

Center 華 and Periphery 夷 in Eighteenth-Century Annamese Neo-Confucian Discourse

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Abstract

This paper examines 18th-century Annamese Neo-Confucian discourse on conceptual issues related to *zhongguo* and the *hua-yi* dichotomy as expressed across a diversity of 18th-century writings. I engage with Huang Chun-chieh's theory of "contextual turn" and localized subjectivity in 18th-century East Asian Confucianisms by arguing that 18th-century Annamese Neo-Confucianism operated along a dissimilar ideological trajectory which affirmed "geographic China, political China, and cultural China" as a transdynastic and singular *zhongguo* from which Annam received its politico-cultural legitimation and prestige. This discourse of dependence on institutional recognition and geographical connection to the Chinese *zhongguo* distinguished 18th-century Annamese literati not only from contemporaneous modes of Confucian intellectuality in Japan and Joseon, but also from foundational conceptions of Vietic statehood characteristic of the early Le dynasty. My analysis of metaphysical theories invoked by 18th-century Annamese literati in their discussions of *zhongguo* and the rise of human civilization engages with both Huang Chun-chieh's theory of a philological turn away from the metaphysical commitments in 18th-century East Asian Confucianisms and Alexander Woodside's theory of pre-modern Vietnamese Confucianism being characterized by a non-metaphysical "classical primordialism."

Keywords: Bui Bich, Pham-Nguyen Dzu, Ngo Thi-Nham, *zhongguo*, *hua-yi* dichotomy

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** This paper is dedicated to the memory of Dam Quang-Hung 譚光興 (1933-2017). I owe my initial and sustained interest in conceptual issues related to *zhongguo* to Thomas C. Bartlett—this paper is but an outgrowth of our coffee conversations in the "sunlit regions" of Sacramento and San Jose. I sincerely thank Philip J. Ivanhoe, Kaishuo Chen, Albert E. Errickson, Grace Teo, and the two anonymous reviewers for their incisive editorial suggestions. All errors are my own.

I. Introduction

Huang Chun-chieh 黃俊傑 has described the eighteenth century as a transitional period of “radical changes” in Neo-Confucian traditions across China, Japan, and Korea, which marked the threshold of modernity and initiated an advent of intellectual developments and crises which would characterize nineteenth-century Confucian discourse across East Asia (Huang 2015, 131). In tandem with modulating hermeneutic orientations and philosophical commitments, Huang draws attention to increased divergence within Chinese, Japanese, and Joseon literati discourse regarding conceptions of *zhongguo* 中國, its constituents, and geographical location as a defining concern of East Asian Confucianisms on the cusp of modernity (Huang 2015, 140-47, 219-20).¹ Absent from Huang’s incisive study is an analysis of eighteenth-century Annamese Neo-Confucianism and its comparatively dissimilar ideological orientations—specifically in relation to contemporaneous conceptions of *zhongguo* prevalent among Annamese literati.² Through analyses of

¹ Huang glosses *zhongguo* as “China” or “Middle Kingdom” depending on context. Thomas C. Bartlett has suggested understanding *zhongguo* as “centralizing state” rather than “central state” and has offered *centralia* as a rendering of *zhongguo* both idiomatic to the English language and reflective of the term’s variegated contours (personal correspondence with author). I will leave *zhongguo* untranslated in order to emphasize the conceptual fecundity of this term in the Sinospheric literati imaginary. Throughout this paper, I will reference a host of classical terms such as *xia* 夏, *huaxia* 華夏, *zhonghua* 中華, *zhongxia* 中夏, and *zhuxia* 諸夏 with politico-cultural and geographical connotations of centrality. These terms are generally understood to signify a politico-cultural and central(izing) efflorescence associated with the height of civilization, specifically that of the Chinese. Because these same terms are often appropriated self-referentially by Annamese literati to describe the politico-cultural institutions and positionality of Annam, I have left them untranslated to preserve their inherent ambiguity in Annamese usage. In contrast, I have opted to translate classical terms primarily denoting geographical centrality such as *zhongzhou* 中州, *zhongyuan* 中原, and *zhongtu* 中土 as “Central Region,” “Central Plains,” and “Central Land,” respectively. All translations of literary Sinitic in this paper, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

² By “Annamese Neo-Confucianism” I refer to the Neo-Confucian tradition as received and articulated in Le 黎 dynasty (1428-1789) Annam 安南. I use the compound Le-Trinh 黎鄭 to refer to the post-Restoration (1533) period during which the Le court was reduced to a largely ritual role while political and military authority was wielded by a parallel court run by the Trinh 鄭 clan. My usage of “Annam” and “Annamese” is intended to distinguish the Le-Trinh polity, its territorial domain, and its constituents from Nguyen 阮 (1802-

discussions of *zhongguo* and the *hua-yi* 華夷 dichotomy across diverse genres of literati writing, I argue that, contrary to the shifting discourses on *zhongguo* in light of growing national subjectivity across eighteenth-century East Asian Confucianisms, contemporaneous Annamese Neo-Confucian conceptions of *zhongguo* followed an opposite trajectory which reaffirmed *zhongguo* as being constituted by what Huang has termed “geographic China, political China, and cultural China” (Huang 2015, 217).³ In arguing that the politico-cultural prestige of Annam and its normative constituencies were primarily derivative from sustained geographical and institutional connection with this transdynastic Chinese *zhongguo*, eighteenth-century Annamese Neo-Confucian discourse diverged not only from contemporaneous trends in East Asian Confucianisms, but also marked a shift away from previous conceptions of center and periphery in the early Le. I will begin by analyzing fifteenth-century Vietic conceptions of statehood and politico-cultural centrality in early Le discourse, specifically as articulated in historiographical genres 史 and “imperial”-commissioned edicts. Shifting focus to the post-Restoration period, I will proceed to draw from a range of eighteenth-century essays 說, discourses 論, and proemial and colophonic writing 序跋, which marked an intentional shift in literati discourse away from the foundational assumptions of early Le rhetoric in favor of an historicized genealogy of Annamese politico-cultural institutions as

1945) dynasty Vietnam 越南 and its predecessor state of Nguyen-ruled Cochinchina. As such, I will focus solely on eighteenth-century Annamese Neo-Confucianism.

³ The *hua-yi* binary is often rendered as “Chinese-Barbarian,” “Sino-Barbarian,” “Han-Barbarian,” etc. *Hua* describes peoples and institutions associated with the central civilization of *zhongguo*, *huaxia*, etc. In contrast, *yi* peoples and institutions belong to the geographical and cultural periphery beyond the pale of *zhongguo* and its ritual institutions. Matthew Mosca has aptly described the “hierarchical division” between *hua* and *yi* as “among the most long-standing and prominent binaries in the Chinese political and cultural worldview” (2020, 104). For an overview of the variegated contours of *yi* in the classical lexicon see Pines (2005). A nuanced argument against the longstanding rendering of *yi* as “barbarian,” particularly in late-imperial usage, is given in Liu (2006). Although I do not categorically reject the translation of *yi* as “barbarian” in every context, in light of the term’s malleability, both in its classical and post-classical usage, I have chosen to leave *yi* untranslated. Similarly, *hua* has sometimes been calqued as “Efflorescent” (Kelley 2005). For largely aesthetic reasons, I am disinclined to use this particular calque and will leave *hua* untranslated.

deriving their legitimacy and prestige from a transdynastic Chinese *zhongguo*. I will conclude by briefly exploring disparate conceptions of center and periphery as articulated in commentarial, religious, and lyrical modalities of late eighteenth-century Annamese Neo-Confucian discourse.

II. Multipolarity and Dyadic Co-equality in Early Le Statecraft

While the usage of *zhongguo* to describe a politico-cultural entity and geographical domain associated with Annam rather than the so-called “Northern state 北國,” i.e., China, was far from default in official histories commissioned by the Le court, neither was such usage entirely uncommon (Chen 1986, 255, 353, 426, 515, 540).⁴ It is impossible to understand conceptions of *zhongguo* among post-Restoration Annamese literati without revisiting the foundational texts of their intellectual lineage in the early Le moment of the fifteenth century. It is not entirely clear whether the ascendant Le court’s bold rhetoric of centrality was necessary for its ruling clan to legitimate its dynastic enterprise in relation to lowland networks of Ming partisans or facilitated by a localized ethos un beholden to the normative intellectual and cultural climate of those very networks.⁵ More than any other contemporaneous text, the *Grand Pronouncement on the Pacification of Wu* 平吳大誥, penned

⁴ Toponymic reference to China as the “Northern state 北國” or “Northern dynasty 北朝” are particularly pronounced in the Le dynasty *Complete Historical Records of Dai-Viet* 大越史記全書 (henceforth, *Complete Records*), originally compiled in the fifteenth century. Some have interpreted this as an historiographical intervention to assert the parity of Vietic political and cultural institutions to those of the “North” (Yu 2005, 67). Similar usages of toponymic address in the inter-state diplomacy of Song China and Liao should be noted (Tao 1983, 69).

⁵ Le Loi 黎利 (1385–1433, r. 1428–1433), later King Thai-to of Le 黎太祖, and the Le clan are understood by modern scholarship to have belonged to an aboriginal highland community linguistically and culturally related but distinct from normative Annamese literati clans in the Red River plain, many of which fought against the fledgling Le forces on behalf of Ming (Taylor 2001). An historical overview of these intramontane peoples, their patterns of chieftainship, and appearances in Sinitic historiographical writing can be found in Anderson and Whitmore (2017). For a detailed hypothesis regarding the intended audience of the *Grand Pronouncement*, see Whitmore (2014).

by Nguyen Trai 阮廌 (1380-1442) in early 1428 on behalf of King Thai-to of Le, captured the heightened triumphalism of the early Le court in wake of the Ming withdrawal from Annam. Nguyen Trai opens the *Grand Pronouncement*:

Lo, our state of Great Viet is verily a realm of authoritative institutions and worthy purveyors of tradition!⁶ Since the geographical boundaries of their rightful domains are distinct, the customs of North and South are likewise dissimilar. From the foundation of our state by the Zhao, Dinh, Ly, and Tran, together with the Han, Tang, Song, and Yuan each wielded imperial rule over its respective quarter.⁷ (Chen 1986, 546)

The *Grand Pronouncement* envisioned a world-order wherein dynastic enterprises, irrespective of geographical accident, could claim legitimate politico-cultural parity through the employment of institutional apparatuses drawn from a common repertoire of classical statecraft. Even if the administrative technologies of this repertoire were associated with a normatively “Northern” antiquity, Nguyen Trai implies that the political legitimation and cultural prestige afforded by their adoption throughout the transdynastic continua of Vietic statecraft was not derivative from tributary vassalage to the “North.” Indeed, this dynamic of co-equal “Northern” and “Southern” binaries seems to preclude the existence of a singular politico-cultural center which alone commanded the right to confer legitimation to peripheral states through a tributary system. Any coherent conception of *zhongguo* in this world-order would necessarily be in the plural.⁸ Rather than deny the legitimacy of “Northern” dynastic enterprises, Nguyen Trai legitimates “Southern” dynasties by linking each one with a contemporaneous “Northern” counterpart. The early Le geopolitical

⁶ Liam Kelley’s translation of “文獻之邦” as “domain of manifest civility” is widely used within the field (2003). I have opted for a wordier translation in order to highlight the institutional dimensions of *wen* 文 in contrast to the personal connotations of *xian* 獻.

⁷ 惟我大越之國。實為文獻之邦。山川之封域既殊。南北之風俗亦異。自趙、丁、李、陳之肇造我國。與漢、唐、宋、元而各帝一方。

⁸ Andrew J. Abalakin’s thesis of imperial China as *primus inter pares* among Sino-Pacific mandala polities, though dealing with a slightly later period, provides a useful framework for this conception of a concentric multiplicity of *zhongguo* (2015, 338-70).

imaginary thus articulated was a North-South dyad wherein each half wielded legitimate imperial authority within boundaries dictated by its respective geographical and cultural demarcations.⁹

The fundamentally multipolar imagination of the early Le court did not preclude assertions of centrality in its politico-cultural lexicon. Beyond lyrical and literary celebrations of Annam as *zhongguo*, the Le court institutionalized unambiguously imperial ritual into its newly-bureaucratized Neo-Confucian state, thus intimating cosmic parity between the Le “emperor” and his Ming counterpart.¹⁰ Building on ritual reforms initiated under the reign of King Thai-tong of Le 黎太宗 (1423-1442, r. 1433-1442), in 1461 King Thanh-tong of Le 黎聖宗 (1442-1497, r. 1460-1497) furthered Ming-modeled institutional reform by reestablishing the Suburban Sacrifice to Heaven-and-Earth 郊, an annual ritual of cosmic import over which only the Son-of-Heaven could preside (Whitmore 2019, 447). One revealing account of this momentous reform is a passage in the *Complete Records* detailing Thanh-tong’s caustic rebuke of court-historian Ngo Si-Lien 吳士連 for suggesting that the early Le adoption of the Suburban Sacrifice was “unworthy of continuation 不足述.” Although Ngo’s exact objections are not recorded, Thanh-tong berated Ngo for recommending discontinuation of the Suburban Sacrifice on account of the Le dynasty’s origins as an “ancient feudatory state 古諸藩” (Chen 1986, 644). The severity of Thanh-tong’s response—condemning Ngo as “truly a traitorous minister who sold

⁹ The North-South binary acquired cosmic and primordial dimensions in early Le historiography. An anonymous evaluation 論 inserted into the *Complete Records* in reference to King Thai-to’s victory over Ming reads: “From the settling of the universe, North and South have been separately ruled. Although the North is mighty and vast, it could not overcome the South. This can be observed by contemplating the times of the Former Le, Ly, and Tran. 自天地既定. 南北分治. 北雖強大. 而不能軋南. 觀於黎, 李, 陳之時可見矣.” (Chen 1986, 550) Concomitant to this binary was an historiographical obligation for Le literati to recognize co-equal emperorship between “Northern” rulers and their own. The “Organizing Principles” 凡例 of the *Complete Records* explains: “The rulers of the successive Northern dynasties will each be referred to as ‘emperor,’ for along with our [emperor] each wielded imperial rule over his respective quarter. 北朝歷代主皆書帝. 以與我各帝一方也.” (Chen 1986, 67)

¹⁰ Examples of the former can be found in Nguyen Trai’s imperially-commissioned *Eulogium on Returning to Lam-Son* 賀歸藍山. Although undated, these poems employ diction conspicuously similar to the *Grand Pronouncement*.

his state 真賣國奸臣也”—suggests that such insinuations were not taken lightly.¹¹

Thanh-tong's ritual invocation of his realm's cosmic centrality was not merely rhetorical self-exaltation—for neighboring polities such as Muang Phuan, Lan Xang, and Champa, it spelled the beginning of cataclysmic military invasions, ultimately resulting in Annam's uncontested regional domination by the close of the fifteenth century (Li 2010, 93).¹² Proclamations 詔 purportedly authored by Thanh-tong himself justified these punitive expeditions 征 not in the language of multipolarity characteristic of early Le political discourse in relation to Ming, but in the unambiguously hierarchical dichotomy of center versus periphery. The 1470 proclamation declaring war on Champa described the Chamic polity as a “yi zone 夷服” and its inhabitants as belligerent “yidi 夷狄” (Chen 1986, 681).¹³ In his 1479 proclamation justifying invasion of Muang Phuan, Thanh-tong described his court as exercising “unifying control over both *hua* and *yi* 統御華夷” (Chen 1986, 707). Only one month later, his proclamation against Lan Xang invoked the memory of his dynastic predecessors “overseeing *zhongxia* 蒞中夏” and “conciliating the outlander *yi* 撫外夷” in order to justify his impending “righteous chastisement 義征” of Lan Xang's “*rongdi* 戎狄” in an attempt to restore the “yi customs 夷俗” of their “*man* quarter 蠻方” to human

¹¹ John Whitmore has rendered the obscure compound 諸藩 as “frontier lands” (2019, 447). While I have conservatively followed this understanding, I propose that reading 藩 for 蕃 is possibly more coherent within the internal logic of this passage. Ngo Si-Lien objecting to the Le clan's ancestry among the “peripheral aborigines 諸蕃” of antiquity might explain why Thanh-tong interpreted this as a personal affront to *his* dynastic enterprise 我國; considering that many of Ngo Si-Lien's comments in the *Complete Records* sharply criticize rulers of previous Vietic dynasties for not conforming to institutional norms of Sinitic statecraft, it would also make sense of this seemingly out-of-character criticism (Wolthers 2001, 94-106). Memory of the Le clan's origins among highlander populations considered peripheral even to the Annamese persisted long after the dynasty's establishment; in the late seventeenth century, the Ming-loyalist scholar Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613-1682) remarked on Thai-to of Le: “This Le Loi was yi from among their yi. 黎利者。乃其夷中之夷也。” (2014, 689)

¹² The genocidal scale of Thanh-tong's campaigns is tacitly approved, if not celebrated, in the *Complete Records*. Muang Phuan is described as having 90,000 households 戶 on the eve of Thanh-tong's 1479 invasion. Approximately 2,000 survivors are recorded (Chen 1986, 711).

¹³ *Di* 狄, literally “dog-tribes,” originally referred to peripheral Northern populations.

morality (Chen 1986, 708).¹⁴ It was on this particular campaign that Thanh-tong would bestow evocative titles such as “yi-punishing general 征夷將軍” on military officials leading the invasion (Chen 1986, 709). While many of these terms were used in a patently rhetorical tenor, the geographic precision of terms such as *rongdi*, when used to describe the “Western” constituencies of Lan Xang, suggests that Thanh-tong and his court employed a classically-inspired lexicon which sought out correlating specificities between the language of ancient Sinitic statecraft and the geopolitical subjectivities of fifteenth-century Southeast Asia. These fifteenth-century appropriations of models of statehood associated with high antiquity—notably the Five Zone 五服 theory—all led to the same tacit conclusion. If Champa could be described as belonging to the *yi* zone of Annam, it only followed that the Annamese court had assumed the mantle of politico-cultural center normatively claimed by “Northern” dynasties since antiquity (Yü 1986, 379).

Where did Ming fit into the world-order of this fifteenth-century Annamese *zhongguo*? Although the older model of dyadic co-equality between the Northern and Southern courts endured, early Le historiography and imperial proclamations were replete with anti-Ming pejoratives. This anti-Ming rhetoric seemed to originate in Nguyen Trai’s *Grand Pronouncement* with its references to the “crazed Ming 狂明” and sacrilegious description of Emperor Xuanzong of Ming 明宣宗 (1399-1435, r. 1425-1435) as a “crafty whelp 狡童” (Chen 1986, 546-47). The terms “Ming bandit 明賊” and “Ming brigand 明寇” were widely used in accounts of Le Loi’s military campaigns and subsequent reign (Chen 1986, 515-16, 527, 537, 556, 565). As late as 1497, Thanh-tong still referred to Ming and its Annamese partisans as “crazed Wu 狂吳” (Chen 1986, 708). Unlike contemporaneous descriptions of Annam’s Southeast Asian interlocutors coming from Thanh-tong’s court, these colorful appellations were more indicative of a rancorous triumphalism celebrating martial prowess than of a putative politico-cultural superiority. It was not lost on the Le “emperors” that their institutional

¹⁴ *Rong* 戎 is a general term for peripheral populations located in the West, particular those of bellicose character. *Man* 蠻, similarly, is a general term for savage tribes in the South.

legitimation as rulers of the Annamese polity was dependent on enfeoffment from the Ming court as princes 國王 within a Ming-centric world-order. The upsetting of this system of enfeoffment and tributary vassalage was an existential threat to the Le court and thusly treated—among Thanh-tong’s justifications for invading Champa was his claim that Chamic potentates had informed their Ming allies of the Le ruler’s “self-exaltation as the emperor of the Southern dynasty 自尊南國之帝皇,” thus provoking the suspicions of “Great Ming 大明” (Chen 1986, 680). While the early Le court’s claims to politico-cultural centrality were clearly disseminated beyond the confines of its Annamese constituencies, even for rulers as prone to magniloquent pomposity as Thanh-tong, this rhetoric was suppressed in relation to Ming. The geopolitical realities of late fifteenth-century mainland Southeast Asia confirmed the status of Annam as *zhongguo* in a regional context. Beyond this, the institutional dependence of the Le court on recognition from Ming necessitated the tacit perpetuation of a North-South binary, despite the increasing incongruity of this older model within a politico-cultural discourse of cosmic centrality.

III. Situating *Zhongguo* During Annam’s Long Eighteenth Century

Rhetoric of politico-cultural centrality was invoked in diverse contexts by rival Vietic principalities traversing the institutional disintegration and politico-cultural ambiguities which defined Annam’s long eighteenth century.¹⁵ The triumphal return of the Le court to Dong-

¹⁵ These regional powers included the Cao-Bang 高平 based Mac 莫 clan, the Thang-Long 昇龍 based Le-Trinh clans, the Thuan-Hoa 順化 based Nguyen clan, and an unrelated Nguyen clan which would lead the Tay-Son 西山 uprising. The period I have termed an Annamese “long eighteenth century” begins with the early sixteenth-century Le-Mac war which initiated a period of prolonged regional division between competing Vietic principalities, each vying for official recognition from the Ming and, later, Qing courts. It ends with the consolidation of these competing regional polities into a single dynastic enterprise under the Nguyen in 1802. Although Taylor does not use this term, the historical leitmotifs which hold the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries together as a “long eighteenth century” of dynastic instability, inter-regional war, prolonged disintegration

Kinh 東京 in 1593 was described by King The-tong of Le 黎世宗 (1567-1599, r. 1573-1599) as a “recovery of the Central Plains 復中原” from its Mac usurpers (Chen 1986, 898). In wake of crippling military defeat and facing imminent death, Grand Mentor Mac Ngoc-Lien 莫玉璉 (1528-1594) emphatically warned the remnant Mac court against seeking military aid from their Ming allies, lest Ming be provided with pretext to invade “our *zhongguo* 我中國” (Chen 1986, 902). Following their return to Thang-Long, Le-Trinh rulers continued to self-referentially invoke *zhongguo* when describing their joint dynastic enterprise (1986, 999, 1000). Clearly, a classical lexicon of politico-cultural centrality was consistently employed across widely disparate geopolitical contexts throughout the entire Le epoch (1986, 515, 540, 573, 578, 762).

The seventeenth-century Ming-Qing transition unfolded during an era of politico-cultural instability and disunion among belligerent Vietic principalities with increasingly independent trajectories. Apart from a general indifference, it is difficult to discern any position which could constitute an overarching Vietic response to the plight of Ming or the ascendancy of Qing. Both the Le-Trinh and Mac courts seemed to have supported the Southern Ming cause, particularly in its early years (Baldanza 2016, 204). This “support,” however, was ambiguous and meager; in reality, Le-Trinh policies, whether by intervention or inaction, hindered Ming loyalist movements and were effectively pro-Qing (Struve 1984, 244). By the first decade of the Kangxi 康熙 era (1661-1722), both the Mac and Le-Trinh courts had transferred their institutional allegiance to Qing. Although the Le-Trinh court allowed Ming refugees into Annam, they were generally resettled outside of metropolitan centers and subject to strict regulation (Salmon 2014, 34-41). Absent from Annamese accounts of this post-Ming diaspora are any grand narratives of civilizational collapse, upheavals of the cosmic order, or vilification of Qing. Unlike their Joseon contemporaries, Annamese elite seemed largely unfazed by the “*yi*-ness” of the Qing dynastic enterprise (Niu 2012, 107-8). For Joseon elite, the rise of Qing

of Annamese politico-cultural institutions, and the ascendancy of a nascent central-southern polity independently ruled by the Thuan-Hoa based Nguyen clan are discussed in chapters 5-8 of Taylor (2013, 224-397).

triggered an epistemological crisis necessitating the fundamental reevaluation of *hua-yi* discourse in a post-Ming world-order (Haboush 2005, 115-17). Cultural loyalty to the fallen Ming was institutionalized by the Joseon court in state-sponsored rituals commemorating Ming emperors, soldiers, and martyrs. Having inherited the mantle of *zhonghua* from Ming, Joseon ruling elite and Neo-Confucian literati regarded their kingdom as a remnant bastion of *huaxia* culture in a world where the normative locus of *zhongguo* had been overtaken by *yi* (Bohnet 2020, 133-37). In turn, this shifting conception of center and periphery conditioned a nascent elite discourse of what Huang Chun-chieh has termed localized subjectivity, identifying Joseon, rather than Qing, as *zhongguo* (Huang 2015, 145-46).

Given that a similar localized turn can be discerned in early Le discourse and historiography, it would be reasonable to presume that eighteenth-century Annamese Neo-Confucian discourse would develop along the trajectories shared with contemporaneous Japanese and Joseon elite discourses seeking to reposition *zhongguo* in wake of the Manchus. Not only is this turn unattested in eighteenth-century Annamese Neo-Confucianism, the equivalent of an emergent localized subjectivity for eighteenth-century Annamese literati was often expressed through classicizing historiographical interventions at odds not only with prevailing trends in East Asian Confucianisms, but also with their early Le politico-cultural heritage. Eighteenth-century literati at the highest echelons of the Le-Trinh bureaucracy returned to Nguyen Trai's *Grand Pronouncement*, interrogating what they argued to be flaws and exaggerations in the historical arguments expressed or tacitly assumed by its internal logic. Among the chief critics of Nguyen Trai was Bui Bich 裴璧 (1744-1818). In *Miscellaneous Discussions Recorded in Sojourn* 旅中雜說 (1789), Bui Bich criticized the *Grand Pronouncement* for its incongruity with the classical canon:

[Regarding] the appearances of our Vietic [state] in the *Five Classics*, in the "Canon of Yao," third-brother Xi was commanded to reside in the southern outskirt called the "Brilliant Capital." It was located in the southernmost extremity. In the "Tribute of Yu," it likely belonged to the wild zone of Yangzhou. The scholar-elite of recent generations

incessantly repeat the saying “together with the Han, Tang, Song, and Yuan each wielded imperial rule over its respective quarter” in their official writings. This [saying] ought to be regarded as merely equivalent to Zhao Tuo’s reply to Sir Lu. However, later generations perpetuated it, following it to the extent that it came to be regarded as normative. The Master regarded pretending to have ministers while having none to be deceiving Heaven.¹⁶ As for this type [of saying], is it not akin to deceit?¹⁷

Basing his critique on the *Classic of Documents* 書經, Bui identifies Vietic antiquity with the region described in the *Classic of Documents* as the wild zone 荒服 beyond the pale of *zhongguo* civilization. Hence, the Vietic state could not lay legitimate claim to the politico-cultural centrality which dynastic enterprises such as “the Han, Tang, Song, and Yuan” were imagined to have inherited through institutional and geographical continuity with the sage-kings of antiquity. Bui dismisses Nguyen Trai’s declaration of institutional parity between Annamese and Northern “emperors” as dissimulation on par with that of Zhao Tuo 趙佗 (240-137 BCE).¹⁸ Bui continues:

That being the case, what is a suitable solution? I answer: The fact that different geographic regions should be divided into “central” and “outer” regions is the naturally occurring condition of the cosmos.

¹⁶ *Analects* 9.12.

¹⁷ 我越之見於五經者。堯典命羲叔宅南交。曰明都。於地為極南。其在禹貢。蓋揚州之荒服。近世士大夫為文翰。輒有與漢、唐、宋、元各帝一方之語。蓋與趙氏所答陸生者等耳。而後人襲之。率以為常。無臣而為有臣。夫子以為欺天。若此類也。毋乃似于欺乎。

¹⁸ According to the account given in the *Hanshu* 漢書, when confronted by Lu Jia 陸賈, Zhao Tuo explained his claiming of “emperorship” over Nanyue 南越 was inspired by similar practices undertaken in neighboring peripheral polities: “Among the *manyi*, to the west is Xi-ou. Half of its populace is feeble, yet [its ruler] faces south and claims kingly authority. To the east is Minyue. Its populace [only] numbers several thousand, yet [its ruler] also claims kingly authority. To the northwest is Changsha. Its populace is half *manyi*, yet [its ruler] also claims kingly authority. Hence, I dared to make an unrightful claim to the title of ‘emperor’ merely for self-amusement. 蠻夷中, 西有西甌。其衆半羸。南面稱王。東有閩粵。其衆數千人。亦稱王。西北有長沙。其半蠻夷。亦稱王。老夫故敢妄竊帝號。聊以自娛。” (Ban 1964, 3851-52) While this passage is excised from the *Complete Records*, the *Complete Records* retains Zhao Tuo’s explanation that his claiming of internal emperorship over Nanyue “did not presume to harm [the integrity of] All-under-Heaven 非敢有害於天下,” i.e., did not infringe on the world-order legitimately ruled by the Han emperor (Chen 1986, 111).

For one's territory to not occupy *zhongguo* and yet have the ability to transform one's state into *huaxia*—this is the accomplishment of the transformative influence of virtuous men and moral exemplars. In antiquity, Qin and Chu were *yi* in relation to the Three Dynasties. Despite this, the “Oath of Qin” and the “Sayings of Chu” were attached to the *Classic of Documents* and made manifest in the *Great Learning*, becoming a model for all generations. This is a clear proof of the ability to become *xia*. How could what qualifies one to become *huaxia* solely consist of geographic accident? Surely, it is only on account of the Way of Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, the Duke of Zhou, and Master Kong existing therein [that it attains this status]. [If] one is able to use this Way to rule over one's own person [and then] extend it to transform the entire state, literati will accumulate moral virtue and commoners will become accustomed to humaneness and deference. If one's being *xia* consists of this, then one can be called *xia*. This is simply the fitting fulfillment of its principle. How much more so in the case of an enlightened and perspicacious region? If one's being *xia* consists of this, this is simply the necessary unfolding of one's fate. Failure to elucidate these principles but to be instead only concerned with baseless and empty assertions is the height of delusion.¹⁹

According to Bui, *zhongguo* and *huaxia* are two distinct categories, the former being grounded in what Huang Chun-chieh would term “geographic China,” the latter being the politico-cultural institutions normative, but not limited, to this geographical reality. Hence, Bui argues that although Qin and Chu were *yi* in relation to the dynastic enterprises of the ancient sage-kings, by adopting the way of the sage-kings, both Qin and Chu eventually attained the status of *huaxia*, thus becoming themselves models worthy of emulation. For polities external to *zhongguo*, transformation into *huaxia* can be achieved through the adoption of “this Way 斯道.”

¹⁹ 然則奚為而可。曰。區域之有中外者。天地自然之勢。地非中國而能以其國為華夏。則仁人君子轉移變化之功。昔者。秦。楚於三代。夷也。而秦晉。楚語繫於書。著於大學。為萬世法。斯則能夏之明驗也。夫華夏之所以為華夏者。豈惟以其地哉。良以堯。舜。禹。湯。文。武。周公。孔子之道在焉耳。能以斯道而治其身。推之以化於國。士蘊道德。民習仁讓。所以為夏者在此。則可以謂之夏。此乃其理之所當盡。而況離明之壤。所以為夏者在此。亦其數之所必值者哉。不是之講而徒事誕漫之說。惑之甚矣。

Although this “ability to [become] *xia* 能夏” is not limited to the geographical boundaries of *zhongguo*, Bui nonetheless attempts to ground the Annamese state on a geographic periphery of *zhongguo* attested to in the classical canon. Hence, while Bui identifies Vietic antiquity with the southernmost “wild zone,” he simultaneously argues that Annam’s position as an “enlightened and perspicacious region 離明之壤,” at least partly facilitates transformation into *huaxia* status independent of politico-cultural institutions. The description of Annam’s geographical location as “enlightened and perspicacious 離明,” literally “sunlit,” is a reference to the “Clinging” 離 hexagram in the *Classic of Changes* 易經. In addition to association with the south, this hexagram also indicates clinging “to centrality and correctness” (Zhu 2019, 158). Although Bui identifies southern positionality as integral to Annam’s politico-cultural status as *huaxia*, this localized subjectivity differs from the North-South binary of the early Le in that it is ultimately derivative from a geographically static *zhongguo* (i.e., the “North”). The derivative nature of Annam’s politico-cultural excellence as related to its southern positionality was elucidated in greater detail by Bui’s contemporary and colleague, Pham-Nguyen Dzu 范阮攸 (1739-1786). In his “Colophon on Sir Am-Chuong’s Collected Poems 跋黯章公詩集後” (1782), Pham-Nguyen explained:

The south occupies the position of the terrestrial branch *wu*. It corresponds to the phase of fire. It [is represented by] the “Clinging” hexagram. “Clinging” refers to the sun at midday, the mutual encounter of the myriad creatures, the consummate flourishing of *yang*, the manifestation of patterned brilliance. Because *yang* originates in the north, it proceeds thenceforth to the east, finally reaching the southeast. Hence, from the beginning of the cosmos, pattern was located at the intersection of north and east. Yao and Shun established their capital in Puban, but Shun was born in Zhufeng. Chengzhou was established within the Passes. [By the time] their civilizational apparatuses and institutions had been established for over a thousand years, our state was merely a fetid marsh of dragons and serpents. Later, the [*yang*]*qi* gradually shifted southward. When the Song moved south of the Yangzi, the talented men, governance, and literary institutions of the Central Plains were entirely relocated [to the south]. Hence,

the great scholar Master Zhu [Xi] arose in [Fu]jian. From then on, the societal climate and conditions of our Annam became expanded day by day. Its institutions and learned men increased in brilliance day by day. The unfolding phenomenon of its flourishing ascendancy is now at its fullness of expression.²⁰

Pham-Nguyen historicizes the “Southern” politico-cultural flourishing of Annam by contextualizing it within a cosmological narrative explaining the rise and spread of human civilization as a whole. Although Annam remains linked to a geographically-fixed southern positionality, no longer does this assume a suprahistorical cosmic parity with the “North.” Pham-Nguyen provides a metaphysical explanation for why the ancient sage-kings first arose in the “northeast” before the eventual southward permeation of their civilization. Although Annam was integrated into this process in a much later epoch, fundamentally, Pham-Nguyen understood the politico-cultural flourishing of Annamese institutions and society as triggered by the same circumstances which explained why the eminent Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) was born in the far south rather than the Jurchen-ruled north. Although this theory of civilizational transfer was contextualized within a metaphysical framework related to the movement of *qi*, it was concretized in human history by the southward migration of the politico-cultural apparatus of the ancient sage-kings.²¹ The early Le discourse of a primordial “North-South” binary is entirely absent from Pham-Nguyen’s vision of history; not only did Pham-Nguyen understand Southern antiquity as being entirely beyond the pale of human civilization, he further asserted that inasmuch as the South did eventually attain a degree of civilizational excellence, it did so only as a late inheritor of originally Northern politico-cultural institutions.

²⁰ 南. 位午. 行火. 卦為離. 離. 日之中. 萬物相見. 陽之盛. 文明之著也. 惟陽始于北. 從北而東. 乃及東南. 故天地初闢. 文在北東之交. 堯舜都蒲阪. 而舜生諸馮. 成周宅闕. 文物千有餘載. 則吾國是時. 方為龍蛇之藪. 其後氣漸轉而南. 宋之江左. 中原才俊圖籍盡徙焉. 而大儒朱子出於建. 於是吾安南風會日開. 文獻日朗. 其方興未艾之象. 及今當大發. NB Am-Chuong 黯章 was the courtesy name 字 of Bui Bich.

²¹ A comparison of this *qi*-based historiographical narrative with the concept of *translatio studii* in medieval European historiography would likely be a fruitful exercise in comparative intellectual history (Jeauneau 1995).

Ultimately, the rise of Southern civilization could be explained as merely the latest phase in an on-going metaphysical process operating independent of human experience and subjectivity.

Pham-Nguyen understood the physical relocation of scholars and textual technologies to a broadly construed “South”—inclusive of both Southern Song and Annam—as initiating a civilizational flourishing thenceforth perpetuated internally within newly centralized “Southern” institutions. This historiographical narrative was not limited to Pham-Nguyen. Writing approximately one decade after Pham-Nguyen, Nguyen Quynh 阮傑 articulated a strikingly similar understanding of Annamese antiquity and its post-classical attainment of civilization in his “Preface to *Collected Poems on the Flowery Trail* 華程詩集序”:

Our state [occupied] the southern outskirts in antiquity. As for the rise of sages and worthies, the crafting of [proper] robes, headwear, ritual, and music, the glorious manifestation of [civilizing] institutions and ritual order, and the recording of the classics and textual traditions—all this [occurred] north of Jing[zhou] and Yang[zhou]. During the Song, the Yellow River’s course changed southward.²² Human excellence was entirely produced in the South. Hence, the great scholar Master Zhu [Xi] arose in [Fujian]. It was at this point that we had a claim to being a domain of authoritative institutions and worthy men.²³

For both Pham-Nguyen and Nguyen, there is no question that the politico-cultural institutions of latter-day Annam originated in a Northern antiquity entirely external to Southern ancientry. Both traced the origins of Annamese civilization—as they understood it—to a twelfth-century moment of transregional cultural flourishing which occasioned the ascendancy of Neo-Confucianism in the Southern Song just as much as it inaugurated the incorporation of Annam into this same civilization. According to Pham-Nguyen, Annam had not even reached the pinnacle of this process until his own generation.

²² I have followed Liam Kelley’s understanding of this rather obscure reference (2003). NB Kelley romanizes the author’s personal name 傑 as Vinh.

²³ 我國古南交也。凡聖賢之所興。衣冠禮樂之所製。典章文物之所著。經籍之所載。皆在荆。楊之北。宋黃河南徙。人才儘產於南。而大儒朱子出于建。我於是乎稱文獻之邦。

Although Vietic antiquity is understood by Bui Bich, Pham-Nguyen Dzu, and Nguyen Quynh to have been geographically and culturally removed from the civilizational enterprise of the ancient sage-kings, there are nevertheless hints of a teleological impulse in their historiographical interventions. While the politico-cultural institutions definitive of *huaxia* civilization arose external to Vietic antiquity, it was, according to this mode of eighteenth-century discourse, *inevitable* that they would be transferred southwards at a later date. For this generation of Le-Trinh literati, the ostensibly *huaxia* nature of eighteenth-century Annam seemingly created an historiographical conundrum—the early Le narrative of Nguyen Trai was historically untenable; still, a convincing institutional genealogy of Annamese civilization demanded explanation for how an unquestionably peripheral polity such as Annam had inherited the civilizational apparatus of *zhongguo* and become a legitimate purveyor of *huaxia* culture in its own sphere of geopolitical influence. Common to the solutions analyzed above is a geographical argument emphasizing the proximity of Annam to various southward expansions of *huaxia* culture and institutions. Although this is suggestive of a certain localized subjectivity, this subjectivity was neither analogous to the politico-cultural parity asserted between “North” and “South” in early Le discourse nor to contemporaneous discourses of localized exceptionalism which arose in eighteenth-century Japan and Joseon in response to dynastic transition in China. Rather, these eighteenth-century Annamese literati understood the flourishing of Annamese institutions as ultimately derivative from Chinese antecedents which had never forfeited politico-cultural legitimacy or centrality. Hence, Annam only partook in a transregional Southern subjectivity which included large swaths of southern China. The problem of Annam’s peripheral positionality was resolved by arguing that, contrary to the *Grand Pronouncement*, there was in fact no meaningful geographical or cultural border distinguishing “North” and “South”—Annam was *huaxia* because it was both geographically and institutionally incorporated within the Chinese *zhongguo*. Hence, in his “Discourse on Dynastic Succession 國統論,” Bui Dzuong-Lich 裴楊歷 (1757-1828) asserted that recognition and participation within the “ranks and association 列會” of the rulers of the Central Region

was necessary for any given dynastic enterprise to possess political legitimacy.²⁴ This institutional communion 預 with the Central Land was, in fact, what constituted the Annamese state and elevated it above neighboring polities. Bui elaborates:

From the beginning of the cosmos, all states in the four quarters have had their respective rulers. Those in the north were predominantly fearsome and ruthless. Those in the west were predominantly freakish daemons. Only our Viet and Joseon are declared to share the same cultural institutions and traditions. However, Jo[seon] is located beyond the seas. Its cultural institutions were obtained only when Jizi came there from the Central Region, bringing with him the learning of the world-ordering principles bestowed to Yu—only then did the culture of ritual and propriety have means to gradually permeate. Our Viet is located exactly in the region of patterned brilliance. Its territory is joined with the Central Land. . . . Why should it be necessary to simulate descent from Shen Nong and only then be considered of importance!²⁵

Bui does not identify Annam as *zhongguo*. Properly speaking, Annam lies outside the Central Region. At most, according to Bui, Annam can be said to enjoy connection with the Central Land—it cannot claim to constitute the same. This stark difference with early Le conceptions of Vietic centrality is elaborated in Bui's "Discourse on Field Allocation Astrology 天野論":

Beyond the Five Zones, the four quarters are all with their respective rulers. Although compared to the Central Region they differ in terms of their diminutive size and deviation from centrality, in regards to the prosperity or decline, order or chaos of their respective states, [each ruler] surely has the means to dictate these for himself.²⁶

For Bui, not only was Vietic antiquity located beyond the pale of civilization, even contemporary Annam remained external to this world-

²⁴ 國之為國，不預中州帝王列會，則非統之正也。

²⁵ 天地開闢，四方之國，各有君長。北多勁悍，西多怪神。惟我越與朝鮮，號同文獻。然朝國在海外，得箕子從中州來以九疇之學為始，而禮義之俗有所漸浸。我越當文明之郊，地聯中土。 . . . 豈必假神農之後，然後為重哉。

²⁶ 五服之外，東西南北，各有君長，視與中州，雖有大小偏正之異，而於其國之興亡治亂，亦必有以主宰之。

order. Hence, Bui's emphasis on institutional recognition within the politico-cultural order of the Central Land as the sole source of legitimate prestige which, alongside geographical proximity, united Annam and the Central Land in a dynamic of singular intimacy. Bui went as far as to condemn Ngo Si-Lien as a man of "crude and shallow learning 學識淺陋" for suggesting that Annam's historical prestige should be attributed to the biological descent of its ancestry from Shen Nong, a mythical sovereign of high antiquity.²⁷ For Bui and his contemporaries, such fantastical conjecture—alongside claims to politico-cultural excellence independent of China—was simply unnecessary. Eighteenth-century Annam was *huaxia* precisely because of its institutional inseparability from the Chinese *zhongguo*, not in opposition to it or as a distinct counterpart.

IV. Commentarial Continua, "Classical Primordialism," and "Contextual Turn"

Many of the objections which eighteenth-century Le-Trinh literati raised, whether explicitly or implicitly, against early Le discourses of center and periphery were drawn from the pre-imperial classical canon, particularly the *Classic of Documents* and the *Classic of Changes*. While an intentional philological turn is absent in their methodology, the general orientation of these exegetical maneuvers does suggest a concern of Le-Trinh literati to ground their historiographical narrative of Annamese civilization within a soundly classical framework. Referring primarily to eighteenth-century Annamese literati, Alexander Woodside has argued that, compared to scholastic discourses on "abstract metaphysical principles" characteristic of post-Song Neo-Confucianism, Annamese

²⁷ Bui considered the mythological genealogy forwarded by Ngo Si-Lien a particularly flagrant violation of historiographical principles. In his *Bui Clan Code of Instruction for Children* 裴家訓孩, Bui's condemnation of Ngo Si-Lien is unequivocally censorious: "Former historians . . . fraudulently recorded freakish and groundless events, disgracing their kingdom with fabrications. They cannot escape from their crimes. 舊史 . . . 妄載荒誕不經之事, 誣辱其國, 罪不可追." A reading of fifteenth-century genealogies linking Vietic ancestry to Shen Nong as "medieval invented tradition" can be found in Kelley (2012).

Confucianism was ideologically inclined to a non-metaphysical “classical primordialism” emphasizing pre-imperial Zhou and Warring States texts and conceptual categories related to “scholarly service” to the state (Woodside 2002, 118-21). Although Le-Trinh literati discourse drew heavily from the pre-imperial canon, it is debatable to what extent this represented an ideological aversion to the metaphysical lexicon of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. For example, Pham-Nguyen Dzu’s *Humble Comments on Analects* 論語愚按, a prominent and widely-disseminated eighteenth-century Annamese *Analects* commentary, was thoroughly Neo-Confucian in orientation and drew directly from Zhu Xi’s metaphysical and pedagogical theories (Nguyen 2017, 186-88). For Pham-Nguyen, the Neo-Confucian concept of *li* 理—often translated as principle, pattern, or coherence—was even invoked in discussion of the *hua-yi* dichotomy. Commenting on *Analects* 13.19, Pham-Nguyen explained:

Reverence, single-mindedness, and devotion are all a single *li*. . . . A scholar can use it to rule his person. A lord can use it to rule the realm. “Even if sojourning amidst *yidi* it cannot be abandoned”²⁸ and “It can be practiced even among *manmo* tribes”²⁹—one refers to the effort exerted, the other to the results obtained. However, the intention is the same. As for the nature of *li*, it fills the entire cosmos and originally has no demarcations of *yi* or *xia*, near or far. If one conforms to *li*, there is nowhere one cannot go. If one goes against *li*, there is nowhere one can go.³⁰

Basing his argument on an understanding of the cosmos as fundamentally constituted by a single *li*, Pham-Nguyen argues that divergence between *yi* and *xia* is not determined by an essential difference, but by conformity—or lack thereof—to *li*. Elsewhere in his commentary, however, Pham-Nguyen seems to suggest that the politico-cultural demarcation between center and periphery is a fixed institutional reality

²⁸ *Analects* 13.19.

²⁹ *Analects* 15.6.

³⁰ 恭敬忠都是一理. . . . 學者可以之治一身. 人君可以之治天下. 雖之夷狄不可棄與雖蠻貊之邦行矣. 此言功. 彼言效. 而其意則同. 夫理之為理. 盈乎天地宇宙間. 初無夷夏遠近之限. 循理則何之不可. 悖理則無所之而可.

maintained by strict adherence to a hierarchical binary of respective social roles for *hua* and *yi*:

When defined social roles are stable this is “possessing [kingly rule].”³¹ When they are confused this is “to be without.” . . . Alas! That the *yidi* are without [a ruler] is unworthy of mention. When *zhuxia* is without [a ruler], this is equivalent to removing what *zhuxia* rightfully possesses and forfeiting it to the *yidi*. . . . If only [defined social roles] complied with what Master Shao described as “*yidi* doing what is proper to *yidi*; *zhongguo* doing what is proper to *zhongguo*,”³² how could [rulership] be lost?³³

Evidently, Le-Trinh literati such as Pham-Nguyen did in fact draw from the Neo-Confucian tradition in their commentarial treatments of canonical texts such as *Analects*. Indeed, the exegetical apparatus of commentaries such as *Humble Comments on Analects* suggests that, more often than not, it is safe to assume both broad familiarity and tacit agreement with Neo-Confucian thinkers and texts among eighteenth-century Annamese literati, whether or not this directly translated into discursive engagement with the same. This is not to deny the prevalence of what Woodside has identified as “textual essentialism” among Annamese elite inclined to affirm a certain “presentness” of classical texts (Woodside 2002, 124). It is, however, to question to what extent this “presentness” of classical texts and concepts in Le-Trinh literati discourse suggested their immediate applicability in an eighteenth-century context. This is particularly relevant to what Huang Chun-chieh has described as the “contextual turn” of eighteenth-century Confucian discourse in Tokugawa Japan, especially in regard to its innovative

³¹ *Analects* 3.5.

³² Master Shao, i.e., Shao Yong 邵雍 (1012-1077). Pham-Nguyen’s quotation is paraphrased from Shao Yong’s *Supreme World-Ordering Principles* 皇極經世: “. . . When *zhongguo* does what is proper to *zhongguo*; when *yidi* do what is proper to *yidi*—this is called the normative way. . . . When *zhongguo* does what is proper to *yidi*; when *yidi* do what is proper to *zhongguo*—this is called the perverted way. 中國行中國事, 夷狄行夷狄事, 謂之正道. . . . 中國行夷狄事, 夷狄行中國事, 謂之邪道.” (Shao 2015, 1168)

³³ 名分定則為有, 名分紊則為亡. . . . 噫, 夷狄之亡不足論, 諸夏之亡, 是移其有, 為夷狄之有. . . . 必如邵子所謂夷狄行夷狄事, 中國行中國事, 安得亡.

exegesis of *loci classici* related to issues of *zhongguo* and periphery in the ancient canon (Huang 2015, 45-48). Although the 1734 Le-Trinh ban on importing Confucian texts from Qing could have provided an intellectually fecund atmosphere for an increasingly localized internal discourse of center and periphery among eighteenth-century literati, there is no evidence suggesting a subsequent burgeoning of localized subjectivity in court-approved Neo-Confucian discourse (Smith 1973, 19).

Despite an upsurge of commentarial activity among eighteenth-century Annamese Neo-Confucian literati, it is difficult to discern any sense that scholar-officials such as Pham-Nguyen Dzu conceived of their exegetical endeavors as constituting a unitive contemporaneity of localized discourse. Hence, although Pham-Nguyen described his commentarial musings on *Analects* as a “record of self-study 自學之書,” lacking entirely in his commentary are any explicit references to his contemporaries or to the politico-cultural realities of eighteenth-century Annam which might have conditioned the underlying ideological orientation of his exegesis. Prior to completing *Humble Comments on Analects*, Pham-Nguyen composed *Collection of Things Obtained During Southern Travels* 南行記得集, a commemorative anthology celebrating the 1774 Le-Trinh takeover of Thuan-Hoa in which he condemned the Nguyen court as having forced formerly Le-Trinh subjects to “transform into *yi* 變入夷.” Among the Nguyen polity’s allegedly “*man* customs 蠻風” was its “demotion of [Confucian] learning 黜學” in favor of Buddhist intellectuality and institutions. Although this politico-cultural rhetoric is drawn from classical discourse on center and periphery, the lack of a corresponding specificity in Pham-Nguyen’s classical exegesis—especially in passages amenable to such digressions—increases the difficulty of separating the triumphalist rhetoric of a self-aggrandizing politico-cultural narrative from a “classical primordialism” which positively registered eighteenth-century phenomena as latter-day instantiations of Zhou and Warring States archetypes.

Lack of contemporaneous specificity and localized subjectivity in eighteenth-century Annamese exegetical works is also characteristic of *Modest Insights on the Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋管見 (1786), an extensive commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋 compiled

by Ngo Thi-Nham 吳時任 (1746-1803) shortly before entering into service of the Tay-Son court. Ngo's proemial framework for approaching the *Spring and Autumn Annals* does indeed assume a certain accessibility based on personal moral praxis rather than mastery of the recondite subtleties of commentarial accretions (Woodside 2002, 122-23). However, Ngo seems to be at least partly influenced by Neo-Confucian discourse on the *hua-yi* dichotomy in relation to exegesis of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Beginning with Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824), the *Spring and Autumn Annals* had become a primary *locus classicus* for developing discourses of ethnicized centrality and barbarophobic conceptions of the periphery as a perennial existential threat to the integrity of *zhongguo*. This exegetical emphasis on the *hua-yi* dichotomy reached its apotheosis in Hu Anguo 胡安國 (1074-1138) who based his revanchist, anti-Jurchen commitments on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (Yang 2019, 24-37, 131-33). Hence, although Ngo argues that Confucius compiled the *Spring and Autumn Annals* out of fear 懼, the fear implied is primarily directed at the cosmic upheaval initiated by *yidi* disruption of the *zhongguo* world-order:

[That one should become] at ease with *yidi* ruling over *zhongguo*, no longer comprehending the proper relation between the heavens above and the earth below; that *yang* should mutate into *yin*, that the supple should take advantage of the firm—this was what Master Kong feared. This was why he composed the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.³⁴

Throughout his commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Ngo draws from post-classical dynastic history to illustrate the ever-looming threat of moral corruption and politico-cultural compromise in any dealings involving *yi*. Whether the ultimate consequence was the “abandonment of moral bonds 棄綱常” or the “extinction of ritual proprietary 絕禮義,” Ngo implied that dynastic history was filled with examples proving that it was only in a prelapsarian classical antiquity that the Sage could transform *yidi* without being compromised by their corrupting influence:

³⁴ 安於夷狄為中國主，而不知天尊地卑之義，陽變為陰，柔遂乘剛，孔子為此懼，春秋所以作也。

The Master desired to dwell among the nine *yi*.³⁵ Why should there be strict [separation between *huaxia* and *yi*]? This is because only the sage is able to use the ways of [*hua*]*xia* to transform the *yi*. In every other case, there has never been one where [*huaxia*] was not transformed into *yi*. . . . Emperor Wen [of Han] declined the *qianli* stallion. Emperor Guangwu shut the passes and rejected the offerings [of *yi*]. They deeply grasped the meaning of keeping distance from *yi* as imparted in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Emperor Yang of Sui visited the tent of Yami [Khagan] and partook in drunken singing and toasts of longevity. No distinction was made between *hua* and *yi*. Whereupon the Japanese state sent a letter from “The Son-of-Heaven of the Land of the Rising Sun” addressed to “the Son-of-Heaven of the Land of the Setting Sun.” Taizong of Tang declared himself the “Celestial Khagan” and his progeny regarded this as normal. Afterwards, Nanzhao sent a letter addressed to “Grandfather Khagan, Emperor of the Great Tang.” In these cases, it would have been better to have never held relations with the *yidi*!³⁶

Elsewhere in his commentary, Ngo cites Song and Yuan history for similarly cautionary illustrations. Like his contemporaries Pham-Nguyen Dzu, Bui Bich, and Bui Dzuong-Lich, Ngo generally avoids dehistoricized speculation, preferring to contextualize his treatment of the *hua-yi* dichotomy in concrete post-classical instantiations drawn from a wide repertoire of dynastic history and politico-cultural experience. Both Ngo’s commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and Pham-Nguyen’s commentary on the *Analects* share a willingness to draw widely from Sinitic institutional and intellectual history while simultaneously avoiding anything suggestive of an equivalent Annamese subjectivity, be it politico-cultural or intellectual in nature. Like Pham-Nguyen’s exegesis of *zhuxia* and *yi* in the *Analects*, Ngo’s hermeneutical approach to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* treats *zhongguo* and *yidi* as essentialized abstractions without an explicitly correspondent politico-cultural referent in his contemporaneous

³⁵ *Analects* 9.14.

³⁶ 夫子欲居九夷，何其嚴也。蓋惟聖人為能用夏變夷，其餘未有不變於夷。 . . . 文帝卻千里馬，光武閉關謝質，深得春秋遠夷狄之義。隋煬幸啟民帳，酣歌為壽，無華夷之別。於是，本國書稱日出處天子，致書日沒處天子。太宗自號天可汗，子孫以為常。其後南詔致書稱大唐皇帝可汗爺爺，此不若不交夷狄為愈也。

context. In an administrative report pre-dating his commentarial composition, Ngo recommended a policy of “using *yi* to assail *yi* 以夷攻夷” to neutralize a contumacious community of “cunning barbarians 狡胡” in Thai-Nguyen 太原 garrison (Ngo 2003a, 609). Although the Hakka settlers in question were semi-itinerant miners from southern China, there is little evidence to suggest that *all* Qing institutions and peoples were broadly regarded as *yi* regardless of context. Certainly, there is nothing in Ngo’s commentary to imply an understanding of Annam as an eighteenth-century *zhongguo* threatened by *yidi* neighbors. If anything, the Tay-Son court to which Ngo eagerly switched his allegiance was more friendly towards Qing than even its Le-Trinh predecessors.³⁷

It is worth considering classical exegesis as but one specific modality of eighteenth-century Annamese Neo-Confucian discourse, and not necessarily a primary site of discursive experimentation at that. The “closed” nature of Pham-Nguyen Dzu’s commentary on *Analects* and Ngo Thi-Nham’s commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* was removed not only from the subjectivities of their authors’ politico-cultural context, but also from relevant ideological orientations present in each author’s wider corpus of works. The tenor of this commentarial mode is neither entirely primordial nor fully contextual. At least in part, it seems that the composition of these commentaries involved an exegetical performativity which allowed their authors to affirm themselves as what Woodside has termed “autonomous moral selves” or “true Confucian literati” 真儒 operating within a closed system which assumed the perennial “presentness” of the past (Woodside 2002, 132-33). The apparent continuity of these eighteenth-century Annamese commentaries with the Song-Ming Neo-Confucian traditions as a whole is dangerously deceptive if used as an authoritative measure of Annamese Neo-Confucian discourse, especially regarding conceptions of center and periphery current among Annamese literati in an age of dynastic transition. Regardless of the rhetorical vehemence displayed

³⁷ Notably, the Tay-Son and its constituents were regarded as peripheral by Le-Trinh literati. In his “Discourse on Field Allocation Astrology,” Bui Dzuong-Lich described the Tay-Son as “southern *man* 南蠻.”

in his treatment of *zhongguo* and *yi* in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Ngo Thi-Nham elsewhere actively promoted historiographical and anthropological models of understanding humanity and human civilization which either circumvented the *hua-yi* dichotomy or directly dismissed it as irrelevant and flagrantly misunderstood. Although written in a Buddho-Daoist tenor, the *Primal Sounds of the Teachings of the Bamboo Grove* 竹林宗旨元聲 (1796) is a late synthesis of Ngo's mature thought and retains the metaphysical lexicon and politico-cultural framework which characterized his more normative Neo-Confucian commitments. Deconstructing the exceptionalism of the ancient sage-kings whose modes of governance formed the basis of all discourses on center and periphery, Ngo argued that diverse forms of human and institutional flourishing were equally ordained and safeguarded by Heaven 天:

Is there anywhere that sages and worthies are not generated? The flowering of brightness and brilliance—this is what Heaven treasures. The flowering of obscurity and remoteness—this is what Heaven keeps stored away. The sage-kings Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, the Duke of Zhou, and Master Kong were generated with the flowering of brightness and brilliance. The buddhas and bodhisattvas arose in the far west. The progenitors of the Liao, Jin, and Yuan arose in the far east and the far north. These too were all rulers who inherited the mantle of rightful rulership from Heaven. They were generated from the flowering of obscurity and remoteness.³⁸

According to Ngo's mature thought, the civilizational excellence of the ancient sage-kings associated with *zhongguo* was neither exceptional nor could it boast a cosmic centrality which elevated their politico-cultural institutions above those of other lands. The historiographical problematics which plagued Pham-Nguyen Dzu, Bui Bich, and Bui Dzuong-Lich in their reconceptualizations of Annam's politico-cultural heritage are entirely irrelevant to this discourse of cosmic equity and the relative parity of human institutions. This radical re-envisioning of

³⁸ 聖賢何地不生。清華之秀。天之所珍。幽深之秀。天之所藏。堯, 舜, 禹, 湯, 文, 武, 周公, 孔子得其清華之秀而生。諸佛菩薩。起於極西。遼, 金, 元之祖。起於極東, 極北。亦皆為繼天立極之君。乃幽深之秀之所生也。

center and periphery was not limited to religious discourse. Indeed, Ngo's poetic output dating to soon after the completion of his commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, indicates a strong contextual turn towards localized subjectivity had already led Ngo to entirely disavow himself of attachment to the *hua-yi* dichotomy. Pondering the diversity of language, customs, and clothing exhibited throughout the Vietic polities of his day in a series of ten poems collectively titled *Pensive Meditations* 有所思, Ngo wrote:

Having exhaustively observed the people's customs, thoughts weigh
heavy on my mind.

What propels these transformations of language and appearance,
nature and customs?

South of the river, clothing resembles that of Manchuria;

North of the citadel-walls, robes are like those of the Huihe.

For the most part, preferences and style follow the circumstances of
the times;

There is no essential discrimination between the technologies and
outward appearance of *hua* and *yi*.

The flowering of patterned brilliance is without profound obstruction;

All with blood and *qi* are generated from the same womb, extended
from the same *li*.³⁹

(Ngo 2003b, 382-383)

Without invoking explicitly Buddhist religious sensibilities, Ngo already argues for the interrelatedness of all creation using a profoundly Neo-Confucian metaphysical framework. While Bui Bich and Bui Dzuong-Lich agonized to defend Annam's politico-cultural institutions through associations with the Central Region, Ngo keenly observed that the institutional realities of their eighteenth-century context made any such associations tenuous at best. The politico-cultural technologies and institutional realities of the Vietic realm—whether ruled by the Le-Trinh, the Nguyen, or the Tay-Son—had no real correspondence to any Northern counterparts except, ironically, those which were

³⁹ 觀盡民風有所思。聲容氣習孰推移。河南服似滿州服。城北衣如回紇衣。好尚大都隨運會。采章原不別華夷。文明開闢無深阻。血氣同胞一理推。

themselves considered peripheral deviations from an imagined center. This, however, was entirely unproblematic as such discrepancies were merely superficial and unreflective of the deeper reality that all humanity—whether labeled *hua* or *yi*—partook of a common *li*. Despite a façade of static orthodoxy, even primordialism, confirmed in part by commentarial posturing, by the close of the eighteenth century, some modes of Annamese Neo-Confucian discourse—particularly the religious and the lyrical—had already moved beyond the established parameters of center and periphery.

V. Coda

The existence of a *longue durée* Annamese discourse positing politico-cultural equality between Annam and China in pre-modern Annamese intellectual history has been grossly exaggerated (Yu 2006, 67-68). Arguments made to defend this trope are usually over optimistic in regarding the *Complete Records* as a reliable repository of transdynastic experience rather than as an historiographical project undertaken to achieve ideological interventions specific to an early Le politico-cultural discourse of dyadic co-equality between “Northern” and “Southern” dynastic enterprises. There is indeed something unprecedented—even radically so—about the Vietic exceptionalism articulated in early Le discourse. The *Grand Pronouncement* of 1428 did in fact articulate a genealogy of politico-cultural origins and prestige for so-called “Great Viet 大越” independent of China—whether this, as some have argued, contributed to the articulation of a “separate national identity for Vietnam” requires further investigation; it is, however, undeniable that the *Grand Pronouncement* represented a watershed in Vietic conceptions of statehood and the possibilities of a non-Sinocentric world-order (O’Harrow 1979, 159, 174). Due largely to the nature of the archive, it is difficult to determine whether the ideological orientation of this early Le moment was normative before the Le or if it in fact represented a brief and shocking aberration from more representative Vietic conceptions of center and periphery which eighteenth-century Le-Trinh literati subsequently attempted to recover. Le Loi’s fifteenth-century

military campaigns have been aptly described as a highlander conquest of the overwhelmingly pro-Ming Red River plain (Taylor 1998, 955-57). It is difficult to recover what exactly constituted a normative discourse of politico-cultural legitimacy and prestige among socially displaced Annamese literati in wake of this reversal of center and periphery. In the wider context of a long institutional history of what Keith W. Taylor has described as Annamese “mimicry” of Sinitic political practice and “mixtures of subservience and non-compliance” towards Sinitic dynastic enterprises, the classicist concerns of eighteenth-century literati such as Pham-Nguyen Dzu, Bui Bich, and Bui Dzuong-Lich appear much less anomalous than the confident triumphalism of Le Loi and Nguyen Trai (Taylor 2003, 621-23).

The center-periphery relationship between pre-modern Sinitic and Vietic dynastic enterprises is often treated in an essentialized manner which assumes enduring nation-state identities across nearly a millennium of dynastic transition involving fundamental re-conceptualizations of the state’s spatial organization and disparate imaginations of the normative identities of its constituencies (Nguyen 2019, 62-70). Certainly, the dynamics of the tributary system cannot be oversimplified; it is undeniable that some Annamese ruling elite and literati, particularly during the early Le, understood this dynamic according to an internal logic of dyadic equilibrium between Northern and Southern courts (Anderson 2013, 275-76). For most Le literati, this dyadic parity was not conceived of as predicated on a civilizational distinction between North and South, but as the partaking of both in a shared fountainhead of classical politico-cultural institutions and reflected in a common lexicon of statecraft and standards of human flourishing (Kelley 2005, 28-36). Perhaps it is for this reason that inquiries into various “localist turns” in pre-modern Vietnamese intellectual history have focused on the development of Vietic subjectivity in various genres of historiographical writing from the early Le (Kelley 2012, 119-21).

Still, the levels of discomfort and resistance which some eighteenth-century Annamese literati directed at Nguyen Trai’s *Grand Pronouncement* and Ngo Si-Lien’s historical revisionism makes it dubious whether the attention drawn to the radical nature of these texts in

twentieth-century scholarship should be attributed entirely to an anachronistically projected nascent Vietnamese nationalism (Kelley 2005, 19-20). Regardless, a broad survey of late eighteenth-century Annamese literati writing is highly suggestive of an intentional turn away from the ideological commitments of the early Le among Annamese scholar-officials in service of the Le-Trinh and later Tay-Son courts. Strikingly coherent leitmotifs recur across diverse modalities of Le-Trinh historical, literary, exegetical, religious, and lyrical composition in relation to classicized conceptions of Vietic antiquity, integration into the politico-cultural institutions of the Central Region as a source of legitimation for Vietic dynastic enterprises, and this same institutional (and geographical) integration into the Chinese *zhongguo* as constituting a certain politico-cultural prestige for Annam indicative of the superiority of its flourishing institutions over other polities and dynastic enterprises—even those which, like Joseon, participated in the same tributary system. To search for evidence of Vietic exceptionalism anywhere outside this intimate integration into *zhongguo* was, in the words of Bui Bich, “the height of delusion 惑之甚矣.”

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