

The Ming Invasion of Vietnam, 1407-1427

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Abstract:

In 1400 Vietnamese leader and radical reformer Hồ Quý Ly (ca. 1350–1410) usurped the Vietnamese throne from the declining Trần leadership. Hồ Quý Ly’s reign, although fueled by regional rivalries, managed to provoke a military response by the neighboring Ming that displaced the dominant Đông Kinh elite of the Red River Delta long enough for the Thanh Hóa elite of upper central Vietnam under Lê Lợi (1385–1433) to unify a political force that would borrow heavily from the Chinese model, but stress essential cultural differences between the two sides of the Sino-Vietnamese frontier. The Ming occupation of Vietnam would last only two decades, but this period continues to have an influence on the modern-day relationship between the People's Republic of China and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This chapter draws connections between Hồ Quý Ly’s radical reforms, the failed Ming response, and Sino-Vietnamese relations today.

Keywords: Hồ Quý Ly | Lê Lợi | Ming invasion | Red River Delta | Sino-Vietnamese relations

Book chapter:

Introduction

In a recent journal article on territorial disputes of the South China Sea, Carl Thayer concluded “Vietnam seeks to cooperate and struggle with China by acknowledging its primacy in the expectation that China will respect Vietnam’s autonomy.”¹ This pattern in Sino-Vietnamese relations seems to repeat throughout history from at least the mid-tenth century when local leaders in the Red River Delta pushed back against the military force of a northern regime. A closer look at the political situation faced by Ngô Quyền (吳權, 897–944) was much more complex, and after his brief reign, the Red River Delta declined into an anarchic period of fighting, which ended only when the strongest and best-connected military leader Đinh Bộ Lĩnh (丁部領, 924–979) defeated his rivals and reached out in 971 to his northern neighbor, the increasingly powerful Song empire. Đinh Bộ Lĩnh and his son’s assassinations by a political

¹ Thayer 2016, 217.

rival prompted local Song officials to call for a general invasion, which was ultimately thwarted by Vietnamese defenders in 980. From this short narrative we can see how difficult maintaining equilibrium in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship has been when interstate relations reacted swiftly to local political currents. In this chapter we examine one such pivotal event, the early fifteenth-century Ming invasion of Vietnam, which was closely related to a rivalry between feuding elite factions occupying the Vietnamese political landscape.

As David C. Kang notes, the single most significant conflict between Vietnam and China in the last 600 years was the Ming invasion of the Đại Việt kingdom,² and the radical reforms of Vietnamese leader Hồ Quý Ly (胡季犛, c. 1350–1410) were the catalyst for this conflict, which at the local level may be better understood as an interregional rivalry that drew on “Great Power” backing for support. In 1400 Hồ Quý Ly usurped the Vietnamese throne from the declining Trần leadership. The Ming soon provided a massive military response. The Ming occupation of Vietnam would last only two decades, but this period continues to have an influence on the modern-day relationship between the Peoples Republic of China and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This chapter draws connections between Hồ Quý Ly’s radical reforms, the massive Ming military response, and Sino-Vietnamese relations today.

Following the rise of Hồ Quý Ly and his usurpation of power that brought an end to the Trần dynasty (陳, 1225–1400), the Ming court’s decision to invade Vietnam was based on a number of factors, most of which are connected with the personal rule of the Yongle emperor (永樂, r. 1402–1424). First, the Yongle emperor’s understanding of Confucian rule included a desire to create a moral world order for all subjects, remaining true to the precepts outlined in his father’s court’s influential treatise the *Veritable Records* (*Taizu shilu* 太祖實錄), which the Yongle emperor ordered revised twice during his reign.³ Secondly, the Yongle emperor wished to outshine his father’s rule, and overshadow his own usurpation of the throne from his young nephew the Jianwen emperor (建文, r. 1377–1402), by seizing control of the territory sought by their Mongol predecessors, including the Đại Việt kingdom. Edward Dreyer has argued that Yongle attempted to “live up to both the Chinese and the Mongol versions of the imperial ideal.”⁴ This effort is best expressed as *de* (德, “power/virtue”) through military might, even if such expressions of power beyond the territorial boundaries of the Ming state had been prohibited on paper by Yongle’s father the Hongwu Emperor (洪武, r. 1368–1398). Finally, the Ming court under the Yongle emperor had originally intended just to restore the Trần ruler to the throne, but early military success drove Yongle to demand more from this aggressive campaign. I would contend that this final factor played the most influential role in the manner with which this episode unfolded. The Ming was pulled into a regional rivalry, about which it had a very vague understanding. Ming support was then offered to the weakest party in the conflict, the remaining Trần leadership, out of a generalized Ming concern for the recreation of a “proper” order of succession. With the greater military capability, the Ming was able to upset Hồ Quý Ly and his family’s regime, but without a detailed understanding of the regional forces that brought Hồ Quý Ly to power, the Ming was unable to collaborate with the right regional rival to maintain a lasting presence through a direct occupation of the Đại Việt kingdom.

² D. C. Kang 2010, 99.

³ Rabasa et al. 2012, 29. Whitmore 1977, 51.

⁴ Dreyer 1982, 178. Cited in S. H. Tsai 2001, 81. See also Baldanza 2016, 58.

The Conflict

During the Trần dynasty, the territorial integrity of Vietnam was successfully defended against the expanding Yuan empire (元, 1279–1368), stemming the tide of Mongol conquest in Southeast Asia. In 1286, following two previous unsuccessful invasion attempts, Khubilai Khan (r. 1260–1294) was preparing for another invasion attempt on Japan, but he immediately organized a second expedition against Vietnam. Khubilai assembled an invasion force of 300,000 men and 500 war junks. He chose a royal family defector Trần Ích Tắc (陳益稷, 1254–1329) to replace Trần Nhân Tông (陳仁宗, 1258–1308) as king of An Nam (安南 “Pacified South”). The Yuan army captured the capital Thăng Long, but Trần forces cut off the Mongols’ supply lines. In 1288 the Yuan army confronted the Trần defenders at the Bạch Đằng River, where, traditional sources note, Trần Hưng Đạo (陳興道, c. 1232–1300) used the earlier Vietnamese warlord Ngô Quyền’s famous iron-tipped stake defense for a second remarkable success.⁵ The Yuan forces were completely defeated. Soon thereafter Trần Nhân Tông sent a delegation to Beijing to present tribute and request vassal status, after “begging forgiveness” for having driven off the Mongol invaders. Hardly mollified by this behavior, the Mongols initially planned another attack, but with the death of Khubilai Khan in 1294, this plan was never realized. After Chengzong (成宗, Temür Öljeytü Qan, r. 1294–1307) came to the throne, the Yuan court implemented the conciliatory policy of “great forgiveness, far and near” (大肆赦宥, 無問遠近), while the Vietnamese court adopted a matching policy of “great forgiveness” (寬宥) regarding its northern neighbor.⁶ The Đại Việt kingdom subsequently continued to act as a tributary vassal throughout the Yuan dynasty, Yuan–Đại Việt relations remained stable, and the existing border between the states remained firm.

The Trần dynasty in a real sense ended with the death in 1394 of the former ruler Trần Nghệ Tông (陳藝宗, r. 1370–1373), who had been administering the throne through sons and grandsons for more than two decades. With Nghệ Tông’s death, a trusted regent Lê Quý Ly (黎季犛), prior to changing his surname to Hồ, soon took over the administration of the kingdom. In 1398, while China was in the turmoil of a brief civil war, Quý Ly ordered the execution of the second-to-last ruler and the de-deposition of the last ruler (his son-in-law). In 1400 Quý Ly usurped the throne, and one year later he turned the throne over to his own son Hồ Hán Thương (胡漢蒼, ?–?). Lê Quý Ly immediately adopted the surname Hồ, and, claiming to be descended from the legendary Chinese emperor Yu (禹) of the Xia dynasty (夏, c. 2070 BCE–1600 BCE), he founded the Hồ dynasty (胡, 1400–1407).⁷ Hồ Quý Ly in 1397 moved his capital out of the Red River Delta, and his new citadel, the “Western Capital” (Tây Đô 西都), was constructed to the south of the Trần heartland in the modern-day Vĩnh Lộc district in Thanh Hóa province, which was away from the Trần’s center of popular support.⁸ This overt rejection of the Red River elite clans that had facilitated Trần rule boosted his Thanh Hóa base in this period of

⁵ Lê 2000, 147.

⁶ Song Lian 1976, 4650. Cited in Huang Fei 2010, 96. For a detailed description of these events, see J. A. Anderson 2014, 106–134.

⁷ Baldanza 2016, 62.

⁸ K. W. Taylor 2014, 168.

power consolidation, but his lopsided support would be Hồ Quý Ly's undoing when he sought to mobilize the entire region against a determined Ming assault.

Hồ Quý Ly's efforts to rule Vietnam should remind us of the short reign of Wang Mang 王莽 and the Xin dynasty (新, "New," 9 CE–23 CE) at the end of the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE), in that Hồ Quý Ly took Vietnam in a very different direction from his predecessors.⁹ While still in the service of the Trần dynasty, he seized land from the local feudal aristocracy and leased the plots to commoners.¹⁰ Responding to a plot by Trần clan members to undermine his consolidation of power, Hồ Quý Ly ordered 370 Trần princes, generals, and high officials executed to wipe out any remaining Trần resistance. Hồ Quý Ly promoted Nôm (喃) as the official language to dilute the influence of classical Chinese at court.¹¹ He criticized Confucian thought, and leaned toward Legalism in its place. Hồ Quý Ly organized mass mobilizations of his subjects to reconstruct irrigation systems, cultivate new lands, and to colonize lands that had recently been seized from Champa (modern-day central Vietnam) in the 1402 invasion. He had a road constructed from the former Cham region around modern-day Huế to the Tây Đô citadel to promote communication across his expanded realm, and to take advantage of the trade entering the former Cham territory. Hồ Quý Ly enriched his administration further by participating in the regional maritime trade network that connected the island emporium of Vân Đồn (雲屯) to the ports of Champa, Angkor, Melaka, and the Indian Ocean.¹²

In the midst of his series of radical reforms, Hồ Quý Ly and his regime also angered the recently established Ming (1368–1644) court, which had begun making increasingly onerous demands of Hồ Quý Ly during a series of diplomatic exchanges that heightened tensions between the two parties.¹³ Adding to the tension was an effort by the remaining Trần dynasts to appeal to their tributary overlord, the Ming. A former slave of the ruling family fled to Beijing to the court of the third Ming ruler, the Yongle emperor, and claimed to be the son of the late former ruler Trần Nghệ Tông. The Ming court chose to send this pretender back to Vietnam with a Chinese escort of 5,000 soldiers. In early 1406 the entourage was massacred at the border under the orders of Hồ Quý Ly.¹⁴ As Kenneth Swope and Kate Baldanza have noted, this massacre prompted the Ming to charge the usurper with twenty great crimes and assemble a punitive expedition.¹⁵

The military response by the Ming court was swift. From autumn 1406 until spring 1407, a force of 215,000 Ming troops attacked Vietnam with the goal of restoring the Trần family to the throne. Champa, having faced an unsuccessful invasion in 1403 by 200,000 soldiers from Hồ Quý Ly's army during the leader's brief reign,¹⁶ sent a small contingent of troops that allied themselves with the Ming forces. The Ming general in charge, Zhang Fu (張輔, 1375–1449),

⁹ Personal communication with C. Michele Thompson, 1995.

¹⁰ O'Harrow 1979, 160.

¹¹ O'Harrow 1979, 161.

¹² Nguyễn 2014, 220–221.

¹³ K. W. Taylor 2014, 178.

¹⁴ Whitmore 1977, 52.

¹⁵ The crimes as listed in the *Ming shilu* are enumerated and discussed in Zheng 1998, 50–52. See Swope 2014a, 160–161, Baldanza 2016, 64–65.

¹⁶ Sun 2006, 99.

simultaneously warned the populace that Hồ Quý Ly was a usurper and searched for a potential new heir to the throne.¹⁷ However, once the troops entered Vietnamese territory, their goal changed to regional domination, and Zhang Fu claimed that no members of the Trần family were still alive. Immediately both Hồ and Trần clan members and their supporters fought back against the Chinese army. As Swope notes, the larger Ming force advanced on several fronts and defeated Vietnamese defenses without great difficulty. The Ming troops forced Hồ Quý Ly first to flee Tây Đô and then to abandon the “Eastern Capital” (Đông Kinh東京, or modern-day Hanoi). Swope notes the Ming army employed firearms and new tactics to fend off Hồ Quý Ly’s elephant cavalry.¹⁸ These tactics had been adopted during Ming campaigns in modern-day Yunnan,¹⁹ where the Mongols had earlier conquered and absorbed the Dali kingdom but had not quite managed to quell the spirit of political autonomy among its local inhabitants.

By July 1407, the Ming forces had all the Vietnamese territory under their control, and the region, now renamed Jiaozhi (交趾) after the Han period colonial commandery, was brought under total domination by the Chinese invaders.²⁰ Hồ Quý Ly, his son, and their administration were shipped off to the Chinese hinterland, where they were forced to serve as common soldiers in the Ming army. Swope notes that at least 17,000 captives were taken back to China following the Ming invasion, and that some of these captives including Hồ Nguyên Trừng (胡元澄, c. 1374–c. 1446), Hồ Quý Ly’s son, were employed as firearms experts. These captive experts were employed in the Ming ministry of works, and their descendants served the Ming until 1489.²¹ Swope, Sun Laichen, and other scholars make the crucial point that military innovations made in Vietnam as early as Hồ Quý Ly’s administration would have lasting effects on military technology and strategy practiced throughout the Ming empire, and most of East Asia, for many decades.²²

Keith Taylor has also offered regional division as a primary reason for Hồ Quý Ly’s inability to secure the loyalty of the majority of the Đại Việt officialdom in thwarting the Ming advance. As Taylor writes,

while the Trần were from the Hồng (Red) River plain, Hồ Quý Ly was from Thanh Nghệ, and he built a new capital in Thanh Hóa. His inability to gain the loyalty of Đông Kinh was a prominent factor in his failure to overcome the Ming invasion of 1406/7, in which he abandoned most of Đông Kinh and attempted to defend the southern bank of the Hồng River.²³

The resident elite families of the Red River Delta had accepted neither Hồ Quý Ly’s usurpation of the Trần throne, nor had they quietly tolerated his seizure of aristocratic lands and reordering of land tenure in their home region. Referring to the elite families of Đông Kinh, Taylor notes that, according to Ming records, “in 1407 ... over 1,100 local men of prominence declared their

¹⁷ Zhang Tingyu et al. 1965, 24:83.

¹⁸ Swope 2014a, 161.

¹⁹ Swope 2014a, 161. See also Swope 2011b, 112–140; and Brose 2014, 135–155.

²⁰ Whitmore 1977, 53.

²¹ Sun 2006, 91–92; Li Bin 1995, 156.

²² Swope 2014a, 164; Sun 2006, 91–92.

²³ K. W. Taylor 1998, 955. See also Woodside 1963, 12–21; Whitmore 1985, 91–116.

allegiance to Ming and requested that their lands be incorporated into the empire. Ming records indicate that over 9,000 local men subsequently made the journey to the Ming capital to be confirmed as officials in the provincial administration.”²⁴ Later Vietnamese historians would emphasize that the local populace, with an emphasis on the rural peasantry, was unified in its opposition to Ming aggression in this period.²⁵ In fact, the Red River Delta remained much more open to collaboration with Ming forces than did the Thanh Nghệ region to its south, which produced both Hồ Quý Ly’s family and the leadership core of the successful rebellion launched by Lê Lợi (黎利, 1385–1433).

By the end of 1407 Ming forces had occupied most of the Đại Việt kingdom, although sporadic uprisings were not put down until 1414. As John Whitmore notes, the Ming occupying army consisted of about 87,000 troops scattered in thirty-nine citadels throughout northern Vietnam, but clustered in the Red River Delta area.²⁶ The Ming court made the mistake of sending second-rate officials down to fill special posts in colonial Vietnamese administration, among them individuals who had failed at the Ming imperial exams or had been exiled to southern China for a variety of offenses.²⁷ The Ming also shipped current editions of the Confucian classical canon and instructors to train a new cadre of local officials to be knowledgeable in Ming imperial ideology. Learned Buddhist monks were dispatched as teachers for the same reason.²⁸ Leading Vietnamese families also provided many of the most able officials to serve in Ming occupation government.²⁹ These families faced harsh judgment in official Vietnamese historical accounts once the Chinese were driven out of Vietnam. Many Ming administrators treated the occupation as an occasion for economic exploitation, which did not win them popular approval, nor did the purging of a corpus of pre-fifteenth-century Vietnamese books in a Ming-administered censorship campaign to weed out “heterodox” texts. Once an initial three-year period of light taxation had concluded, the taxes and levies imposed on trade and monopolized commodities, such as salt, were later described by Vietnamese historians as a heavy burden on the populace.³⁰ Keith Taylor argues that this dire description of Ming occupation had been enhanced in Vietnamese literature produced in the post-occupation period, but a general popular dissatisfaction with the colonial arrangement seems clear.

The effort to end the Ming occupation required a spark, which appeared in the form of a minor official Lê Lợi, who hailed from Hồ Quý Ly’s home region. During the final effort to reestablish a Trần state with the uprising of Trần Quý Khoách (陳季攢, c. 1409–1414), Lê Lợi, a member of the landed elite from Thanh Hóa, held the position of general of the imperial insignia (金吾將軍), nominally in charge of the imperial bodyguard. After surrendering to the Ming and serving a period of imprisonment, Lê Lợi was reconfirmed by the Ming administration in his minor official position of tutor (輔導) for Mt. Khả Lam (可藍) in Lạng Sơn.³¹ Lê Lợi soon thereafter led the local resistance through a strategy of attacking the Chinese garrisons and supply lines and

²⁴ K. W. Taylor 1998, 955–956.

²⁵ Nguyễn 1995, 124.

²⁶ Whitmore 1985, 112.

²⁷ K. W. Taylor 2014, 178.

²⁸ K. W. Taylor 2014, 178.

²⁹ Whitmore 1977, 64–65.

³⁰ K. W. Taylor 2014, 178.

³¹ O’Harrow 1979, 164.

gradually wearing down Ming resolve. Lê Lợi's forces also employed firearms, copied in rebel-built arsenals from Ming weapons used against Hồ Quý Ly's army.³² Swope notes that the production of firearms may have started during Hồ Quý Ly's reign to prepare for a possible Ming invasion.³³ In 1418, during the Tet lunar festival, Lê Lợi proclaimed himself "Bình Định Vương" (平定王, "Pacification King"), and launched a widespread revolt.³⁴ Ming collaborators among the Vietnamese officialdom were treated without mercy. The rebels relied on the strategy mapped out by the scholar and tactician Nguyễn Trãi (阮廌, 1380–1442): "feign friendship on the outside. forge weapons, subscribe money, and kill elephants, to build up an army on the inside."³⁵ Nguyễn Trãi was a great admirer of Hồ Quý Ly, having placed first in the palace exams during Hồ Quý Ly's first year on the throne.³⁶ In 1425 Lê Lợi had taken Hồ Quý Ly's capital at Tây Đô.³⁷ In 1428, Lê Lợi's supporters had established a new court in Thăng Long, now the "Eastern Capital," and Vietnamese sources record that at this time the Ming court had recognized Lê Lợi as the legitimate ruler of a new dynasty. A Nguyễn period court chronicle notes that the frontier was "restored" to its old location in this year as well.³⁸

Keith Taylor contends as a challenge to conventional wisdom that the end of Ming rule was primarily a Ming decision, which calls into question that main premise of the Vietnamese nationalist narrative of resistance to foreign occupation that endures until today.³⁹ If we look at the occupation as purely a Ming creation, we need also to look again at the origins of the conflict that produced the occupation. The Yongle emperor's initial effort to dissolve the boundary between Vietnam and China with this direct annexation reflected the different personalities of the first two Ming rulers. Zhu Yuanzhang (朱元璋, 1328–1398), the Hongwu emperor (洪武, r. 1368–1398), founder of the Ming dynasty and father to the Yongle emperor, was cautious in frontier affairs, and admonished his subjects not to disturb China's neighbors. As written in the "Ancestral Admonitions" (*Huang Ming Zu Xun* 皇明祖訓) the Ming court specifically should not invade Vietnam, among other neighbors of China.⁴⁰ Peace-seeking and impartial China was to remain a moral example for others to emulate, emphasizing the ceremonial aspects of tribute relations. The Hongwu emperor had restricted coastal contact to avoid problems with Japanese *Wakō* piracy. Mongol raids still posed a real threat to Ming stability along the northern and northwestern frontiers. The Hongwu emperor's problem was that he required all subsequent rulers to follow his example, and this policy had a strong effect on foreign relations during this dynasty following the unusual reign of Yongle. In contrast, the Yongle emperor couldn't avoid the turmoil on China's border. Pursuing an increasingly expansionist policy, he seemed more interested in military and economic (trade-related) gains in his foreign policy measures. When the Yongle emperor died, the Hongxi emperor in 1424 and then the Xuande emperor in 1425 followed Yongle's policy. However, by 1427, court advisors recommended abandoning the occupation attempt, quoting Hongwu's own opposition. The Chinese courts' dilemma was such:

³² Swope 2014a, 162.

³³ Swope 2014a, 162; Whitmore 1985, 84; and Lo 1970, 171.

³⁴ Zhang Tingyu et al. 1965, 24:97.

³⁵ Hodgkin 1981, 58.

³⁶ O'Harrow 1979, 162.

³⁷ Cœdès 1983, 207.

³⁸ Phan 1960, 12:7–8. Cited in Xiao and Huang 1993, 235.

³⁹ K. W. Taylor 2014, 180.

⁴⁰ D. C. Kang 2010, 98.

Vietnam had once been part of China and so should be able to be civilized; however, Chinese officials had come to the agreement that local Vietnamese would not accept this civilizing mission.⁴¹ Reviving tributary relations provided a more practical solution, and this issue was ultimately left undecided.

Modern Vietnamese historians have had a different reading of events.⁴² It is generally accepted in Vietnamese scholarship that the founders of the Latter Lê dynasty (*Hậu Lê* 後黎, 1428–1788) saw essential differences between Vietnamese and Chinese cultures suddenly as plain as the mountains and rivers that divided the two regions. I would agree with Liam Kelley that the new leadership at Đông Kinh regarded its mandate to rule as a validated intellectual and moral order shared by northern and southern regimes alike. Even if proclamations of the early Lê presented Chinese and Vietnamese political pasts as clearly separated, common values such as those expressed through the performance of tributary protocol, for example, held the two regions together in a special bond. As Nguyễn Trãi declared in his well-known 1428 statement of victory “The Great Declaration of the Wu’s (China’s) Pacification” (Bình Ngô Đại Cáo 平吳大誥):

Mountains and rivers have demarcated the border [of our country]. The customs of the North [China] and the South [Vietnam] are also different. We find [in antiquity] that the Triệu, the Đinh, the Lý, and Trần [dynasties] built our country. Alongside the Han, Tang Song, and Yuan [dynasties], the rulers [of our dynasties] ruled as emperors over their own part [of the world represented by the North and the South].⁴³

However, we must also consider the dissenting view within Vietnam’s leadership that the officialdom’s closer relationship with the Ming led to compromises deemed unacceptable for some. As Keith Taylor wrote of the author of the 1428 declaration,

Nguyễn Trãi’s ultimate isolation and elimination – he was accused of regicide and executed in 1442 – was surely facilitated by his having been alienated from both his regional compatriots in Đông Kinh, from whom he turned to serve the interests of Thanh Nghệ, and the ascendant powers of Thanh Nghệ, who disliked his self-righteous preachments about good government and his efforts to enroll Đông Kinh people into government service.⁴⁴

The successors of Hồ Quý Ly’s administration continued to battle with the ancient regime of the Red River Delta even after direct control by the Ming invaders had ended. This regional tension would continue into the late imperial period, and arguably, through to the present day.

Border negotiations continued after the Ming invasion in what was a particularly active phase in Sino-Vietnamese relations. In 1527, shortly after the establishment of the Mạc dynasty (莫, 1527–1592; –1677) in the northern region of the Đại Việt kingdom, the Ming emperor sent a

⁴¹ Tarling 1999, 150.

⁴² Recent scholarship has been quite critical of this modern reading of Lê period views. Kelley 2005, 19–20.

⁴³ Wolters and Reynolds 2008, 209.

⁴⁴ K. W. Taylor 1998, 956.

battalion of troops, calling for the capture of Mạc Đăng Dung (莫登庸, 1483–1541), the dynastic founder. Mạc Đăng Dung immediately decided to seek Ming support for his rule, and he rushed a mission to Beijing to gain recognition. The Ming court showed little interest in fully abandoning tributary links with the Lê, but Mạc Đăng Dung persisted. In 1540, sources note that he and his assistants crawled barefoot to the frontier camp of a Ming delegation as a sign of submission, offering records of his administration in five frontier prefectures near Lang Son in exchange for peace at the border. The Ming court finally recognized this frontier region as the “Annam Protectorate Colonial Secretariat” (Annandu Tongshisi 安南都统使司) and him as a local magistrate. Formally, then, the border had shifted with the inclusion of this territory into the Ming empire. However, in 1530 Mạc Đăng Dung had already abdicated to his son and took the title *Thái thượng hoàng* (太上皇, “Ruler Emeritus”), so his son continued to rule as “king” of the Đại Việt kingdom, while Mạc Đăng Dung himself served as a Ming frontier administrator.⁴⁵

Despite protests from the Lê court, the Ming court decided that the Mạc and the Lê should continue to rule Vietnam as covassals of the Ming empire. Thus, began the period of South and Northern Courts (*Nam Bắc Triều*, 1533–1592). Exiled Lê leaders found support from Nguyễn Kim (阮淦, 1476–1545) and his son-in-law Trịnh Kiểm (鄭檢, 1503–1570), members of powerful Thanh Hóa clans that hoped to take all of Vietnam from the Mạc. In 1532 the Lê set up a court-in-exile in Laos. In 1540, the Lê rulers moved back to Thanh Hóa and began to actively resist Mạc claims to national control. Nguyễn Kim was murdered during this same year, but the struggle continued. It took the Lê court forty-seven years before it was able to drive the Mạc out of the capital at Thăng Long in 1592. Even at this point, the Mạc lingered in the northern border region until 1677, and the territorial struggle between the now rival Nguyễn and Trịnh clans through the Tây Sơn rebellion (西山, 1771–1802) eclipsed any political relevance the Mạc continued to muster. The Tây Sơn rebellion exploded in 1771, and its leaders were three brothers, the second eldest of which was Nguyễn Huệ (阮惠, 1753–1792), later known to his rebel followers as Emperor Quang Trung (光中). This rebel band of brothers, despite using their mother’s surname, claimed the Trần dynasty usurper Hồ Quý Ly as a direct descendent, and they traced their family’s origins to Nghệ An (乂安), which shared a cultural and linguistic bond with neighboring Thanh Hóa, the home region of the rebellious Hồ Quý Ly.

A reappraisal of Hồ Quý Ly’s achievement in his brief reign started as soon as the Lê founders had consolidated their rule. Lê Lợi had complained that “the trivial and demanding policies of the Hồ gave rise to popular resentment and rebellion. The Ming waited for their chance, and used this treatment to poison our people.”⁴⁶ Later, the leading Vietnamese court chroniclers Ngô Sĩ Liên (吳士連, 1400–1497), Ngô Thì Sĩ (吳時仕, 1726–1780), Lê Quý Đôn (黎貴惇, 1726–1784), and Phan Huy Chú (潘輝注, 1782–1840) all wrote critically of Hồ Quý Ly’s usurpation of the Trần throne, because the traditional interpretations of these events was that Hồ Quý Ly’s behavior likened the Vietnamese ruler to the Ming Yongle emperor, who had also seized the throne by ousting his infant nephew, the Jianwen emperor Zhu Yunwen (朱允炆, 1377–1402). Modern Vietnamese historians have rehabilitated Hồ Quý Ly’s image by labelling him a radical reformer, maligned by his conservative Vietnamese detractors and derailed by the expansionist

⁴⁵ Goodrich and Fang 1976, 2:1033.

⁴⁶ Baldanza 2016, 81.

Ming. Arguing that Hồ Quý Ly's efforts were a logical step in state-building efforts of the Đại Việt, John Whitmore wrote that "Quý Ly's regime overcame the critical dangers of decentralization and foreign invasion and acted against growing local autonomy."⁴⁷ His efforts, although fueled by regional rivalries, managed to launch a military response by the neighboring Ming that swept away the Đông Kinh elite and their power base long enough for the Thanh Hóa elite under Lê Lợi to become a unified political force that would borrow heavily from the Chinese model while stressing essential cultural differences on both sides of the frontier. Cooperating with and struggling against Chinese authorities continued through periods of peace and war for leaders of numerous Vietnamese political movements through the early nineteenth century and again in the post-World War II period. Such patterns of adaption and resistance continue to express themselves in Sino-Vietnamese relations in the modern era.

⁴⁷ Whitmore 1985, 129.