relies on to make her argument, its demotic equivalent does not appear in any of the original texts that those translations are based on. There one finds only Sinitic compounds based on the Sinitic term *linh* [Chn., *ling*].

Linh is a term that one could also translate as "spirit power," that is, *thiêng liêng* minus the adjective *thiêng*, "miraculous." But a more accurate translation of this term would be "spirit of the deceased." Spirits of the deceased played an important role in the Confucian repertoire, for they could bestow some of their spirit power to certain living individuals. But there was nothing miraculous about the power mentioned by Gia Long. Instead, it was a hoped-for response to the proper execution of filial duties. Nothing was more central to the execution of filial duties than the proper execution of death ritual and the honoring of one's ancestors. Further, in carrying out one's filial duties to one's ancestors, a ruler could maintain the hope that the spirit of the deceased would aid and assist him in this world.[99]

This appears to be precisely how Gia Long thought, for besides the fact that he mentioned the *linh* of his ancestors, he also emphasized the importance of filial piety. To quote from one of his edicts, one in which he

honored his ancestors with posthumous titles and which Cooke cites without noting this passage: "Monarchs rule All Under Heaven through filial piety. As for filial piety, nothing is more important than respecting one's parents. Posthumously honoring one's ancestors is the means to fully demonstrate one's reverence and filiality."[100] The spirits of Gia Long's ancestors were thus important to him, but not because they represented a miraculous spirit power from a source outside of the Confucian repertoire.

We can discern this from the terms that were used, and also from portions of these documents that Cooke fails to cite—the second way in which her argument about the importance of powers beyond the Confucian repertoire is compromised. For instance, one of the documents that Cooke uses to demonstrate the importance to Gia Long of the miraculous spirit power of the nine generations of his ancestors begins with the following comments:

> I have heard that to take revenge after nine generations is one of the great lessons of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and that to console the people by punishing the wicked is the highest form of benevolence for a monarch. Profound achievements grow from difficult beginnings, and great orders disperse like flowing sweat.[101]

This document then moves on to talk about the Nguyễn family's establishment of a separate kingdom in Đàng Trong. It mentions how prosperous the domain was until the Tây Sơn rebellion brought an end to its peaceful existence. The document then recounts the effort that Gia Long made to retake the kingdom, and then concludes by stating:

> All of this was accomplished by relying on the assistance of Heaven [*thượng huyền*, an arcane term for Heaven], the aiding spirits of the deceased of the Nine [Ancestral] Temples, the meritorious services of the officers, and the effective efforts of the Three Armies [i.e., the soldiers].[102]

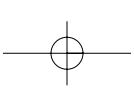
In this case, as with the other examples that Cooke cites, the term *thiêng* only appears in the vernacular translation of this text. The classical Chinese original employs a Sinitic compound, *hiệp linh* [Chn., *xieling*], which I have translated as "the aiding spirits of the deceased." More important, however, is the manner in which this document begins. It commences by stating that "I have heard that to take revenge after nine generations is one of the great lessons of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*."

The *Spring and Autumn Annals* [*Chunqiu*] is of course one of the main texts in the Confucian repertoire. The comment in Gia Long's edict refers to an episode recorded in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* about the destruction of one kingdom (Ji) by another (Qi) to avenge an insult that had taken place nine generations earlier. Whether the latter kingdom should be praised for having avenged an insult or condemned for taking the extreme measure of destroying another kingdom is a matter that was debated extensively by later generations of scholars.[103] Gia Long, or the scholars who drafted this edict on his behalf, clearly felt that the act of avenging a wrong was worthy of praise, and that this precedent justified the Nguyễn rise to power.

The question remains: what exactly was the insult that the Nguyễn family suffered nine generations before Gia Long? And how did the Nguyễn conquest of the Tây Sơn serve to avenge this past insult? What the edict demonstrates is that the answer to these and other related questions is to be found not outside of the Confucian repertoire but deep within its own intricate logic. As Philippe Langlet has pointed out, the Nguyễn found themselves in a very difficult position, as they had to strike a balance between rewarding the officers who had helped them defeat the Tây Sơn, honoring their ancestors as royal precursors to this new dynasty, and respecting the memory of the Lê Dynasty, which their ancestors had served.[104] The Confucian repertoire, however, was filled with examples and precedents that one could use to justify one's actions. That the Nguyễn did so demonstrates its central importance to them.

Inventing a Confucian Past

From the previous discussion it should be clear that a great deal of intellectual effort has been expended over the past four decades toward demonstrating the supposed limited appeal and influence of the Confucian repertoire in premodern Vietnam. Given that many of these arguments can be contested, scholars who work on the modern period face particular difficulties in attempting to assess the role of the Confucian repertoire in the twentieth century in a nuanced manner. We can get a sense of this difficulty from Shawn McHale's fascinating examination of the rise of a modern print culture in early twentieth-century Vietnam, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam*. In this work,

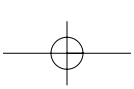


McHale devotes a chapter to a discussion of some major works from the 1920s to 1940s that debated the role of Confucianism in Vietnamese history and society. Familiar with the scholarship on premodern Vietnam, with its emphasis on the limited role of the Confucian repertoire, and having conducted some research of his own on the Trần period that echoed this same perspective, McHale expresses his surprise in this work at finding prominent intellectuals from the period, such as Trần Trọng Kim, declaring that Confucianism was historically central to the Vietnamese identity.[105]

Before examining Trần Trọng Kim's magnum opus, *Confucianism* [*Nho giáo*], McHale reminds his readers of the arguments that scholars have made about Confucianism and the Vietnamese past, namely, that the Trần period was not Confucian, that Confucian influence rose and fell with state power and was thus limited in its overall reach, and that Confucianism played a limited role in Đàng Trong. Having thus established "the place of Confucianism in Vietnamese history," McHale then goes on to examine what he sees as Trần Trọng Kim's "mapping of a 'forgotten' Confucian antiquity."[106]

In particular, McHale notes that Trần Trọng Kim saw his work on Confucianism as a map from the past that the current generation could use to find their way through the troubled present. This map worked by showing Vietnamese the importance of their Confucian heritage and encouraging them not to forsake it. However, given that from McHale's perspective the role of Confucianism in Vietnam's past had been relatively weak, he argues that "the past that Trần Trọng Kim was interested in 'remembering' was more a projection onto the past than a chronicle of it."[107] McHale suggests further that this practice of imagining a past that had never existed led Trần Trọng Kim to certain contradictions. On the one hand, he felt that Confucianism had influenced virtually every aspect of life in the past, but on the other, he had to explain its rapid demise in the twentieth century. Trần Trọng Kim did so by arguing that in the past Vietnamese had focused too heavily on studying for examination success and in the process had failed to grasp the true meaning of Confucianism, or as McHale summarizes this point, Vietnamese had "simply mimicked true Confucianism."[108]

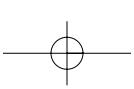
Trần Trọng Kim was a fascinating individual, and he did certainly project some anachronistic ideas onto the past. However, his views also suggest the powerful hold of certain ideas on the Vietnamese elite, from centuries past



right up to Trần Trọng Kim's day. We can see this, for instance, in his explanation for the demise of Confucianism. Although probably not the first to offer such a criticism, Confucius is recorded to have said, "Those who studied in antiquity did so for themselves, while those who study today do so for others."[109] This perception that there was a dichotomy between scholars who studied for superficial reasons ("for others," and by extension, for "other purposes") and those who studied to cultivate themselves and obtain true knowledge gained even more salience during the Song Dynasty with the emergence of the Learning of the Way, or neo-Confucianism. Zhu Xi, the most famous proponent of this school of thought, felt that it was precisely because scholars were studying for superficial goals that the China of his day was suffering from foreign invasions—be they human, in the form of the Jin, or intellectual, in Buddhism. Here Zhu Xi placed particular blame on the civil service examination, as he felt that the wealth and prestige that successful exam graduates accrued led aspirants to disregard the true meaning of the classics and to focus all of their efforts on passing the exams.[110]

Zhu Xi thus wanted scholars to focus once again on learning for their own benefit. He argued that scholars could indeed come to apprehend the true meaning of the classics if they engaged in self-cultivation, a practice probably inspired by Buddhist meditation, and if they followed a certain progression in reading through the classics.[111] In the end, however, Zhu Xi's emphasis on discovering the true meaning of the classics through self-cultivation and reflective reading may have served to exacerbate the sense that there was a dichotomy between true learning and what scholars engaged in to pass the civil service examinations, for literati would continue to lament the poor quality of examination candidates in the centuries that followed.

Viewed from this context, it is hardly surprising that Trần Trọng Kim would claim that the influence of Confucianism was dwindling fast in twentieth-century Vietnam because scholars, presumably in the final years that the exams were held, had focused too narrowly on passing the examinations and had not apprehended the true meaning of Confucianism. Such an opinion suggests that this concept of a dichotomy between true and superficial learning was alive and well in the mind of scholars like Trần Trọng Kim as late as the 1930s. What is interesting about Trần Trọng Kim, however, is his proposal for reapprehending the true meaning and import of



that teaching. For according to McHale, Trần Trọng Kim felt that one could use intuition to do this.

The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) scholar Wang Yangming had already proposed this concept, but Trần Trọng Kim was now borrowing it from the French philosopher Henri Bergson, whose ideas were in vogue in East Asia at the time.[112] Thus, Trần Trọng Kim's complaint may seem straightforward, but it was likely loaded with significance, both historical and cultural. However, until work on the premodern period can better illuminate the historical role of the Confucian repertoire in Vietnam, such significance will probably elude us.

The World Waiting in the Archives

While various aspects of what we can call the Confucian repertoire have been discussed in the above-mentioned works, much of this scholarship has been based on an extremely limited selection of texts, the majority of which have long been available in *quốc ngữ* translation. Many of these sources only peripherally deal with some of the more central aspects of the Confucian repertoire, such as philosophy, death ritual, and the civil service exams. In contrast, sitting unexamined in Vietnamese archives are a wealth of manuscripts, in both classical Chinese and Nôm, that have the potential to revolutionize our understanding of the role of the Confucian repertoire in Vietnam's past. In what follows I will briefly try to describe the types of materials that exist, as well as the kinds of knowledge that we can gain from them.

One of the most glaring lacunae in our understanding of the historical importance and functions of the Confucian repertoire in Vietnam regards philosophy. Textual exegesis was arguably the premier technique for discussing philosophical issues contained in the classics, and yet virtually no scholarship has been done on this topic. Recently, Wai-Ming Ng composed a short piece on an early twentieth-century commentary on the *Classic of Changes*; though limited in scope, Ng's study nonetheless gives a sense of the rich ideas that scholars can find in such commentaries.[113] Alexander Woodside, meanwhile, has written in broad terms of "primordialism" in Vietnamese thought. Woodside's argument is that Vietnamese scholars privileged original Zhou-era texts over the metaphysical arguments of the Song and later periods.[114] This point, although insightful, is limited in its plausibility

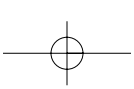
by the fact that it is based on a small selection of sources, none of which are works in which the authors directly discuss the classics.

It would be wonderful if a scholar would test Woodside's assertion by examining some of the numerous commentaries that Vietnamese wrote on the classics, all of which exist in manuscript form in Vietnam. A passing glance at some of these works suggests that Woodside is correct in his assertion that Vietnamese scholars did not focus on metaphysical discussions of their own. Nonetheless, they were very much aware of Song and post-Song scholarship on these works, as we can see in the references that Vietnamese writers make to Song Dynasty scholars, such as Zhu Xi and Cheng Yi, as well as to scholars from the Ming.

Just to mention a few more studies of the *Classic of Changes*: a work compiled in 1805, *Persisting Questions about the Meaning of the Changes* [*Dạch nghĩa tồn nghi*], focuses largely on explaining Zhu Xi's interpretation of that work.[115] An 1815 preface to a Nôm translation of the *Classic of Changes* notes that the interpretations of Zhu Xi and Cheng Yi are unsurpassed, whereas another undated Nôm translation includes the preface to Cheng Yi's commentary on the *Changes*.[116] Therefore, even if Vietnamese were "primordial" in their philosophical interests, they nonetheless kept up with later scholarship. At this point, how or whether Vietnamese scholarship was in any way distinct from similar scholarship in late imperial China, Korea, and Japan are all topics that can fruitfully be explored given the abundance of available materials.[117]

A related topic about which there is likewise an abundance of materials that scholars can mine concerns the civil service exams. Although scholars like Zhu Xi complained that the civil service exams were a hindrance to gaining a true understanding of the classics, in actuality, by our standards today Zhu Xi's failed scholars likely learned a great deal about those works as they studied for the exams. The exams were thus an important institution for the perpetuation of the teachings of the classics, and in order to truly understand the place of the Confucian repertoire in Vietnam we need to comprehend how the exams worked and what their impact on society was.

Alexander Woodside devoted a chapter of *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* to this topic. He provided an outline of how the exams worked and also discussed such issues as the curriculum that candidates studied in



preparation. Recently, Nola Cooke has published a series of articles that criticize Woodside's claim that the exams were meritocratic and that literati from the Red River Delta took advantage of their long history of scholarship to rise through the ranks in the Nguyễn Dynasty.[118] In tracing the career trajectories of various Nguyễn Dynasty officials, Cooke finds that applicants from the northern part of the empire were actually discriminated against, and that less scholastically qualified individuals from the center and south were allowed to skip exams and rise through the ranks.

While Cooke's findings are a welcome addition to our understanding of nineteenth-century Vietnam, they will come as no surprise to anyone who has read any of the many studies on the civil service examination in China that have come out in the decades since Woodside published his study.[119] Indeed, our understanding of the civil service examinations in China is so much more sophisticated than it was when Woodside researched and wrote his book that the absence of similar work on Vietnam points to another great void in our knowledge of that land. Cooke's articles likewise would have benefited from a familiarity with the work on China; while her claim that the exam system was not meritocratic is persuasive, her effort to extrapolate from this that "the nineteenth century was no era of widespread Neo-Confucian resurgence" is less convincing, for she never explains what she thinks Neo-Confucianism is and how it can be detected or measured in society. Cooke admits that the individuals who were promoted without having to take all of the exams were "hardly uneducated," but she never indicates what their education consisted of and how it differed from those who passed all of the exams.[120]

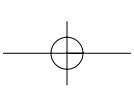
To find answers to such issues, scholars need to examine what exam candidates wrote as well as what the average person studied to become literate. For the former, there are many extant collections of sample essays from the various levels of the exam system that historians could examine to determine what candidates were tested on and whether or not there was a clear distinction between the regional and metropolitan exams in terms of scholastic ability. At the other end of the spectrum, scholars could examine educational primers to find the kind of ideas that children were first exposed to. One 1834 work, the *New Edition of the Precious Mirror for Enlightening the Young* [*Tân toản thiếu tiểu khai tâm bảo giám*], for instance, contains

excerpts on proper behavior from such works as the *Record of Rites*, the *Greater Learning* [*Daxue*], the *Analects* [*Lunyu*], Zhu Xi's *Reflections on Things at Hand* [*Jinsi lu*], and Hong Zicheng's *Vegetable Root Discourse* [*Caigen tan*].[121]

The inclusion of passages from this latter work in a text that also contains excerpts from the classics points to another unexplored, but rich, topic—what we might call popular Confucian thought. The *Vegetable Root Discourse* is a Ming Dynasty work that mixes ideas from all of the "three repertoires" and presents simple advice on how the average person can live a good life.[122] A wide variety of such texts circulated in late imperial China. In general, they sought to promote moral behavior among the common people, encouraging them to accumulate merit through such behavior as a way to avoid supernatural retribution. Referred to as "morality books" or "ledgers of merit and demerit," these texts also spread to Vietnam, and there are extant copies of these works that scholars could examine to gain a sense of how ideas from the Confucian repertoire were propagated at a more popular level.[123]

Related to these works are numerous extant examples of spirit writing, a phenomenon that spread to Vietnam from China around the turn of the nineteenth century. In this genre, mediums would become possessed by spirits and thereby communicate essentially the same messages that one found in morality books and ledgers of merit and demerit. At first, the messages were transmitted by spirits that originated in China, usually Wenchang Dijun. But by the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, Vietnamese spirits, such as that of the goddess Liễu Hạnh, were assisting Wenchang Dijun in communicating through mediums and exhorting Vietnamese to follow the moral dictates of the Confucian repertoire—that is, for "officials to be loyal, children to be filial, older siblings to be fraternal, younger siblings to be respectful, husbands and wives to live in harmony, friends to rely on trust, the five relationships to conquer all, and the hundred moral attributes to never decay."[124]

These are just a few of the many topics that are central to the Confucian repertoire but that have yet to be examined. In addition to materials on the above topics, there is an extensive body of extant writings on rituals, as well as community compacts, that is, sets of rules that were employed to regulate behavior and ritual performances at the village level. Finally, there is also



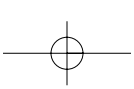
the issue of the relationship between the Confucian repertoire and the spirit world. While the *Departed Spirit of the Việt Realm* is by now well-known to scholars, by the nineteenth century the court was officially recognizing over a thousand tutelary spirits. This is another topic for which there is a wealth of materials, and one that could give us a sense of how the court employed the Confucian repertoire to appropriate and control the spirit world.[125]

Conclusion

What, then, is the "state of the field" for the study of "Confucianism" in Vietnam? Again, I would have to argue that there basically is no such field. Scholars simply have not yet researched core aspects of the Confucian repertoire. There is only one brief article on a commentary to a classic, although numerous such works are still extant. Very little has been written on ritual, a critical element in the Confucian repertoire. Our understanding of the civil service examination system is still comparatively rudimentary. No one has examined in detail morality books or community compacts to give us a sense of how ideas from the Confucian repertoire might have impacted the lives of common people. We know precious little about the curriculum used for general literacy or education. The list goes on and on and on.

Meanwhile, alongside this dearth of core scholarship is the flawed dominant paradigm that we have created, which is based on an abundance of studies that only indirectly deal with the Confucian repertoire but that argue for its limited influence and appeal. Unfortunately, even though so much work needs to be done, I am not at all optimistic that anyone will pursue such research. First, doing so will require that whoever engages in this work have a strong foundation in classical Chinese. To really get at the heart of the role that the Confucian repertoire played in Vietnam's past will require that scholars examine manuscripts in the raw, without reliance on the crutch of *quốc ngữ*, but few scholars today engage in that type of research. Fortunately, a good deal of scholarship on the Confucian repertoire in China does exist, and therefore, historians who take advantage of that body of work will gain some guidance.

Doing so, however, will require "going through China to get to Vietnam," and that is a step very few individuals take. Indeed, as I stated at the outset, much of the scholarship discussed in this paper is to some



degree part of an effort to counter the claims of colonial-era scholars that Vietnam was a "little China." Ironically, in challenging this claim, scholars generally appropriated, rather than interrogated, the concept of "China" that colonial scholars employed. Meantime, China studies have evolved a more nuanced understanding of Chinese imperial history. While Henri Maspero once argued that in extending its bureaucratic government to Vietnam in the first millennium CE, China brought an unprecedented degree of cohesion to Vietnamese society, today historians of China debate the very idea of a bureaucratic government in early imperial China, and instead envision the China of that time in terms that are much more fluid and heterodox than colonial-era scholars, like Maspero, ever imagined.[126]

It is precisely through understandings such as these that scholars working on China have started to employ terms like "repertoire," for they realize that conveying the nuances of the past that previous generations of scholars overlooked at times requires the creation of a new vocabulary. This is a point that scholars working on Vietnam should heed as well, for it will assist us in our effort to move out from under the long shadow cast by colonial-era scholarship and its later refutation, so that we can make sense of the voices of figures like Lý Văn Phức and Liễu Hạnh on their own terms. Until that is achieved, we will have to keep in mind that the current scholarship on the Confucian repertoire in Vietnam, like the colonial-era scholarship that preceded it, possesses both strengths and weaknesses and should be approached with caution. ■

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the scholarship on Confucianism in premodern Vietnam by the leading figures in the field in North America and Australia. By testing the findings of this scholarship against primary sources and simi-

lar work done on China, the author concludes that scholars have not acknowledged the full role that Confucianism played in Vietnam's past, and that key research remains to be done. The article concludes with suggestions for such research.

KEYWORDS: *Confucianism, Vietnam, China, premodern history*

Notes

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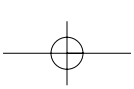
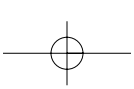
2. See Lionel M. Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
3. See Robert Ford Campany, "On the Very Idea of Religions (In the Modern West and in Early Medieval China)," *History of Religions* 42, no. 4 (2003): 317–319; Robert Hymes, *Way and Byway: Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 5.
4. Benjamin A. Elman with John B. Duncan and Herman Ooms, "Introduction," in *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam*, eds. Benjamin A. Elman et al. (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series, 2002), 4–5.
5. R.B. Smith, "The Cycle of Confucianization in Vietnam," in *Aspects of Vietnamese History*, ed. Walter F. Vella (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1973), 1–29.
6. For more on this, see Evelyn Rawski, "Presidential Address: Reenvisioning the Qing," *Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 4 (1997): 829–850, and Ho Ping-ti, "In Defense of Sinification: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski's 'Reenvisioning the Qing,'" *Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (1998): 123–155.
7. Lý Văn Phức, *Mân hành tạp vịnh* [Random Chants from a Journey to Mân] (1831), A. 1291, 24b–25a.
8. For more on these points, see J.D. Legge, "The Writing of Southeast Asian History," in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, vol. 1, part 1, *From Early Times to c. 1500*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–50, and John Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 2 (1961): 72–102.

9. Keith Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983).
10. It should be noted that Taylor clearly situated his work during this period as a challenge to colonial-era scholarship. See, for instance, his "An Evaluation of the Chinese Period in Vietnamese History," *The Journal of Asiatic Studies* 23, no. 1 (1980):139–164.
11. K.W. Taylor, "Notes on the Việt Điện U Linh Tập," *Vietnam Forum* 8 (1986): 42.
12. Taylor, "Authority and Legitimacy in Eleventh-Century Vietnam," in *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries*, eds. David G. Marr and A.C. Milner (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), 143.
13. Taylor, "Authority and Legitimacy," 141. Also see Taylor, *Birth of Vietnam*, 296.
14. Valerie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127–1276* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).
15. Terry F. Kleeman, *A God's Own Tale: The Book of Transformations of Wenchang, the Divine Lord of Zitong* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994); and Ellen G. Neskar, "The Cult of Worthies: A Study of Shrines Honoring Local Confucian Worthies in the Sung Dynasty (960–1279)" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1993).
16. Taylor, "Authority and Legitimacy," 156–161. Keith Taylor has written a more recent article that more directly addresses Gao Pian's position in Vietnamese history. However, the focus of that article is on nineteenth-century memories of Gao Pian rather than his ninth-century activities. See Keith W. Taylor, "A Southern Remembrance of Cao Biền," in *Liber Amicorum: Mélanges offerts au Professeur Phan Huy Lê* [Liber Amicorum: A Miscellany Offered to Professor Phan Huy Lê], eds. Philippe Papin and John Kleinen (Hà Nội: Thanh Niên, 1999), 241–258.
17. Michel Strickmann, "The *Consecration Sutra*: A Buddhist Book of Spells," in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), 98.
18. For more on this, see Kenneth Ch'en, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).
19. For a fuller understanding of Wolters' ideas on this topic, see his *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1999).
20. There is an enormous body of literature on this topic. For a good place to start, see Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).
21. For more on these works, see Michael Nylan, *The Five "Confucian" Classics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).



22. To get a sense of the type of issues that Chinese scholars debated, see Ching-i Tu, ed., *Classics and Interpretations: The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000).
23. O.W. Wolters, *Two Essays on Đại Việt in the Fourteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 1988), 5–6.
24. Ngô Sĩ Liên, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* [Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt], ed. Chen Jinghe, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Toyo Bunka Kenkyujo Fuzoku Toyogaku Bunken Senta, 1984), 113–114.
25. O.W. Wolters, "Historians and Emperors in Vietnam and China: Comments Arising out of Lê Văn Hưu's History, Presented to the Trần Court in 1272," in *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*, eds. Anthony Reid and David Marr (Singapore: Heinemann, 1979), 70.
26. Ibid., 73.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 83.
29. Wolters, *Đại Việt in the Fourteenth Century*, 40.
30. This is my own translation. Ủy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội Việt Nam, Viện Văn Học [Social Sciences of Vietnam Committee, Institute of Literature], *Thơ-văn Lý-Trần* [Lý-Trần Poetry and Prose], vol. 3 (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1978), 99.
31. For more on this, see Liam C. Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 185–188.
32. Wolters, *Đại Việt in the Fourteenth Century*, 27.
33. Ibid., 25.
34. *Yijing*, xici xia.
35. Wolters, *Đại Việt in the Fourteenth Century*, 26.
36. Ibid., 38.
37. Ibid., 39.
38. Ibid., 25 and 40.
39. Grant Evans, an expert on Laos, however, is one exception. See his "Between the Global and the Local There Are Regions, Culture Areas, and National States: A Review Article," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (2002): 147–162.
40. John K. Whitmore, "From Classical Scholarship to Confucian Belief in Vietnam," *Vietnam Forum* 9 (1987): 50.
41. John K. Whitmore, "Chu Văn An and the Rise of 'Antiquity' in 14th c. Đại Việt," *Vietnam Review* 1 (1996): 50–61.
42. Wolters, *Đại Việt in the Fourteenth Century*, 39; Whitmore, "From Classical Scholarship," 56.



43. John K. Whitmore, "Foreign Influences and the Vietnamese Cultural Core: A Discussion of the Premodern Period," in *Borrowings and Adaptations in Vietnamese Culture*, ed. Trương Bửu Lâm (Honolulu: Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, 1987), 8; Whitmore, "From Classical Scholarship," 54.
44. Cf. John K. Whitmore, *Vietnam, Ho Quy Ly, and the Ming (1371–1421)* (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for International and Area Studies), 1985.
45. K.W. Taylor, "Vietnamese Confucian Narratives," in *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam*, eds. Benjamin A. Elman et al. (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series, 2002), 339.
46. Taylor, "Vietnamese Confucian Narratives," 344–345.
47. The first and third quotes are from Taylor, "Vietnamese Confucian Narratives," 345, while the second is from Whitmore, "Literati Culture and Integration in Đại Việt, c. 1430–c. 1840," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 666–667.
48. Whitmore, "Literati Culture and Integration," 674.
49. K.W. Taylor, "The Literati Revival in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 18, no. 1 (1987): 1–23.
50. R.B. Smith, "The Cycle of Confucianization in Vietnam," 1–29.
51. George Dutton, "Reassessing Confucianism in the Tây Sơn Regime (1788–1802), *South East Asia Research* 13, no. 2 (2005): 119–145.
52. Nylan, *The Five "Confucian" Classics*, 2:364–365. The quoted items are on page 365.
53. Edward L. Davis, *Society and the Supernatural in Song China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 7.
54. Phan Văn Các et al., comps, *Văn khắc Hán Nôm Việt Nam*, vol. 2, *Thời Trần* [Hán Nôm Inscriptions of Vietnam, vol. 2, Trần Period] (Hà Nội: Viện Nghiên Cứu Hán Nôm, 2002), 303.
55. Judith A. Berling, *The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-En* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).
56. Timothy Brook, "Rethinking Syncretism: The Unity of the Three Teachings and Their Joint Worship in Late-Imperial China," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 21 (1993): 13–44.
57. Mai Quốc Liên, ed., *Ngô Thì Nhậm, tác phẩm* [Ngô Thì Nhậm, Works], vol. 3 (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 2002), 265–266.
58. Dung Ngoc Duong, "Buddhist Discourse in Traditional Vietnam" (PhD dissertation, Boston University, 2001), 150.
59. Whitmore, "Foreign Influences and the Vietnamese Cultural Core," 8.
60. For examples of this, as well as for the closely related terms *bạch diện lang* and *bạch diện thư lang* in works such as the *History of the Jin* [*Jinshu*], the *History of the Song* [*Songshu*], and in the poetry of Tang Dynasty poets Du Fu and Bo Juyi, see the citations for these terms in Lin Yin and Gao Ming, comps.,

Zhongwen da cidian [Great Dictionary of Chinese], vol. 6 (Taibei: Zhongguo Wenhua Daxue, 1982), 857.

61. Ngô Sĩ Liên, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, 202, 207.
62. Ibid., 207–208.
63. Whitmore, "Literati Culture and Integration," 677.
64. Taylor, "Vietnamese Confucian Narratives," 346.
65. Keith Taylor, "Nguyễn Hoàng and the Beginning of Vietnam's Southward Expansion," in *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power, and Belief*, ed. Anthony Reid (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993): 42–65; Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1998), as well as her article, "An Alternative Vietnam? The Nguyễn Kingdom in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 29, no. 1 (1998): 111–121; Nola Cooke, "Regionalism and the Nature of Nguyễn Rule in Seventeenth-Century Đàng Trong (Cochinchina)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 29, no. 1 (1998): 122–161; and Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mang (1820–1841)* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2004).
66. Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, 101.
67. Ibid., 103.
68. Ibid., 102.
69. Ibid., 104–106.
70. Ibid., 110.
71. To get a sense of this process, see Kenneth Dean, "Transformations of the *She* (Altars of the Soil) in Fujian," *Cahiers d'Extême-Asie* 10 (1998): 19–75.
72. Angela Zito, *Of Body and Brush: Grand Sacrifice as Text/Performance in Eighteenth-Century China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 130–131.
73. Lý Tế Xuyên, *Việt điện u linh tập* [Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm] (Sài Gòn: Khai Trí, 1961), 218. Li Tana and I both work with the classical Chinese text appended to this *quốc ngữ* translation.
74. Nguyễn Thế Anh, "The Vietnamization of the Cham Deity Po Nagar," in *Essays Into Vietnamese Pasts*, eds. K.W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1995), 46–47.
75. Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, 105.
76. Đào Thái Hành, "La Déese Liễu Hạnh" [The Goddess Liễu Hạnh], *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Huế* 1, no. 2 (1914): 167–186; Nguyễn Thế Anh, "The Vietnamization of the Cham Deity Po Nagar," 42–50.
77. Đoàn Thị Điểm, *Truyền kỳ tân phả* [New Register of Tales of the Strange] (1811), A. 48, 20b-23b, or, for a summary of this passage in English, Olga Dror, "Đoàn Thị Điểm's 'Story of the Vân Cát Goddess' as a Story of Emancipation," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (2002): 67.

78. Đoàn Thị Điểm, *Truyền kỳ tân phả*, 31a–31b.
79. For a description of this research, see Judith Magee Boltz, "Not By the Seal of Office Alone: New Weapons in Battles with the Supernatural," in *Religion and Society in T'ang and Sung China*, eds. Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), 242.
80. Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, 46.
81. Ibid., 48.
82. Ibid., 109.
83. *Đại Nam thực lục tiền biên* [Veritable Records of Đại Nam, Preliminary Compilation] (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Linguistic Studies, 1961), 10/6a–7b.
84. Ibid., 10/7b.
85. *Liji* [Record of Rites], Quli xia.
86. Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, 100.
87. Alexander Barton Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1971, reprint 1988), 1. Citations are to the 1988 edition.
88. Ibid., 8.
89. Ibid., 96.
90. Đỗ Văn Ninh, *Từ điển chức quan Việt Nam* [Dictionary of Vietnamese Official Titles] (Hà Nội: Thanh Niên, 2002), 99, 465.
91. Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, 27.
92. Ibid., 28.
93. Ibid., 9–13.
94. Ibid., 10–12.
95. There is one spirit, Phùng Hưng, who is referred to in this work as the "Bố Cái Đại Vương," with *đại vương* meaning "great king." Keith Taylor has hypothesized that *bố* might have originally been read as *vua*, and *cái* might have meant "great," to produce a title that stated "great king" in both Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese forms. In the text itself, however, *bố* and *cái* are specifically translated as "father" and "mother," respectively. Therefore, even if this title contained a character that was originally read as *vua*, by the time this text was recorded in the fourteenth century, that reading was apparently no longer commonly recognized. See Keith Taylor, "Phùng Hưng: Mencian King or Austric Paramount?" *Vietnam Forum* 8 (1986): 10–25; and Lý Tế Xuyên, *Việt điện u linh tập lục* [Record of the Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm], in *Yuenan hanwen xiaoshuo congkan* [Collection of Vietnamese Novels in Chinese], eds. Chan Hing-ho, Cheng A-tsai, and Trần Nghĩa, series 2, vol. 5 (Paris and Taipei: École Française d'Extrême-Orient and Student Book Company, 1992), 22.
96. Nola Cooke, "The Myth of the Restoration: Đàng-Trong Influences in the Spiritual Life of the Early Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–47)," in *The Last Stand of*

Asian Autonomies: Responses to Modernity in the Diverse States of Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750–1900, ed. Anthony Reid (Melbourne, Australia: Macmillan Press, 1997), 269–270.

97. Ibid., 272–273.
98. Ibid., 275.
99. For more on this, see Evelyn S. Rawski, "The Imperial Way of Death: Ming and Ch'ing Emperors and Death Ritual," in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, eds. James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 228–253.
100. *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên đệ nhất kỷ* [Veritable Records of Đại Nam, Primary Compilation, First Era] (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Linguistic Studies, 1963), 24/11a.
101. Ibid., 19/4a.
102. Ibid., 19/5a–5b.
103. See *Chunqiu*, Zhuanggong 4; *Gongyang zhuan*, Zhuanggong 4; James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 5, *The Ch'un Ts'ew with The Tso Chuen* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 76–77.
104. Philippe Langlet, *L'Ancienne Historiographie d'État au Vietnam*, Tome I, *Raisons d'être, conditions d'élaboration et caractères au siècle des Nguyễn* [The Old Historiography of the State in Vietnam, vol. 1, Its Purpose, Development and Character in the Nguyễn Century] (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1990), 18.
105. Shawn Frederick McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 77–88. McHale's main work on the Trần is "'Texts and Bodies': Refashioning the Disturbing Past of Trần Vietnam (1225–1400)," *Journal of the Social and Economic History of the Orient* 42, no. 4 (1999): 494–518.
106. McHale, *Print and Power*, 69–77.
107. Ibid., 80.
108. Ibid., 81.
109. *Lunyu* [Analects], 14.24.
110. Daniel K. Gardner, *Learning to Be a Sage: Selections from the Conversations of Master Chu, Arranged Topically* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 15–22.
111. For more on the importance of self-cultivation, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 49–66; and for Zhu Xi's plan for learning, see Gardner, *Learning to Be a Sage*, 35–56.
112. McHale, *Print and Power*, 81–82. McHale notes that Trần Trọng Kim might have learned about Bergson from the Chinese thinker Liang Shuming, but also states that he may have learned about Bergson from his own reading in French. For more on Bergson and Liang Shuming, see An Yanming, "Liang

Shuming and Henri Bergson on Intuition: Cultural Context and the Evolution of Terms," *Philosophy East and West* 47, no. 3 (1997): 337–362.

113. Wai-Ming Ng, "*Yijing* Scholarship in Late-Nguyen Vietnam: A Study of Le Van Ngu's *Chu Dich Cuu Nguyen* (An Investigation of the Origins of the *Yijing*, 1916)," *Review of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003): 1–14.
114. Alexander Woodside, "Classical Primordialism and the Historical Agendas of Vietnamese Confucianism," in *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam*, eds. Benjamin A. Elman et al. (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series, 2002), 116–143.
115. Anonymous, *Dịch nghĩa tồn nghi* [Persisting Questions about the Meaning of the *Changes*] (1805), A. 363.
116. Đặng Thái Bàng, comp., *Chu dịch quốc âm ca* [An Ode in the Kingdom's Language of the *Zhou Changes*], (1815, orig. comp., 1750), AB. 29, 4b; Anonymous, *Dịch kinh chính văn diễn nghĩa* [The Extended Meaning of the Orthodox Text of the *Classic of Changes*], (n.d.), VHv. 1114.
117. For a list of Vietnamese commentaries on the "Confucian classics," see Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, "Thư tịch Hán Nôm Việt Nam luận giải về *tứ thư* và *ngũ kinh* hiện có ở Viện Nghiên Cứu Hán Nôm [Vietnamese Han Nom Works on the Four Book and Five Classics Presently Held at the Han Nom Institute]," *Tạp Chí Hán Nôm* 68, no. 1 (2005): 33–43.
118. See Nola Cooke, "Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Confucianization in Historical Perspective: Evidence from the Palace Examinations (1463–1883)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 25, no. 2 (1994): 270–312; "The Composition of the Nineteenth-Century Political Elite of Pre-Colonial Nguyễn Vietnam (1802–1883)," *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no. 4 (1995): 741–764; "Southern Regionalism and the Composition of the Nguyễn Ruling Elite (1802–83)," *Asian Studies Review* 23, no. 2 (1999): 205–231.
119. For a list of this scholarship, see the bibliography in Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Service Exams in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).
120. Cooke, "Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Confucianization," 312 and 306, respectively.
121. Anonymous, *Tân toản thiếu tiểu khai tâm bảo giám* [New Edition of the Precious Mirror for Enlightening the Young], (1834), VHv. 719.
122. See Daniel W.Y. Kwok, "Afterward," in *Vegetable Roots Discourse: Wisdom from Ming China on Life and Living*, trans., Robert Aitken with Daniel W.Y. Kwok (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2006), 165–216.
123. For a study on these works in China, see Cynthia J. Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

124. Anonymous, *Tam vị thánh mẫu cảng thế chân kinh* [The True Classic of the Three Sagely Mothers' Warning to the World] (1906), VHv. 3742, 9b.
125. See Trần Nghĩa, ed., *Di sản Hán Nôm Việt Nam thư mục đề yếu, bổ di 1* [Catalog and Abstracts of Vietnam's Hán Nôm Heritage, Supplement 1], 2 vols. (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2002).
126. For Henri Maspero's claim, see his "L'Expédition de Ma Yuan," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 18 (1918): 27–28. To get a sense of what historians today think government was like during this period in China, see Dennis Grafflin, "Reinventing China: Pseudobureaucracy in the Early Southern Dynasties," in *State and Society in Early Medieval China*, ed. Albert Dien (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 139–170; Christopher Leigh Connery, *The Empire of the Text: Writing and Authority in Early Imperial China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); and Charles Holcombe, *In the Shadow of the Han: Literati Thought and Society at the Beginning of the Southern Dynasties* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994).