

Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia [book review]

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Abstract:

As explored in several recent studies, the regions of modern-day China and Vietnam have been engaged in a long and complicated relationship. In *Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia*, Kathlene Baldanza skillfully discusses how internal Vietnamese political changes accompanied the thirteenth- through sixteenth-century transformations in Sino-Vietnamese relations, illustrated in this study with literary examples by the relationship's chroniclers. Baldanza has written what she describes as an overview of late imperial "Sino-Vietnamese history" in which she captures the dynamic nature of this interregional engagement from the era of Mongol invasion to the cessation of conflict in the Trịnh-Nguyễn rivalry (10). The author's focus on intellectual portraits of Vietnamese and Chinese scholars closely associated with changes along the Sino-Vietnamese frontier provides a novel, well-researched approach to an important topic.

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Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

KATHLENE BALDANZA

Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia.
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As explored in several recent studies, the regions of modern-day China and Vietnam have been engaged in a long and complicated relationship. In *Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia*, Kathlene Baldanza skillfully discusses how internal Vietnamese political changes accompanied the thirteenth- through sixteenth-century transformations in Sino-Vietnamese relations, illustrated in this study with literary examples by the relationship's chroniclers. Baldanza has written what she describes as an overview of late imperial "Sino-Vietnamese history" in which she captures the dynamic nature of this interregional engagement from the era of Mongol invasion to the cessation of conflict in the Trịnh-Nguyễn rivalry (10). The author's focus on intellectual portraits of Vietnamese and Chinese scholars closely associated with changes along the Sino-Vietnamese frontier provides a novel, well-researched approach to an important topic.

Baldanza begins her study with a detailed look at the political controversy generated by the Gia Long Emperor's (r. 1802–1820) first act to gain recognition from the Qing dynasty for the newly established Nguyễn dynasty. The Nguyễn court at Huế chose for itself the name of the ancient Nam Việt / 南越 kingdom (204 BCE–111 BCE), which had occupied a coastal region from the modern-day Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi to the southern reaches of the Hồng River Delta. Baldanza looks beyond this request and Beijing's initial opposition to contend that the approval of "Việt Nam" as a compromise appellation was a positive act of bilateral negotiation (4). The author's assertion touches on the larger current debate about the

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existence and function of the so-called tribute system, which bound Imperial China to its neighbors through a ritual protocol that guided diplomatic encounters. Baldanza has incorporated Brantley Womack's notion that Sino-Vietnamese tributary relations were conducted "within a framework of acknowledged asymmetry" (55); she argues that successful negotiations implied that deference on the Vietnamese side would necessarily be followed by acknowledgement from the Chinese court.

Baldanza argues that the themes of diplomatic negotiation and compromise are found throughout the history of Vietnam's relations with China, but with the rise of the Latter Lê dynasty, envoys and rulers of Đại Việt also engaged with the Ming court in demonstrations of proficiency in "classical culture," as expressed in the canon of Sinitic texts. Even in times of intense conflict between the two states, a cultural steadfastness was maintained. As Baldanza writes about the early Lê leadership, "[c]ultural and armed resistance to the Ming did not necessarily mean a rejection of classical institutions" (83). The Lê may have driven out the Ming militarily, but the frequent Vietnamese tributary missions sent north in the decades following the Ming occupation are a strong indicator that the practices of the northern hegemon remained extremely useful in shaping Đại Việt institutions and political power. Baldanza states throughout the book that she wishes to undermine the long-standing "David-and Goliath narrative," which maintains that Vietnam's core value was political and military resistance. This theme is hard to neglect, given the events of modern Vietnamese history, but the author makes a good case for its reexamination in the premodern period.

Baldanza also explores court debate over matters of Ming-Đại Việt relations, noting that common cultural bonds could be a source of anxiety for Ming officials. She writes that by adopting elements of this Sinitic script-based classical culture, "Vietnamese governments and elite were actually decentering the Chinese world by positing a cultural hub beyond the borders of the Chinese state" (6). Chinese court officials were invariably threatened by such a possibility, and "northern governments found Đại Việt's self-representation to be problematic and troubling" (14). The scholars at the Ming court became even more uneasy with the Đại Việt's civilizing efforts once the Mạc had established its control in the north and the Lê court neglected its tributary duties. By the late sixteenth century, Vietnam was

torn apart by internal political divisions, causing many elites from rival courts to seek Ming assistance in their struggles. In this period, Ming scholars would debate whether the court should treat Đại Việt as “a lost colony in need of support or as a barbarian kingdom of little concern” (7). Baldanza’s examples of Ming writings on Đại Việt in this period are filled with disdain and dated descriptions of “barbarian” practices. I would note that such attitudes among Chinese authorities are not unique to the late imperial period. Similar descriptions found their way into the accounts by the *History of the Song Dynasty* (*Songshi*) chroniclers of Đại Cồ Việt’s ruler Lê Hoàn’s (941–1005) character and appearance in the aftermath of the Chinese military defeat in 980.

Rather than presenting an all-inclusive narrative history of this period in Sino-Vietnamese relations, the author explores in detail the worldviews of various chroniclers of these events. Baldanza has selected a group of “border-crossers,” as she describes them, whose careers spanned two worlds, which they navigated from one side to another. These border-crossers include Lê Tắc (c. 1260s–1340s), Trần deserter and author in exile of the *An Nam Chí Lược* [A Brief History of Annam]; and Hồ Nguyên Trừng (1374–1446), exiled son of the usurper Hồ Quý Ly and author of *Nam Ông Mộng Lục* [A Record of the Dreams of an Old Southerner]. Both officials served northern regimes while their scholarship looked back on Vietnamese states, which they were no longer eligible to enter, but from which they drew much of their self-awareness. Vietnamese pride is apparent in the writings of both scholars, but Baldanza notes that “[w]hile Le Tac blurred the boundaries of the two countries, it is clear from Ho’s account that Dai Viet is a separate state” (73). Both scholars presented Đại Việt court writing as the cultural equal of northern scholarship. In Hồ Nguyên Trừng’s case, Baldanza offers examples of Ming scholars’ appreciation for his literary skills. The author ends her study with Nguyễn Khoa Chiêm’s *Stories about the Achievements of the South Court* (1719), in which Nguyễn Khoa Chiêm brought the rise of the Nguyễn clan from the south into the larger Đại Việt narrative through highlighting its literary achievements, for example by celebrating (and magnifying) the envoy Phùng Khắc Khoan’s supposedly virtuosic performance at the Ming court of the Wanli Emperor. Such accounts indicate the extent to which Vietnamese scholars in this period desired to demonstrate

a mastery of “classical culture” to such an extent that they overshadowed their less worthy counterparts to the north.

The author ends the study with Đại Việt reactions to the rise of the Qing dynasty, but the main points of the book are made in earlier engagements. Her conclusion that bilateral negotiation rather than “China’s unilateral domination and Vietnam’s cunning self-defense” is supported by the sources she has consulted (210). To reveal an additional dynamic in negotiating physical borderlands, I suggest including more mention of “the people in between,” as Catherine Churchman has described the Sino-Vietnamese frontier communities, but this wouldn’t affect the author’s overall conclusions. This is a well-organized book with helpful signposts throughout. I didn’t find many editorial issues to highlight, although there are a few points to mention. The author’s translation of “Xiyang” as Ceylon or perhaps Chola is more precise than Edward Farmer’s translation as “Western Ocean Country,” but I was unclear why the modern place name Sri Lanka was not employed here. On page 69, the author accidentally gives 1518 (rather than 1418) as the year in which Lê Lợi and his followers begin their campaign of Ming resistance. Lin Xiyuan’s dates are given as c.1480–1650, but I believe that these dates should be adjusted. These errors are easily corrected. With this study Baldanza has contributed to our understanding of the cultural foundations of the complicated relationship between China and Vietnam in the late imperial period, and all scholars interested in the political negotiations between these two states will benefit from reading this book.

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