Brush and Ship: The Southern Chinese Diaspora and Literati in Đại Việt during the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries

John K. Whitmore©2010°

Abstract:
What relationship developed between the new realm of Đại Việt (northern Vietnam) and the growing southeast coast of China in the early second millennium C.E.? Fan Chengda’s report of the 1170s on the Vietnamese spoke of a strong interaction between the two regions, of Min Chinese moving into Đại Việt. This note looks at commercial and educational developments on the southeast coast of China and relates these developments to the emerging Trần dynasty and the increased significance of literati in Đại Việt.

Keywords:
Vietnamese literati; early Đại Việt; Trần dynasty; lower Red River Delta; southeast coast of China; Fan Chengda; Asian maritime commerce

In the 1170s, two officials in Guangxi Province of the Song empire, just north of Đại Việt (now northern Vietnam), wrote reports on the Vietnamese realm and its people. In what appears to us as an exaggeration, the first of these officials, Fan Chengda, claimed:

[The locals] cannot produce paper and brushes, getting them from [our] territory. Their people have little comprehension of [our] writings. People from Min close to the sea come by ship [and] are certainly most well received. Consequently, [their king] commands his officials to consult [the Min people] so as to decide matters. Generally, [our] civilization (wen) influences [their] perversity [and] chaos. Many travelers from [Min] go [there]. Tradition has it that their royal ancestor (Lý) Công Uẩn was also originally a Min man.

Moreover, the indigenes of their country form much less than half [of the population]. [There are] people of [our] territory [who] travel to the south [and] entice people, male and female, to become menials. [They] grab them and take them into the mountain grottoes of [this] territory, binding and selling them for two liang of gold. [From this] territory’s grottoes, [they] move and sell them into Jiaozhi [the Chinese name for Đại Việt], receiving three liang of gold (for each one). Yearly, there are not less than 100,000 [such people]...

There are also accomplished scholars, Buddhist monks, Daoist practitioners, and clever artisans, [all] becoming absconders [who] have lost the [imperial] mandate. Those who flee are very many....

[The Vietnamese thus] grab and plunder the sold men and women as well as the scholars [who] cross the frontier and enter [their land]....

Specifically, in Fan’s mind, Đại Việt was dependent on the north for ideas and manpower, including scholars, as well as for literati materials like writing brushes and paper. Indeed, Fan saw Min (Fujian) on the southeast coast of China as the source of intellectual power for the Vietnamese realm. Đại Việt, he also declared, was the meeting point of south Chinese merchants and traders from points south and west.

° John K. Whitmore is an historian of early Vietnam. His email address is: johnkw@umich.edu.
manpower and civilization flowed along this maritime route into Đại Việt.\(^1\) The second official, Zhou Qufei, shortly afterward wrote his *Ling Wai Dai Ta* and reinforced Fan’s points, but without his sensationalism.\(^2\) What can we make of these comments? Let us turn to contemporary events on the southeast coast of China to attempt an explanation.

After the defeat of the Northern Song regime in 1126 and the move of the capital to Hangzhou in the Yangtze Delta, there was an increase in both maritime trade and local scholars. From the eleventh century into the twelfth, the growing wealth of this southern society and the increasing emphasis on education led to ever larger numbers of males receiving instruction and striving for government service. The expansion of scholarly numbers, and competition among them, grew as the Song Empire was confined to the south. By the mid-twelfth century, there was a strong recognition that the surplus of scholars had become a problem. What was to be done for (and with) all these young educated men? Scholars like Lu You and Yuan Cai noted what paths such literati might take—into religious life, into clerkships, into commerce, etc. In sum, many educated men, lacking a secure path to state service, found themselves spun off into seeking other opportunities to support themselves and their families. Certainly, there would have been roving scholars looking for the chance to teach or somehow to benefit from and to apply their learning. And in the thriving commercialism of the south, what better opportunity for the literate than in internal and external, short- and long-distance trade?\(^3\)

Thus, at the very time when Fan and Zhou were describing the Chinese–Vietnamese connections, Lu and Yuan were discussing (pejoratively, perhaps) alternative occupations for the surplus educated. This situation may be seen especially in the Min region, now Fujian, and particularly in the port of Quanzhou. The quantity of degree candidates and the overall number of educated men in this region were, in Peter Bol’s word, “amazing,” many thousands in all. John Chafee describes the significant scholarly development in the Quanzhou region and throughout Min during these centuries. One of the new opportunities to be had there was to teach in a school for foreigners, instructing them in Chinese texts. Quanzhou lay at the eastern end of the international trade route stretching westward to the Mediterranean during a time of major maritime commerce. This meant both that many foreigners came into Quanzhou and that ships, especially Chinese vessels, moved south down the southeast coast into Southeast Asia. This maritime movement offered further opportunities for educated men, in a very fluid situation and overpopulated region, to service the merchants or to move elsewhere along the coast.\(^4\)

Quanzhou also stood at the northern tip of a more regional trade system, that of the Jiaozhi Ocean. This system formed in the twelfth century as a result of the Song surge of international maritime trade and linked Quanzhou to Yaizhou on the coast of Hainan Island, Qinzhou on the Guangxi coast, Vân Đồn in the islands off the northeast coast of the Red River Delta, and Thi Nại (modern Quy Nhơn) in central Champa (now south-central

---

Angkor’s reach eastward in this century strengthened the Vijaya region of Champa and helped shape the new system. Both local and international goods flowed around this system as Muslim traders connected it with East Java and points further west. Behind these ports, population, industry, and wealth grew as trade linked the agricultural lowlands, the highlands, and the coast, and as manufacturing developed for both internal and external markets. This trade route also provided a path for the movement of population down the southeast coast of China into underpopulated areas like the lower Red River Delta.5

In Đại Việt, the development of this coastal hinterland behind the port of Văn Đồn, and of the Jiaozhi Ocean system, involved not only commerce and industry, but also fishing and agriculture. The growth of population came out of the latter two as much as the former two, especially as more sophisticated methods tamed the wetlands and the swamps. It would appear that population movement from Min helped to form both the political base of the new Chinese-descended Trần (Ch. Chen) dynasty (1225–1400) of Đại Việt and a “northern” society in this region (confusing the Vietnamese generals in the Mongol wars of the 1280s). Accompanying this Min population movement undoubtedly were some of the roving surplus scholars of the Fujian region, drawn to the settlements abroad. There such scholars would have taught and inspired not only other Chinese, but also bright local lads. The coastal Trần royal family, originally of a fishing background, came to have the most literate group of princes in Vietnamese history, well known for their poetry. For me, it seems to have been no coincidence that this Trần dynasty set up more formal Confucian examinations in the thirteenth century and that the great majority of the successful Vietnamese scholars came from the coastal provinces of Hải Dương, Sơn Nam, and Thanh Hóa. It would appear that this coastal zone saw the development of population and literati out of Min along the thriving trade route of these centuries.6

While we have no direct evidence from this era that Min scholars did migrate into coastal Đại Việt, teach immigrant Chinese (and local) students like the Trần, and thereby create this literati coastal culture, we do have one major example from the fourteenth century. The classic “First Teacher” of Đại Việt was the scholar Chu Văn An (1292–1370). He was credited with establishing his own school south of the capital of Thăng Long (modern Hanoi) and teaching a number of famous Vietnamese students there. His father was from China and a man of a certain education, perhaps specializing in geomancy, medicine, and commerce.7

Against this background, I would interpret the twelfth century observations of Fan and Zhou as true, if seen through the prism of Min migration into the lower Red River Delta. Their coastal perception is reflected in their view of the territories of Đại Việt. They knew the more peripheral areas, but were weaker on the inland ones. It was the coastal region of the lower Red River Delta that held the most Chinese population. This population carried with it a strong interest in the education and scholarship of their homeland, hence


the import of writing brushes and paper. Fan and Zhou saw Min as connected to this territory and indeed as furnishing its brains. The rise of the Trần family from Min to the throne of Đại Việt in the half century after they wrote confirms this view.8

In general, then, this coastal territory of Đại Việt might be interpreted as an extension of southern Chinese coastal history which overlapped with the movement of Đại Việt from the upper Red River Delta down to the lower. One aspect of southern Chinese history important here was the reclamations of wetlands for rice agriculture. In both south China and the lower delta of Đại Việt, draining and poldering9 led to the intensification of agriculture and, together with the growing commerce, to a greater concentration of population and wealth.10 Given this connection, it is no surprise that survivors from the Mongol defeat of the Song found refuge in Đại Việt as they followed the earlier population movement. There the Trần court warmly received the refugees and exchanged poems with them, as local and immigrant literati interacted.11 One result of the overlap of these two historical forces was the possibility of loyalty going in either of two directions, up the coast to the capital of the Chinese empire or upriver to Thăng Long, the capital of Đại Việt. The tension between these two choices exploded with the Mongol invasions of the 1280s. The Trần prince Ích Tắc, founder of the first major Vietnamese school of Chinese classics on his estate in the lower Red River Delta, joined the Yuan forces and, on their defeat, went with them to China. So too did the coastal scholar Lê Tắc.12 Thus might the movement of ships and brushes go in either direction at this time.

This strong movement from the recently populated southeast coast of China, specifically Min, represents a new stage in the interaction of Northerners and Southerners (Chinese and Vietnamese) that had gone on for almost a millennium and a half by the time Fan and Zhou wrote their reports. As Michael Churchman and John D. Phan show in this issue of *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, through the first millennium C.E. there was a strong integration of northern and southern societies and cultures in the middle of the Red River Delta around what is now Hanoi. In this new stage of northern and southern relations, the strong demographic and port growth along China’s southeast coast at the end of the millennium meant two things: first, that the new Song dynasty had no need to, and so did not, force the reintegration of Annan back into the empire; and second, that there would be a continued contact between the more recently settled southeast coast and the older populated region of the Red River Delta. In turn, this stage would be followed by the next, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when more Chinese from the southeast coast would participate both as inhabitants and sojourners in Hội An and in the wider Nguyễn domain on the central coast of Vietnam. Just as in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, intellectuals in this later movement would eventually have an impact on Vietnamese society.

The consequence of this situation in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was what Fan described, a shared community of peasants and scholars spread along the coasts of the two regions. While Đại Việt and the Song formed two different regimes (as the Trần dynasty stressed in its historiography13), there was a communality between these two sectors of their respective realms, a shared regional history that needs to be examined more closely.

9. A polder is a low-lying tract of land surrounded by dikes that control the access of water.