

STATECRAFT ON THE MARGINS:
DRAMA, POETRY, AND THE CIVILIZING MISSION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
SOUTHERN VIETNAM

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STATECRAFT ON THE MARGINS: DRAMA, POETRY, AND THE CIVILIZING MISSION
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In the eighteenth century, the Mekong delta was a site of interaction between an expansionary Vietnamese kingdom and a network of dispersed Chinese Ming loyalists. This dissertation investigates the ways in which eighteenth-century Vietnamese and Chinese literati shaped the cultural landscape of the Mekong delta. It demonstrates the importance of the intellectual and cultural inhabitation of space for the appropriation of frontier lands. Specifically, it considers the literary works of Nguyễn Cư Trinh (1716-1767), a prominent southern Vietnamese scholar-official, and Mạc Thiên Tứ (1710-1780), the leader of Hà Tiên, an autonomously governed ethnic Chinese enclave in the Mekong delta.

The first part of this dissertation examines a satirical play, *Sãi Vãi* (Monk and Nun), which Nguyễn Cư Trinh composed in 1750 to encourage the people of Quảng Ngãi to fight the Đá Vách (Stone Wall) uplanders. The play reveals how Nguyễn Cư Trinh's attempt to stabilize the Vietnamese kingdom's borders was intimately related to his attempt to educate the Việt inhabitants of the frontier. Moreover, the play shows the extent to which Sino-Vietnamese literary culture formed a part of the Vietnamese cultural consciousness on the frontier during this period. The second part of this dissertation is dedicated to a study of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*, a collaborative literary project that Mạc Thiên Tứ organized. The landscape poetry served as a medium through which the originator of the project rendered his domain civilized and brought it into the cultured discourse of Chinese intellectuals. A comparison of the landscape poems of

both Mạc Thiên Tứ and Nguyễn Cư Trinh, moreover, provides insight into the divergent nature of the Chinese and Vietnamese projects on the frontier. The patterns of migration that led the two authors to the Mekong delta informed the cultural production of knowledge in the region; and this knowledge, in turn, was integral to the literati's attempts to shape statecraft on a rapidly changing frontier.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Claudine Ang was born in Singapore in September of 1976. She attended the National University of Singapore (NUS), where she majored in Southeast Asian Studies and graduated with a B.A. (hons.) in 1999. She later returned to pursue a M.A. in the Department of History, which she received in 2005. In August of 2005, she arrived in Ithaca, NY for graduate study in history at Cornell University. Upon completion of her Ph.D., she begins her appointment as Assistant Professor of Humanities (History) at Yale-NUS College and is concurrently appointed as a fellow of the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University in 2012-2013.

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Introduction

Civilizing Projects in Eighteenth-Century Đàng Trong¹

In the eighteenth century, two extraordinary men lived on Đàng Trong's frontiers. Political actors well suited to frontier living, they were able military leaders with successful records of both winning battles and avoiding them in order to protect the fragile peace of the frontier world. More distinctive, perhaps, was the fact that they were also highly educated men of letters. As scholars and officials living on the southern Vietnamese frontier, they were not content with carrying out the work of annexing territories, building settlements, and organizing soldiers and their families on the new lands. On top of the physical work of establishing settlements on the margins of the expanding kingdom, they sought to fully inhabit the worlds in which they lived by infusing the frontier lands with culture and literature. To this end, they composed drama and poetry in their quest to bring about what they believed was the elevation of the civilizational status of the frontier lands and its inhabitants. These two figures' lives and their literary works, which were composed in various provinces on the southern Vietnamese frontier, provide us with insight into civilizing projects in eighteenth-century Đàng Trong.

This dissertation explores the intertwining lives and literary works of Nguyễn Cư Trinh (1716-1767) and Mạc Thiên Tứ (1710-1780),² and investigates their civilizing projects in Quảng

¹ Đàng Trong (The Inside) and Đàng Ngoài (The Outside) were the names used by the southern Vietnamese for their kingdom and the northern Vietnamese polity respectively. Foreign missionaries and traders used names derived from the terms Cochinchina (in reference to the south) and Tonkin (in reference to the north). In this dissertation, I refer to the southern Vietnamese polity as Đàng Trong, the name most commonly used by the Việt inhabitants of the region. When discussing it in the context of foreign missionaries and traders I use the name Cochinchina, which was the name by which they most commonly called Đàng Trong.

Ngãi and Hà Tiên respectively. The two men came to inhabit the southern regions of Vietnam following two divergent trends of migration, namely contiguous territorial expansion and non-contiguous diasporic settlement.³ In the eighteenth century, Vietnamese territorial expansion into the southern regions was fueled by the efforts of the Nguyễn family, who had ruled the southern Vietnamese polity of Đàng Trong since the mid-sixteenth century. Prior to this, the Nguyễn had been an important family in the political scene of Đại Việt, the Vietnamese kingdom that had its capital in Thăng Long (modern day Hà Nội). They were allied with another important family, the Trịnh, and together sought to defend the Lê dynasty against usurpation by the Mạc family. In 1545, Nguyễn Kim was assassinated by the Mạc. Trịnh Kiểm, Nguyễn Kim's son-in-law, took control of the loyalist forces but soon sought control over Đại Việt instead. In time, he came to exercise his political power by openly manipulating the Lê king from behind the throne upon which the king still sat. The Nguyễn clan and its supporters, led by Nguyễn Kim's son Nguyễn Hoàng, moved south to Thuận Hóa in 1558. From there, they continued to exist as a part of Đại Việt until 1620, when Nguyễn Hoàng's son and heir, Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên, stopped paying taxes to the north in a clear sign of the Nguyễn family's separatist intentions.⁴ This act of separatism sparked a series of wars along the border of the two Vietnamese polities, which the

² The date of Mạc Thiên Tứ's birth is not determined exactly. See Émile Gaspardone, "Un Chinois des Mers du Sud, le Fondateur de Hà Tiên," *Journal Asiatique* CCXL, no. 3 (1952), p. 384, for the problems associated with its dating. I have reflected in the dates above the year chosen by Gaspardone.

³ In his study of twentieth-century Chinese migration, Adam McKeown argues for the importance of placing migration in global perspective in order to adequately understand and articulate the local experiences of migrants. See Adam McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900-1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), in particular his first chapter, "Chinese Migration in Global Perspective." My dissertation is similarly attentive to the divergent global (in this case more accurately called "regional") processes that led to the migration of Việt and Chinese peoples to the Mekong delta, which I believe influenced their interactions with the delta lands and its inhabitants.

⁴ Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn [Nguyễn Dynasty Historical Institute], *Đại Nam Thực Lục* [Veritable Records of the Great South], ed. Đào Duy Anh, trans. Nguyễn Ngọc Tinh, vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục Publishing House, 2002), entry for year 1620, p. 40. The *Đại Nam Thực Lục* is the main dynastic chronicle of the Nguyễn Dynasty. It was commissioned in 1821 and completed in 1844.

Trịnh and the Nguyễn controlled, and these wars lasted throughout most of the seventeenth century. The reign of Nguyễn Phúc Tần (r. 1648-1687), the fourth Nguyễn lord of Đàng Trong, clearly demonstrates the direction in which Đàng Trong had come to focus its expansionist energies by the time of the mid-seventeenth century. Nguyễn Phúc Tần was one of the most able of the Nguyễn lords, and under his rule the Nguyễn army made significant advances against the Trịnh. His political intentions, however, were increasingly directed towards the southern part of his kingdom. Although Nguyễn Phúc Tần was vigilant in protecting his northern border, and took care to build walls and fortifications to keep the Trịnh armies out of Đàng Trong, he kept a keen eye on developments in the southern regions. It was under his rule that three thousand Chinese migrants, together with their families, came to be settled in the Gia Định area in 1679; the chronicles record that one of his reasons for settling the Chinese migrants in the southernmost provinces was to ensure that the Nguyễn would be better able to wrest the area away from Cambodian control.⁵ The Nguyễn family continued to extend their control into the Mekong delta, and by the eighteenth century could at least claim nominal control over most of it. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's presence on the southern Vietnamese frontier in the eighteenth century was a result of Đàng Trong's contiguous territorial expansion towards the south. His civilizing project in Quảng Ngãi reflected the political connections he maintained with the southern Vietnamese imperial center in Phú Xuân, Huế.

⁵ *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, entry for year 1679, p. 91. I will discuss the significance of this resettlement of Chinese migrants further in Chapter Four of this dissertation. Interestingly, some scholars who have discussed this event have dated it to 1682 rather than 1679. See Niu Junkai and Li Qingxin, "Chinese 'Political Pirates' in the Seventeenth-Century Tongking Gulf," in *The Tongking Gulf through History*, eds. Nola Cooke, Li Tana, and James A. Anderson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 199, fn. 43, where they cite Wang Fuzhi, *Xuwen xianzhi* [Gazetteer of Xuwen, compiled 1911], 10: 439 as the source of their date 1682. See also Chen Ching-ho, "Kasen Tei shi no bungaku katsudo, tokuni Kasen jyuei ni tsuite" [On the Literary Works of the Mạc, Governor of Hà Tiên, with Special Reference to the Hà Tiên Thập Vinh], in *Shigaku* 史學 [*The Historical Science*] XL, nos. 2-3 (1967), p. 150.

A different trend of migration led the Mạc family to settle on the lands that were to become the southern Vietnamese frontier regions.⁶ In the seventeenth century, the dynastic transition from the Ming to the Qing resulted in the dispersal of many Chinese who continued to profess loyalty to the fallen Ming dynasty. Following trading routes that were familiar to them, these Chinese migrants fled to various East and Southeast Asian kingdoms including Japan, Korea, Siam, Vietnam, Java, and the Philippines.⁷ Unlike the case of the Vietnamese expansion to the south, seventeenth-century Chinese migration to other kingdoms in the region reflected the pattern of non-contiguous diasporic settlement, in which the Chinese settlers found themselves to be minority groups in their newly adopted countries without the support of a strong imperial center. The Chinese migrants adapted to the changed conditions in different ways. While some joined the ranks of local society, others maintained independent enclaves for as long as possible. The Chinese settlement at Hà Tiên is an example of an independent Chinese enclave. Even though its leader and founder, Mạc Cửu (*Pinyin*: Mo Jiu, 鄭玖), initially styled himself as an *okñā*, an official of Cambodia, when he arrived in 1671 and later acknowledged Vietnamese suzerainty in 1708, he ran Hà Tiên autonomously until his death in 1735. Yet other Chinese migrants and their descendants came to play integral roles in the politics of the countries in which they settled. Phya Tak Sin (1734-1782), for example, a son of a Chinese migrant to Siam and a local Siamese woman, famously wrested control of the Siamese kingdom in 1768. His ambition to extend the Siamese empire eastwards towards Cambodia and Vietnam was a

⁶ The Mạc family of Hà Tiên is not to be confused with the Mạc family that usurped the Lê throne in sixteenth-century Đại Việt. In fact, the Mạc family in Hà Tiên changed their name from 莫 to 鄭 so as to better differentiate themselves from the Mạc family in the north.

⁷ See Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009) for a systematic account of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia from the fifteenth century to the present.

defining factor in the political scene of the Mekong region in the 1770s. These and other polities led by Chinese migrants or their descendants played prominent roles in the politics of the Southeast Asian region in the mid-eighteenth century.⁸ Mạc Thiên Tứ's presence in Hà Tiên was a result of the non-contiguous diasporic settlement of ethnic Chinese migrants to the region, and his civilizing project reflected the pattern of migration that brought his family, beginning with Mạc Cửu, to Hà Tiên.

Contours of the Two Civilizing Projects

These two migratory trends significantly shaped the civilizing projects that Nguyễn Cư Trinh and Mạc Thiên Tứ brought to the southern Vietnamese frontier. Their projects present interesting case studies through which to explore the intellectual and cultural inhabitation of the frontier lands in the eighteenth century. Pared down to its simplest form, most scholarly discussions of a civilizing mission and its related civilizing projects posit a center and a periphery, which are linked together by an impulse from the center to transform the periphery.⁹ Of course, few nowadays would conceptualize a civilizing process as a uni-directional flow of culture and values from the center to the periphery that changes the periphery into a form more similar to the center. One important way in which scholarship has complicated the discourse on the civilizing process is through a recognition of the agency of peripheral peoples, an agency that

⁸ For more information on the Chinese-led polities of the eighteenth century and the ways in which they defined the politics of the Southeast Asian region, see Chen Ching-ho, "Kasen Tei shi no bungaku katsudo, tokuni Kasen jyuei ni tsuite" [On the Literary Works of the Mạc, Governor of Hà Tiên, with Special Reference to the Hà Tiên Thập Vinh], pp. 149-154.

⁹ Stevan Harrell, for example, defines the civilizing project in the confines of his book as "a kind of interaction between peoples, in which one group, the civilizing center, interacts with other groups (the peripheral peoples) in terms of a particular kind of inequality." Stevan Harrell, "Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them," in *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Stevan Harrell (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), p. 4.

is manifest in their selective adoption of ideas from the center.¹⁰ In addition, a discussion of how the center is shaped in turn by its interactions with the periphery complicates and enriches the discourse on the civilizing mission.¹¹ Nevertheless, the central idea in the scholarly literature remains that a civilizing mission aims to include peripheral peoples into a larger entity in which the civilizing center is dominant.

One assumption embedded in this idea is that the **targets** of civilizing missions are the peripheral “others,” or peoples considered outsiders in relation to the civilizing center. One result of this predominant focus on peripheral outsiders as targets of civilizing projects is an attentiveness to the unintended development of ethnic consciousness on the part of the people who live on the periphery.¹² But while pairing the discourse of the development of ethnic consciousness and the civilizing process is a powerful way through which to render agency to the periphery in discussions of civilizing missions, the focus on peripheral outsiders as the targets of civilizing projects comes at the expense of other possible civilizing goals. The two civilizing projects that I discuss in this dissertation, for example, deviate from the conventional form described above because the intended targets of the civilizing attempts were not the peripheral outsiders on the frontier. Instead, they were the *ethnic insiders* who resided on the frontier in the case of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s civilizing project, and the *frontier landscape* itself in Mạc Thiên

¹⁰ See, for example, Pamela Kyle Crossley, Helen F. Siu, and Donald S. Sutton, introduction to *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and the Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 1-24.

¹¹ Harrell, “Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them,” pp. 6-7.

¹² This concern is at the center of the essays collected in Crossley, Siu, and Sutton, *Empire at the Margins* and Harrell, *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers*.

Tú's. A recognition of the variety of civilizing targets allows for a wider-ranging consideration of the nature of civilizing missions.

Closely related to scholars' interest in the development of ethnic consciousness amongst the people on the periphery is the impetus to observe the impact of this ethnic consciousness on the civilizing center and its agents. As the civilizing center and its agents carried out what is typically considered an **inclusive process** of incorporating peripheral peoples and territories into its empire, studies have drawn attention to the ways in which the agents of the center engaged at the same time in the seemingly contradictory practice of increasing the differentiation between the insiders of the empire and the ethnic outsiders of the periphery in their textual and pictorial representations of the peripheral regions.¹³ Laura Hostetler has explained the practice of differentiation between peoples and the demarcation of boundaries on the periphery as an attempt by the Qing state to articulate its knowledge of peripheral groups and thus better claim them as part of the empire.¹⁴ Alternately, Leo Shin understands the practice of differentiation and demarcation as an aspect of border strategy by Ming rulers who opted to define and protect their borders instead of expanding the empire.¹⁵ The first explanation is inclusive of the peoples on the periphery, whereas the second marks the end of the inclusive civilizing impulse after which the

¹³ Leo Shin has written about these processes at work in the Ming dynasty, while Laura Hostetler has observed them in the cartographic practices of the Qing dynasty. See Leo Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State: Ethnicity and Expansion on the Ming Borderlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

¹⁴ "Just as mapping of territory allowed for increased knowledge of and control over physical geography, depicting peoples was a way of knowing, and a means to better controlling, the human geography of areas into which the Qing was expanding." Refer to Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise*, p. 157.

¹⁵ Shin, *Making of the Chinese State*, pp. 158-170.

civilizer chooses to exclude peripheral outsiders from the empire.¹⁶ Although divergent, both explanations focus on the peripheral outsiders of the kingdom and disagree only in whether the act of differentiating them from the people of the center indicated an end to the civilizing process. One of the two civilizing projects of this dissertation, Nguyễn Cư Trinh's project in Quảng Ngãi, exhibits the same characteristic of differentiating between the Việt frontier inhabitants and the local uplanders of the peripheral region. Like Shin, I understand it as an aspect of border strategy. Instead of marking the end of the civilizing process and therefore keeping *outsiders out*, however, I focus my attention on the Việt insiders of the frontier and suggest that it was precisely Nguyễn Cư Trinh's inclusive civilizing project to keep the *insiders in* and thereby maintain the borders of the southern Vietnamese kingdom.

In the literature of Chinese civilizing missions, the civilizing center from which agents were sent to the periphery was unambiguously the capital of the ruling dynasty or regime, which was at once the political and cultural center of the civilizing project. Focusing on the civilizing agents of the two civilizing projects in eighteenth-century Đàng Trong, however, leads to a complication of the concept of the **civilizing center**. Nguyễn Cư Trinh was an official of the territorially expanding Đàng Trong kingdom, whose capital represented the civilizing center of his project. Mạc Thiên Tứ, conversely, had a more complicated relationship with Đàng Trong's center in Huế. Although he formally accepted Nguyễn overlordship and was thus an agent of Đàng Trong on its frontier, he was also the son of the founder of the ethnic Chinese enclave on the southern Vietnamese frontier over which he now had control. His relationship to his frontier

¹⁶ It should be noted that Hostetler and Shin studied the Chinese empire in two different historical moments. Their divergent explanations for a similar tendency, however, is worth drawing out in order to facilitate discussion of the fascinating observation that an increasing ethnic differentiation accompanied the moment of territorial expansion and the accompanying cultural transformation of the peripheries, which are understood to be inclusive processes.

province owed more to his heritage as the son of a diasporic Chinese settler than to his position as an agent of the southern Vietnamese court. The center of Mạc Thiên Tứ's civilizing project is further complicated by the fact that his family had fled the Middle Kingdom to escape from its Manchu conquerors, who now held power. The political center of his civilizing mission was certainly not the capital of the Manchu-led Qing dynasty, and the Vietnamese political center in Huế was similarly inadequate to fully encompass his sense of political belonging. The remnant Ming loyalists, with whom he had the most affinity, were left without a political center in relation to which Mạc Thiên Tứ could situate his peripheral domain. Indeed, in analyzing Mạc Thiên Tứ's civilizing project, an important discovery was the nature and location of his civilizing center.

Unlike the ambiguities surrounding the *political* center of Mạc Thiên Tứ's civilizing project, the *cultural* center of his civilizing project was clearly that of the Han-Chinese Middle Kingdom. Notably, the cultural center of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's civilizing project was similar to Mạc Thiên Tứ's even though he represented a different political center. Both men were educated into a similar cultural heritage, one that all educated members of the East Asian world shared. Even though modern day national boundaries have now rendered that cultural heritage unambiguously "Chinese," such demarcations of cultural boundaries were markedly absent in the frontier literature of the eighteenth century. That common cultural and literary heritage, however, promoted the Middle Kingdom as the cultural center, which problematizes the concept of the center in Nguyễn Cư Trinh's civilizing project. The two civilizing projects of eighteenth-century Đàng Trong thus demonstrate the complicated nature of the civilizing center.

Finally, the contours of the two civilizing projects in Đàng Trong were shaped by the life histories of their **civilizing agents**, Nguyễn Cư Trinh and Mạc Thiên Tứ. They were both men of the frontier, but differed significantly in one respect: Nguyễn Cư Trinh was born near the capital and raised as a person of the center, whereas Mạc Thiên Tứ was born in a peripheral province. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's life history was typical of those of other civilizing agents, who were sent to transform the periphery according to the customs and traditions of the center. Mạc Thiên Tứ's atypical position rendered him a person of the periphery who was carrying out a civilizing project on the landscape of his own hometown. He could hardly, however, be considered in the same category as the "peripheral outsiders" discussed earlier in this section. Instead, he was an elite representative of the cultural center of both his own and Nguyễn Cư Trinh's civilizing projects. The two civilizing agents' life histories determined significantly the contours of their projects on the southern Vietnamese frontier.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh's and Mạc Thiên Tứ's civilizing projects present significant challenges to the conceptual parameters of the discourse on civilizing missions. Without diminishing the importance of the work that has been done towards understanding the implication of civilizing projects on "peripheral others," this dissertation focuses on the civilizing agents themselves in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the various ways in which they sought to inhabit their newly claimed territories. This dissertation is especially interested in the realm of ideas, which it argues is an integral part of the process of claiming new territories. In choosing to foreground the thoughts and ideas of the civilizing agents on the southern Vietnamese frontier, the scope of this dissertation is limited to a consideration of Vietnamese and Chinese actors at the expense of other agents of history on the Mekong delta, such as Khmer, Cham, French, and

the many other ethnic groups of the region. In spite of this unfortunate neglect, the insights that a study of the ideas of eighteenth-century Vietnamese and Chinese colonizers yields constitute a significant contribution to the understanding of the process of territorial annexation.¹⁷ These insights are particularly important because they shed light on a period of Vietnamese expansionist history that took place before the systematic French colonization of the same territory, which has received significantly more scholarly attention.¹⁸

¹⁷ The process of territorial annexation is also referred to as the *Nam tiến*, or Southern expansion. For an example of the way in which Vietnamese southward migration has been presented, see Nguyễn Thế Anh, “Le Nam tien dans les textes vietnamiens,” in *Les Frontières du Vietnam: histoire des frontières de la péninsule indochinoise*, ed. P.B. Lafont (Paris, L'Harmattan, 1989), pp. 121-127. See also Phan Khoang, *Việt sử, xứ Đàng Trong 1558-1777: Cuộc Nam tiến của dân tộc Việt Nam* [Vietnamese history, the Southern Region 1558-1777: The Southern advance of the Vietnamese people] (Sài Gòn: Nhà Sách Khai Trí, 1967). Vietnamese scholarship has often depicted the annexation of lands from Cham and Khmer peoples in the language of Social Darwinism—the natural outcome of the survival of the fittest—or an abstract form of cultural exchange. See, for example, Nguyễn Đăng Thục, “Nam tiến Việt Nam: Hai trào lưu di dân nam tiến” [Vietnam’s southern expansion: Two waves of migration in the southern expansion], *Tạp San Sử Địa* 19-20 (July-December 1970), pp. 25-44 and Tạ Chí Đại Trường, “Một vấn đề của sử học Việt Nam: vị trí của Đại Việt, Chiêm Thành, Phù Nam trong lịch sử Việt Nam” [A problem in the historical study of Vietnam: The position of Đại Việt, Champa and Cambodia in Vietnamese history], *Sử Địa* 4 (Oct-Dec 1966), pp. 45-103. In other instances, the ethnic minorities are described as part of the natural environment, and interactions with them described as “fighting with nature.” See, for example, Nguyễn Văn Hào, “Sự thôn thuộc và khai thác đất Tầm Phong Long” [The annexation and exploitation of Tầm Phong Long], *Sử Địa* 19-20 (July-December 1970), pp. 3-24.

¹⁸ See Pierre Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy, and Revolution, 1860-1960* (Madison: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995) for an excellent study of the ecological and economic changes that the French brought to the Mekong delta. See also Milton Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response, 1859-1905* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969). A popular perspective through which to study the period of French colonization of Vietnam is the study of Vietnamese response. See, for example, David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Mark W. Mcleod, *The Vietnamese Response to French Intervention, 1862-1874* (New York: Praeger, 1991); “Trương Định and Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism: A Reappraisal,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 24, no. 1 (1993), pp. 88-105; Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *The Long Resistance (1858-1975)* (Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1975); Milton E. Osborne, “Truong Vinh Ky and Phan Thanh Gian: The Problem of a Nationalistic Interpretation of 19th Century Vietnamese History,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 30, no. 1 (November 1970), pp. 81-93; “The Faithful Few: The Politics of Collaboration in Cochinchina in the 1920s,” in *Aspects of Vietnamese History*, ed. Walter F. Vella (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1973), pp. 160-190; and Trương Bưu Lâm, *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention: 1858-1900* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1967).

Within Vietnamese language scholarship, there have been fraught attempts to evaluate the historical actors associated with the loss of the Mekong delta provinces to the French, in particular Phan Thanh Giản, and others deemed to be collaborators, such as Trương Vĩnh Ký and Phạm Quỳnh. See, for example, “Bản án của các Đại Thần nghị xử về việc để thất thủ 3 tỉnh Vĩnh Long – An Giang – Hà Tiên” [Report of the Great Mandarins about the loss of the 3 Provinces of Vĩnh Long, An Giang and Hà Tiên], trans. Tô Nam, *Sử Địa* 7-8 (1967), pp. 172-174; Chu Quang Trứ, “Cần Nghiêm Khắc Lên Án Phan Thanh Giản” [The Need to Judge Phan Thanh Giản Harshly], *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 51 (June 1963), pp. 35-39, 48; Hồng Hạnh, “Sự thống nhất về tính chất phản động của Phạm Quỳnh trong lĩnh vực chính trị và văn học” [The reactionary nature of Phạm Quỳnh in politics and culture], *Văn Sử Địa* 48

Nguyễn Cư Trinh was born in 1716 to a prominent family of the southern Vietnamese kingdom, Đàng Trong. His family was originally from Thiên Lộc in Nghệ An, and it was

(January 1958), pp. 60-81; Nam Xuân Thọ, *Phan Thanh Giản, 1796-1896* (Sài Gòn: Nhà Xuất Bản Tân Việt, 1950); Nguyễn Anh, “Vài ý kiến về Trương Vĩnh Ký” [A few opinions about Trương Vĩnh Ký], *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 57 (December 1963), pp. 17-27, 38; Nguyễn Thế Anh, “Phan Thanh Giản dưới mắt người Pháp qua vài tài liệu” [Phan Thanh Giản as seen through French documents], *Sử Địa* 6 (April-June 1967), pp. 22-34; Nguyễn Văn Trung, *Phạm Quỳnh* (Sài Gòn: Trung Tâm Alpha, 1972-1973); Phạm Văn Sơn, “Chung quanh cái chết và trách nhiệm của Phan Thanh Giản trước các biến cố của Nam Kỳ cuối thế kỷ 19” [About Phan Thanh Giản’s death and responsibility before the troubles of Cochinchina at the end of the 19th century], *Sử Địa* 7-8 (July-December 1967), pp. 78-95; Phù Lang Trương Bá Phát, “Kinh lược Đại Thần Phan Thanh Giản với sự chiếm cứ ba tỉnh Miền Tây” [The Viceroy and Great Mandarin Phan Thanh Giản and the occupation of the three western provinces of Cochinchina], *Sử Địa* 7-8 (July-December 1967), pp. 41-77; Tô Minh Trung, “Trương Vĩnh Ký tên tay sai đắc lực đầu tiên của chủ nghĩa thực dân Pháp trong lịch sử nước ta” [Trương Vĩnh Ký, the first accomplished lackey to serve the French in the history of our country], *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 59 (February 1964), pp. 43-46; Trần Huy Liệu, “Chúng ta đã nhất trí về việc nhận định Phan Thanh Giản” [We have reached a unanimous judgment on Phan Thanh Gian], *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 55 (October 1963), pp. 18-20; Trần Quốc Giám, “Cuộc đời Phan Thanh Giản (1796-1867)” [The Life of Phan Thanh Giản (1796-1867)], *Sử Địa* 7-8 (July-December 1967), pp. 96-148; “Thái độ của triều đình Huế đối với Phan Thanh Giản: từ Vua Tự Đức đến Vua Đồng Khánh” [Attitudes of the court of Huế towards Phan Thanh Giản: from Emperor Tự Đức to Emperor Đồng Khánh], *Sử Địa* 7-8 (July-December 1967), pp. 154-172; Trương Bá Cẩn, “Phan Thanh Giản: Đi sứ ở Paris (13-9 đến 10-11-1863)” [Phan Thanh Giản: Ambassador in Paris (13-9 to 10-11-1863)], *Sử Địa* 7-8 (July-December 1967), pp. 3-21; Trương Hữu Kỳ, “Đánh giá Phan Thanh Giản thế nào cho đúng?” [How to correctly evaluate Phan Thanh Giản?], *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 54 (September 1963), pp. 40-47, 64; and Viên Đài and Nguyễn Đồng, “P.J.B. Trương Vĩnh Ký: Người đã mở đầu một kỷ nguyên văn học Việt Nam mới” [P.J.B. Trương Vĩnh Ký: The person who opened a new era in Vietnamese literature], *Bách Khoa* 40 (1 September 1958), pp. 43-57.

A major theme in Vietnamese language scholarship associated with the study of this period is to highlight the actions of the Vietnamese people who resisted French colonization. See, for example, Diệp Vân, “Tài liệu về cuộc kháng chiến chống Pháp của Nguyễn Trung Trực” [Documents on the Nguyễn Trung Trực resistance against France], *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 110 (1968), pp. 53-60; “Đại Nam Chánh Biên Liệt Truyện - Tiểu Sử Trương Định” [Biographies of Đại Nam - Trương Định], trans. Tô Nam, *Sử Địa* 3 (July-September 1966), pp. 143-144; Mai Hạnh, “Trương Định: người anh hùng tiêu biểu cho tinh thần chống ngoại xâm của nhân dân Miền Nam Việt Nam thời kỳ cận đại” [Trương Định: a heroic representation of the spirit of opposition to foreign aggression of the Southern Vietnamese people in the modern period], *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 66 (September 1964), pp. 59-62; Nguyễn Xuân Thọ, “Tình hình chính trị Việt Nam thời kỳ Nguyễn Trung Trực khởi nghĩa: quan điểm của Ba Lê, Madrid và Huế về hòa ước Sài Gòn 1862. Phản ứng của nhân dân Việt Nam, các giáo sĩ” [The treaty of 1862 seen from Paris, Madrid and Huế. Reaction of the Vietnamese population and the missionaries], *Sử Địa* 12 (October-December 1968), pp. 99-121; Phạm Văn Sơn, “Nguyễn Trung Trực một Kinh-Kha của Miền Nam” [Nguyễn Trung Trực, a Vietnamese Jing Ke of the South], *Sử Địa* 12 (October-December 1968), pp. 65-75; Phù Lang Trương Bá Phát, “Nguyễn Trung Trực, dũng tướng Tân An Phú” [Nguyễn Trung Trực, the gallant strategist of Tân An Phú], *Sử Địa* 12 (October-December 1968), pp. 3-42; “Trương Định, dũng tướng huyện Tân Hòa” [Trương Định, gallant strategist of Tân Hòa], *Sử Địa* 3 (July-September 1966), pp. 3-80; Sơn Nam, “Đất khởi nghĩa và vài giai thoại về Nguyễn Trung Trực” [Country of revolt and some anecdotes about Nguyễn Trung Trực], *Sử Địa* 12 (October-December 1968), pp. 83-98; Trần Văn Giáp, “Tài liệu mới về Trương Công Định (1821-1864), vị anh hùng dân tộc Miền Nam” [Newly discovered documents on Trương Công Định (1821-1864), a hero of the South], *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* 51 (June 1963), pp. 54-57; and Vương Hồng Sển, “Trương Công Định và đạo hiếu trung” [Trương Công Định and the way of loyalty], *Sử Địa* 3 (July-September 1966), pp. 130-142.

amongst the first to move to Thuận Hóa in the sixteenth century.¹⁹ By the time that Nguyễn Đăng Đệ, Nguyễn Cư Trinh's father, was born, the family had settled in An Hòa village, located in Hương Trà, near Huế. Nguyễn Cư Trinh belonged to the eighth generation to have settled in Đàng Trong. The family participated actively in the politics of the southern Vietnamese kingdom.²⁰ Nguyễn Đăng Đệ, for example, was in charge of all the provinces in Quảng Nam and at the height of his career was appointed to the elevated position of Grand Secretary (*Ký lục Chính doanh*).²¹ Nguyễn Cư Trinh's own career trajectory was not very different from his father's. He was first appointed to office in 1740 as a county chief, and from there moved swiftly upwards in his bureaucratic career until he was eventually made the controller of all the regions that the Nguyễn claimed in the Mekong delta. So close was Nguyễn Cư Trinh to the Nguyễn lord, Nguyễn Phúc Khoát, that his biography records that when Nguyễn Phúc Khoát declared the Nguyễn family a dynasty in 1744, the decree was issued from Nguyễn Cư Trinh's hand.²²

In 1750, Nguyễn Cư Trinh was promoted to the position of governor (*tuần phủ*) of Quảng Ngãi.²³ Quảng Ngãi first appears in the Nguyễn dynasty imperial records in the entry for the year

¹⁹ It is recorded in the biography of Nguyễn Đăng Đệ, Nguyễn Cư Trinh's father, that the family traced their ancestry to a person named Trịnh Cam, an official of the Lê dynasty, who had who moved to Thuận Hóa in the sixteenth century to organize a resistance movement against the Mạc who had usurped the Lê throne. See Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn [Nguyễn Dynasty Historical Institute], *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiên Biên* [Biographies of the Great South, Premier Section], ed. Hoa Bằng, trans. Đô Mộng Khương (Huế: Thuận Hoá Publishing House, 1993), p. 136.

²⁰ Five family members have individual entries in the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiên Biên*: Nguyễn Cư Trinh, Nguyễn Đăng Đệ (Nguyễn Cư Trinh's father), Nguyễn Đăng Thịnh (Nguyễn Cư Trinh's cousin), Nguyễn Đăng Tiến (Nguyễn Đăng Thịnh younger brother) and Nguyễn Đăng Căn (Nguyễn Cư Trinh's elder brother). Two of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's sons, Nguyễn Cư Dật, Nguyễn Cư Tuấn, and his grandson Nguyễn Cư Sĩ, are mentioned as well.

²¹ *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, pp. 136-37.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 139.

²³ See Figure 1: Map of South China Sea, located at the end of this dissertation.

1570 as Tư Ngãi, one of the prefectures subsumed under Quảng Nam. Tư Ngãi itself comprised three counties: Bình Sơn, Mộ Hoa, and Nghiã Giang.²⁴ In 1604, Tư Ngãi underwent a name change to Quảng Ngãi. Quảng Ngãi contributed men to the Nguyễn army, and the record for the year 1632 indicates that the Nguyễn set up a drafting station in Quảng Ngãi itself.²⁵ Quảng Ngãi had six harbors at Chu Ô, Sa Kỳ, Tiểu, Đại Nham, Mỹ Á, and Sa Hùynh.²⁶ Of the six, only the one in Chu Ô was classified as “medium-deep,” while the others were classified as “shallow.”²⁷ In the early eighteenth century, Quảng Ngãi’s participation in the Nguyễn economic system was largely in the form of transportation of rice from the Mekong delta to Thuận Hóa, where the Nguyễn stationed the bulk of their army in defense against the Trịnh. The boats that Quảng Ngãi supplied towards this task were identifiable by their red-colored flags.²⁸ As demands for rice grew in Thuận Hóa, boat owners found the Nguyễn system of conscription increasingly burdensome and less lucrative in comparison with the profits to be made in private business. In 1714, the Nguyễn monetized their economy and paid for the services they required in exchange for establishing a taxation system on private shipping.²⁹ Quảng Ngãi benefited from this change and, besides gaining from its coastal shipping responsibilities, began to receive payment for the

²⁴ *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, entry for year 1570, p. 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, entry for year 1632, p. 49.

²⁶ Refer to the map of Quảng Ngãi, c. 1690, in Li Tana and Anthony Reid, eds., *Southern Vietnam under the Nguyễn: Documents on the Economic History of Cochinchina (Đàng Trong), 1602-1777* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), p. 51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁸ *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, entry for year 1700, p. 113.

²⁹ Monetization of the economy was to create disastrous fiscal problems for Đàng Trong in a few decades, since the supply of coins from China and Japan was shrinking. See Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998), p. 94-98.

human and horse labor used in relaying mail between stations.³⁰ In 1726, Nguyễn Cư Trinh's father, Nguyễn Đăng Đệ, toured all the provinces in Quảng Nam to determine the number of newly established settlements there. The dynastic chronicles report that Quảng Nam was experiencing a period of expansion with settlements sprouting “everywhere near the mountains and beside the coast.”³¹ From the numbers that Nguyễn Đăng Đệ collected, it is possible to establish a basic sense of the size of Quảng Ngãi in 1726: Quảng Ngãi had four counties (*thuộc*), and each county had at least five hundred people. Therefore, Quảng Ngãi had a population of at least two thousand people in 1726. This is a relatively small number compared to its surrounding prefectures. Quy Ninh, for example, had thirteen settlements and thus at least six thousand five hundred people, while Phú Yên was the largest with thirty-eight settlements made up of at least nineteen thousand people.³² Even though Quảng Ngãi was still listed as a prefecture under Quảng Nam in 1744, it had its own governor (*tuần phủ*) and inspector (*khám lý*).³³

Quảng Ngãi comprises a fairly slim strip of land wedged between the coast and the mountains. The region is home to many local ethnic groups, most notably the Đá Vách (Stone Wall) people who inhabited the mountains in the region. Trading between the lowlanders and the uplanders in the mountainous terrain of Quảng Ngãi took the form of exchange of upland goods such as precious woods, rattan, wax, honey, oxen, cinnamon, areca, and gold for lowland goods such as salt, fish sauce, dried fish, iron wares, and copper pots.³⁴ Because of the importance of

³⁰ *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, entry for year 1714, p. 131.

³¹ *Ibid.*, entry for year 1726, p. 140.

³² *Ibid.*, entry for year 1726, pp. 140-141.

³³ *Ibid.*, entry for year 1744, p. 153. The only other prefecture with separate administration is Quy Nhơn.

³⁴ Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, p. 122.

upland-lowland trade in Đàng Trong, early Nguyễn policies towards the uplanders had been one of peaceful co-existence.³⁵ From the late 1740s, however, possibly because of Nguyễn Phúc Khoát's lax policies, which did not punish Vietnamese officials who harassed the uplanders, the Đá Vách began to raid the lowland Vietnamese villages in Quảng Ngãi.³⁶ In 1750, Nguyễn Cư Trinh was appointed governor of Quảng Ngãi as part of the court's attempt to solve the problem of the Đá Vách people.

The fear for the continued stability of the Vietnamese inhabitation of Quảng Ngãi was not recorded in the chronicles. Quảng Ngãi was home to a fairly small Vietnamese population compared to its surrounding regions, but it was an important prefecture because its narrow lands strategically linked the northern and southern territories of Đàng Trong. Furthermore, the presence of a Vietnamese population in the lowlands of Quảng Ngãi was necessary for maintaining the security of the important coastal area. There are suggestions, moreover, that some members of the Việt lowland population might have found it more advantageous to move to the mountains to join the uplanders, perhaps as a reaction against the increasingly extractive policies of the Nguyễn government in the mid-eighteenth century.³⁷ It was probably this final problem that prompted Nguyễn Cư Trinh's civilizing mission in Quảng Ngãi.

³⁵ See Gerald Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands to 1954* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 144-189 for an account of pre-twentieth century Vietnamese-Highlander relations.

³⁶ Li Tana suggests that the deteriorating fiscal situation in mid-eighteenth century Đàng Trong might have affected the Nguyễn's ability to pay their officials. Vietnamese officials might have begun extracting revenues from the uplanders to make up for the shortfall, which could explain why the Nguyễn lord made no attempt to stop this practice.

³⁷ Nguyễn Cư Trinh suggests this in his 1751 petition to Nguyễn Phúc Khoát, which I will discuss in greater in Chapters One and Three.

An understanding of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s strategy for solving the problem in Quảng Ngãi helps us to better appreciate the nature of Vietnamese civilizing projects in eighteenth-century Đàng Trong. Nguyễn Cư Trinh composed a play in the vernacular Vietnamese language to be staged as public entertainment for the Vietnamese villagers of Quảng Ngãi. His biography records that he intended for the play to “answer [their fears] and advise [the people].”³⁸ My analysis of his play demonstrates that Nguyễn Cư Trinh employed it as a medium through which to instruct the Việt lowlanders on Confucian moral principles. In so doing, he strove to increase the civilizational distance between the uplanders and the lowlanders. Significantly, Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s play was not aimed at the Đá Vách people but at the ethnic Việt people of Đàng Trong, and particularly those who resided in Quảng Ngãi. The targets of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s civilizing project were not the *ethnic outsiders*, but the *Việt insiders* of Đàng Trong. Its aim was not to incorporate the outsiders into his domain, but was precisely the opposite; Nguyễn Cư Trinh tried to increase the civilizational distance between his people and the ethnic outsiders so as to prevent the Việt insiders from leaving the kingdom to join the uplanders, and thereby secure the borders of Đàng Trong. Although his civilizing project was conceived in Confucian terms of moral education, its goal was not to bring other ethnic groups into the Confucian civilized realm but to retain the insiders within circumscribed boundaries.

³⁸ The people of Quảng Ngãi supposedly considered the mountainous border to be “dangerous and remote, and unhealthy air in the mountains and woods hindered [them]” from advancing to fight the Đá Vách. See Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s biography in the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, p. 139. The problem of the Đá Vách has been narrated in the Vietnamese imperial records in such formulaic terms as to suggest that it might have been an imagined representation, rather than an actual account of the frontier inhabitants’ relationship with the environment. See Shin, *Making of the Chinese State*, pp. 20-55, for a study of Ming dynasty travelers’ real and imagined boundaries in Guangxi.

Mạc Thiên Tứ and the landscape of Hà Tiên

The Mạc family first settled in the region of Hà Tiên in 1671, after Mạc Thiên Tứ's father, Mạc Cửu (*Pinyin*: Mo Jiu, 鄭玖) fled the Manchu regime in China during the transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasty.³⁹ Originally from Leizhou in Guangdong, southern China, Mạc Cửu established himself as an *okñā*, a Cambodian official, under Khmer authority when he arrived in the region. Although the Mạc family is credited with establishing the port in that region, they were probably drawn to the area precisely because there already existed a lively trading community composed of Chinese, Khmer, Vietnamese, and Malay peoples.⁴⁰ Mạc Cửu built a city from those foundations, formed military units, and built guesthouses to attract traders from afar. His intention to stay permanently in his adopted region was demonstrated clearly when he sent for his aged mother, who relocated to her son's distant domain and lived out her last years in Hà Tiên. Through Mạc Cửu transformative efforts, the port of Hà Tiên grew daily in strength. Newly ensconced in a region located far from Manchu-controlled China, Mạc Cửu soon found out that he had fled the political chaos of his homeland only to be caught up in yet another unstable political situation. The success of the port in Hà Tiên drew the unwanted attention of the expanding Siamese state, and Mạc Cửu realized that his Cambodian overlords were too weak to protect him from the Siamese advances. In 1708, Mạc Cửu sought the protection of the Nguyễn lords of Đàng Trong and subordinated his ethnic Chinese realm to Vietnamese control.⁴¹

³⁹ At that time, the region was under Cambodian control and appears in historical records under different names, such as Ponthiamas or Ponteamas (to the Europeans), Cancao, or Candar (to the Chinese), and Peam (to the Khmer). See Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, p. 142, fn. 11.

⁴⁰ See Mạc Cửu's biography in the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, p. 173.

⁴¹ For more information about the consequences of Hà Tiên's subordination to the Nguyễn for Siamese-Vietnamese relations, see Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchia*, pp. 141-44.

Mạc Cửu died in 1735, leaving control of Hà Tiên to his son, Mạc Thiên Tứ.⁴² Mạc Thiên Tứ traveled to Huế to report to the Nguyễn lord, who granted him the title of Commander-in-Chief of Hà Tiên (*đô đốc*) and bestowed on him three ships with the Nguyễn insignia, which were not taxed. To facilitate trade in Hà Tiên, the Nguyễn lord established a facility there to mint coins. Mạc Thiên Tứ busied himself with building citadel walls, recruiting soldiers, widening roads, and expanding markets. A Chinese official traveling through the region in the 1740s noted with wonder the level of cultural advancement that Hà Tiên had attained. He recorded that:

The Kingdom of Gangkou [港口, i.e. Hà Tiên] is in the southwest seas. It is a dependency of Annam and Siam. The King's surname is Mo, and the current King's name is Tianxi [i.e. Mạc Thiên Tứ]. Information about its history and the succession of its rulers is unreliable. In the kingdom there are many lofty peaks. The area under its control extends only for a few hundred leagues. The fortress walls are made of wood. Its dwellings are no different from those in the Middle Kingdom; from the residence of the King on down, all use bricks and tiles. Their style of clothing is like that of the former dynasty. The king wears a net headgear and a gauze hat. For attire he dons a "python-robe" with a sash around his waist and boots for footwear. The people wear long robes and wide sleeves. When they are in mourning they wear all white. Normally though they dress in various colors. It is a land that is perpetually warm. It does not even become cold in autumn or winter. The men usually leave their upper bodies unclothed and wrap a cloth around their lower bodies. When they meet they place their hands together and raise them in greeting.

As for their customs, they value literature and are fond of the Classics. The kingdom has a Confucian temple and the king and the people all respectfully pay obeisance to it. There is also a public school where the brightest of the country's children are taught, even those who are too poor to pay. Han people who sojourn there and understand the meaning of sentences are invited to teach. The students are all refined.

The local products are sea goods, dried fish, small dried shrimps, and dried and seasoned beef.

⁴² See Figure 1, located at the end of this dissertation.

Since the seventh year of this dynasty's *yongzheng* reign [1729] commerce has been incessant. Passing the great ocean of the Seven Continents [the Paracels] ships reach Luwan mountain [Lantau], and then passing through Humen [the Bogue] they reach Guangdong. The journey is 7,200 *li*, and another 160 to Xiamen [Amoy] by sea.

Your servant respectfully notes, barbarians are restricted from the Central Efflorescence [China] by the seas. Gangkou and Jianpuzhai [Cambodia], being only 7,000 *li* from Guangdong, are the closest of the various barbarian kingdoms. I have observed that their dwellings, weddings, and divinations are all basically the same as those of the Central Kingdom. They have constructed a Temple of Literature and established a public school which has enabled all the kingdom's people to learn to read, thereby adhering themselves to the rites and teachings of the Central Efflorescence. This is because the way of the sages is great, as is this Sagely dynasty's spirit of transformation.⁴³

The Chinese official's glowing report of the state of affairs in Hà Tiên corroborates the Vietnamese records of Mạc Cửu's and Mạc Thiên Tứ's labors in Hà Tiên. The high level of education and culture in Hà Tiên was due undoubtedly to Mạc Thiên Tứ's efforts. Just a year after taking over control of Hà Tiên from his late father, Mạc Thiên Tứ launched an ambitious literary project. In 1736, together with a guest, Chen Zhikai, who traveled to Hà Tiên from Guangzhou, he composed ten poems in praise of ten scenic sites of Hà Tiên. Chen Zhikai then distributed copies of the ten poems to poets along the coast of the South China Sea on his way back to Guangzhou and solicited response poems from them. In all, thirty-one other poets composed poems in praise of the ten scenic sites in Hà Tiên. Many of them may never have seen Hà Tiên, but they sent their poems back to Mạc Thiên Tứ when the boats sailed again in the next season. Mạc Thiên Tứ compiled the three hundred and twenty poems as a collection that he claimed added to the "airs and odes" (*fengya*, 風雅) of Hà Tiên. Mạc Thiên Tứ's literary project

⁴³ These observations were recorded in 1747 in the Qing dynasty's *Huangchao wenxian tongkao* (皇朝文獻通考), scroll no. 297. Also printed in Gaspardone, "Un Chinois des Mers du Sud, le Fondateur de Hà Tiên," pp. 363-64. The above is Liam Kelley's translation of the text, which I have reproduced with some minor modifications. See Liam Kelley, "Thoughts on a Chinese Diaspora: The Case of the Mạc of Hà Tiên," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14, no. 1, pp. 80-82.

was aimed at civilizing his domain in a way that was perhaps even more ambitious than his and his father's projects of building markets, roads, and citadel walls had been. Whereas the building projects had tangible economic and defensive value, the poetry project could be considered a luxury indulged in for the sole purpose of elevating the cultural status of his domain. Notably, the target of his civilizing project was not the people in the kingdom, or the local people who lived in the areas surrounding his kingdom. It was, instead, the landscape of his domain, which he sought to bring to what he considered to be a higher civilizational plane. Mạc Thiên Tứ's civilizing project was, moreover, circumscribed in its geographical aims. His goal was to mark his domain as distinct from its surrounding environment, not to bring the surrounding regions into his civilized realm. Instead of civilizing Hà Tiên as part of a wider world defined by a distant center, Mạc Thiên Tứ's project sought to elevate Hà Tiên to the position of center. My analysis of Mạc Thiên Tứ's poems reveals the nature of the wider world against which Mạc Thiên Tứ set up his domain as a center.⁴⁴

Both Nguyễn Cư Trinh's and Mạc Thiên Tứ's civilizing projects exhibit characteristics of a process in which domains are defined in opposition to their less civilized surroundings. Whereas Nguyễn Cư Trinh's project sought to protect Đàng Trong's borders and territory by keeping the Vietnamese frontier inhabitants inside the circumscribed civilized realm, Mạc Thiên Tứ's project positioned his domain as the center of a larger realm that was not geographically contiguous with his domain. An understanding of their divergent civilizing projects enriches our conceptualization of the civilizing mission; these projects exhibit a variety of possible civilizing

⁴⁴ I will discuss the nature of this wider world in Chapter Four.

targets, and demonstrates the need to distinguish between political and cultural civilizing centers and to acknowledge the complex geopolitical position of peripheral regions.

Sources

To understand the two civilizing projects in eighteenth-century Đàng Trong and the personal and political relationships that connected their two civilizing agents, I examine some important literary works that Nguyễn Cư Trinh and Mạc Thiên Tứ produced on the frontier. In this dissertation, I perform a close reading of frontier literary texts to gain an understanding of the history of the Vietnamese southward expansion. My interpretation foregrounds the hopes, ideals, and ambitions of the frontier officials as they were expressed in their oftentimes deeply personal compositions. It builds on scholars' rich accounts of diverse aspects of southern Vietnamese society from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries; these accounts have been carefully constructed through the use of sources such as Vietnamese chronicles and imperial biographies, village and family historical records, privately written histories, land tenure and other economic records, missionary letters, and foreign traveler accounts.⁴⁵ Existing scholarship

⁴⁵ See, for example, the works of Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*; Keith Taylor, "Nguyễn Hoàng and the Beginning of Việt Nam's Southward Expansion," in *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Anthony Reid (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 42-85; "Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region," *Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 4 (November 1998), pp. 949-978; Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng (1820-1841): Central Policies and Local Response* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2004); George Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); and Nola Cooke, "Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Confucianization in Historical Perspective: Evidence from the Palace Examinations (1463-1883)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 25, no. 2 (September 1994), pp. 270-312; "Regionalism and the Nature of Nguyen rule in Seventeenth-Century Đàng Trong (Cochinchina)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 29, no. 1 (March 1998), pp. 122-161; "Southern Regionalism and the Composition of the Nguyen Ruling Elite, 1802-1882," *Asian Studies Review* 23, no. 2 (June 1999), pp. 205-231; "The Composition of the Nineteenth-Century Political Elite of Pre-Colonial Nguyen Vietnam (1802-1883)," *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no. 4 (October 1995), pp. 741-764; "The Myth of the Restoration: Đàng Trong Influences in the Spiritual Life of the Early Nguyen Dynasty (1802-47)," in *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies: Responses to Modernity in the Diverse States of Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750-1900*, ed. Anthony Reid (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 269-298; "Strange Brew: Global, Regional, and Local

has hitherto not used literary texts as the basis for understanding southern Vietnamese history, and it is my hope that my use of these richly textured sources will contribute a layer of lived experience to the existing accounts of the Vietnamese southward expansion.

Additionally, the literary sources that I use provides us with a glimpse of the cultural and political connections that existed between the southern Vietnamese coastal cities and other communities of the South China Sea trading world. There has been an increasing interest in studying the South China Sea and its regional ports as an integrated trading system.⁴⁶ Because the Vietnamese coastline was an integral part of this regional system, much of the scholarship produced has focused on Sino-Vietnamese networks and connections. Chinese and Vietnamese historical actors, however, have typically been represented as distinct groups. My study of the works of Nguyễn Cư Trinh and Mạc Thiên Tứ problematizes the distinction between “Chinese” and “Vietnamese” actors in the eighteenth century by highlighting the significant *cultural* overlap between the two groups of people. Moreover, a distinction based on *political* divisions proves similarly inadequate when applied to people such as Mạc Thiên Tứ, who have come to be affiliated with both China and Vietnam. I have found that the literature of the southern Vietnamese frontier provides a particularly rich source for studying the complicated relationship between Vietnamese and Chinese literati-officials; their compositions also demonstrate how Sino-Vietnamese literary and social relations were an integral part of the production of

Factors behind the 1690 Prohibition of Christian Practice in Nguyễn Cochinchina,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (September 2008), pp. 383-409.

⁴⁶ See, for example, the essays in the two collections: Nola Cooke and Li Tana, eds., *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880* ((Singapore: Singapore University Press and Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004); Nola Cooke, Li Tana, and James A. Anderson, eds., *The Tongking Gulf through History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). Additionally, see also the older but still very relevant work by Dian H. Murray, *Pirates of the South China Coast, 1790-1810* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

knowledge on the frontier. In particular, this dissertation focuses on three important works: a vernacular Vietnamese play, the *Sãi Vãi* (Monk and Nun), which Nguyễn Cư Trinh composed in Quảng Ngãi in 1750, a ten-poem suite dedicated to the landscape of Hà Tiên, which Mạc Thiên Tứ composed in 1736, and another ten-poem suite of responses to Mạc Thiên Tứ's original poems of Hà Tiên written by Nguyễn Cư Trinh sometime between 1754 and 1765.

Sãi Vãi by Nguyễn Cư Trinh

The *Sãi Vãi* is a work written in the vernacular Vietnamese script (*chữ Nôm*). In the preface to his French translation of the *Sãi Vãi* in 1886, A. Chéron gave it the dubious honor of being one of the most difficult *chữ Nôm* texts to translate because its “characters are not constant” and there are “easily two, or sometimes three, different meanings in a single passage.”⁴⁷ There have been at least seven transliterations of the *Sãi Vãi* in which the *chữ Nôm* text is rendered into the romanized Vietnamese script, *quốc ngữ*.⁴⁸ Until now, there has only been one translation of the *Sãi Vãi*, which is Chéron French translation from 1886. The popularity of the *Sãi Vãi* in the early twentieth century probably stemmed from the Vietnamese nationalistic desire to bring to the forefront literature that was composed in the “national language” as a counter to the larger corpus of literature composed in the Chinese script, *chữ Hán*. Of the *chữ*

⁴⁷ A. Chéron, trans., “Bonze et Bonzesse: Dialogue Annamite,” *Excursions et Reconnaissances* (Sài Gòn: Imprimerie Coloniale) XI, no. 25 (1886), p. 45.

⁴⁸ Two Vietnamese scholars, Lê Ngọc Trụ and Phạm Văn Luật, have compiled a “master transliteration” of the *Sãi Vãi* in *quốc ngữ* based on six *quốc ngữ* versions published between 1886 and 1932; their transliteration is informatively annotated. The six transliterations that they use are the works of: A. Chéron (1886), Lương Khắc Ninh, Nguyễn Khắc Huê, and Nguyễn Dư Hoài (1901), Cao Hải Đễ (1923), Trần Trọng Huê (1920), Trần Trung Viên (1932), and Dương Mạnh Huy (1932). See Lê Ngọc Trụ and Phạm Văn Luật, *Nguyễn Cư Trinh với Quyển Sãi Vãi*, reprinted in Vô Danh Thị [Nameless Clan], *Truyện Nhị Độ Mai & Nguyễn Cư Trinh với Quyển Sãi Vãi* (Paris: Institut de l'Asie du Sud-Est, 1984), pp. 57-59. There is at least one that *quốc ngữ* version that Lê Ngọc Trụ and Phạm Văn Luật did not take into consideration. This is *Sãi vãi luận đàm*, trans. Lê Duy Thiệu (Sài Gòn: Lưu Đức Phương Publishing House, 1929).

Nôm textual versions of the *Sãi Vãi*, only four survive.⁴⁹ Amongst all the transliterations that have been produced, there are only three works in which the transliterators conduct an analysis of the content of the text, or at least provide an explanation of its heritage, to accompany their transliterations of the *Sãi Vãi*.⁵⁰ These are the works of Lê Ngọc Trụ and Phạm Văn Luật, Nguyễn Văn Sâm, and Phan Hứa Thụy.⁵¹ While all three monographs offer some form of historical contextualization of the *Sãi Vãi*, they go to different lengths to analyze the text itself. Lê Ngọc Trụ and Phạm Văn Luật's analysis takes the form of a detailed annotation, but the annotation is restricted to an explanation of the terms that Nguyễn Cư Trinh used in the play. Nguyễn Văn Sâm's and Phan Hứa Thụy's works speculate about Nguyễn Cư Trinh's thought and belief system based on passages extracted from the *Sãi Vãi*. I argue, however, that their use

⁴⁹ Two of these can be found in the Viện Nghiên Cứu Nôm và Hán Việt [Institute for Research on Nôm and Sino-Vietnamese, also known as the Viện Hán Nôm]. They are undated, hand copied versions of the character text that are parts of larger compilations. One compilation is the *Quốc văn tùng kí* [Collected recordings of national literature, 國文叢記] by Hải Châu Tử (Viện Hán Nôm shelf no. AB.383, n.d.). It is a compilation of literary works by various authors including Trần Hưng Đạo, Chu Mạnh Trinh, and Hồ Xuân Hương, placed together in one volume because they are all written in *chữ Nôm*. The other compilation is *Ca văn thi phú thư truyện tạp biên* [A diverse compilation of songs, literature, poems, verses, letters, and stories, 歌文詩賦書傳雜編], compiler's name unknown (Viện Hán Nôm shelf no. VNV.520, n.d.). This is a collection of miscellaneous works on diverse topics such as an exhortation to study, a letter from a wife to her husband, and a dispute amongst domestic animals regarding the services that they render. The third is a hand-copied version published as an appendix in Nguyễn Văn Sâm, *Văn học Nam Hà: Văn học Đường Trong thời phân tranh* [Literature of the Southern Region: Literature of Đường Trong in the period of separation] (Sài Gòn: Phong Phú Publishing House, 1974). The author notes that it is a copy from his personal library. The final *chữ Nôm* version of the *Sãi Vãi* can be found in the Bibliothèque des Langues Orientales in Paris. It is a woodblock print publication dating to 1874. See *Sãi Vãi*, ed. Duy Minh Thị, (Guangdong: Golden Jade Publishing House, 1874). Because of the quality of the print and the presence of dating and publication information, this final version is the text on which I base my translation of the *Sãi Vãi*. I conduct checks with the other versions whenever necessary.

⁵⁰ Although Chéon does not provide an analysis of the *Sãi Vãi*, his French translation of the text is heavily and informatively annotated. I do not number his work amongst the three that conduct an analysis of the *Sãi Vãi*. According to an advertisement at the back of Dương Mạnh Huy's transliteration of the *Sãi Vãi* that was published in 1929 by the Tín Đức Thư Xã Publishing House, there was an accompanying analysis of the text, called *Sãi Vãi dẫn giải* [A guide and explanation to the *Sãi Vãi*]. I have not been able to locate this publication. Refer to Nguyễn Cư Trinh, *Câu Chuyện Sãi Vãi*, trans. Dương Mạnh Huy (Sài Gòn: Nhà In Tín Đức Thư Xã, 1929). This would have been the fourth published work containing an analysis of the *Sãi Vãi*.

⁵¹ See Lê Ngọc Trụ and Phạm Văn Luật, *Nguyễn Cư Trinh với Quyển Sãi Vãi*; Nguyễn Văn Sâm, *Văn Học Nam Hà: Văn Học Đường Trong thời Phân Tranh*; and Phan Hứa Thụy, *Thơ Văn Nguyễn Cư Trinh* [Poetic Literature of Nguyễn Cư Trinh] (Huế: Thuận Hóa Publishing House, 1989).

of the text lacks a systematic understanding of the *Sãi Vãi* in its totality; as such, passages from the *Sãi Vãi* that Nguyễn Văn Sâm and Phan Hứa Thụy used to support their arguments reveal themselves to have a very different meaning after careful contextualization. In my dissertation, I engage in a close and systematic textual study of the *Sãi Vãi*, which Nguyễn Cư Trinh composed for public entertainment in Quảng Ngãi. My purpose is to achieve a deeper understanding of the ideas of Nguyễn Cư Trinh, which reveals a version of political theory crafted specifically to accommodate the socio-political circumstances of the southern Vietnamese entity. Moreover, the *Sãi Vãi* is valuable as a record of frontier experience and it sheds light on a form of entertainment available to the eighteenth-century inhabitants of the frontier. Through a textual analysis of this play, I hope to further understand the intellectual and cultural nature of the civilizing project that Nguyễn Cư Trinh brought to the southern Vietnamese frontier, from the perspectives of both the author and the intended audience.

Ten Songs of Hà Tiên by Mạc Thiên Tứ

The *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* is a literary project that Mạc Thiên Tứ initiated, in which he composed ten poems about Hà Tiên and distributed copies of them to poets from afar in order to solicit response poetry. As the originator of the project, Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten poems on Hà Tiên are the most well known of all the landscape poems in the collection and they have captured the imagination of many. Few, however, have studied the ten-poem suite in its entirety.⁵² Đông Hồ is

⁵² See, for example, Chen Ching-he, "Kasen Tei shi no bungaku katsudo, tokuni Kasen jyuei ni tsuite" [On the Literary Works of the Mạc, Governor of Hà Tiên, with Special Reference to the Hà Tiên Thập Vinh]. Although he pays special attention to Mạc Thiên Tứ's literary project in this essay, he does not conduct an analysis of any of them. Another example is Kelley, "Thoughts on a Chinese Diaspora," pp. 71-98. Kelley translates and analyzes only the first and third of Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten poems.

the Vietnamese scholar who has most famously made a name for himself for his study of Mạc Thiên Tứ's *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*.⁵³ His scholarship aggressively appropriated Mạc Thiên Tứ's work as an important part of the Vietnamese literary heritage, whereas others, like Chen Ching-he, saw Mạc Thiên Tứ's literary project as an outgrowth of his desire to establish links to his hometown in Guangdong, China.⁵⁴ I seek instead to understand how landscape poems work as a medium through which to civilize a domain. In this dissertation, I dedicate a chapter to studying Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten poems in their entirety and in so doing have uncovered significant patterns and recurring motifs in his poems. The patterns and motifs reveal his cultural and political vision for his frontier domain of Hà Tiên. I base my reading of Mạc Thiên Tứ's poems on the hand-copied version of the *An Nam Hà Tiên Thập Vinh* (Ten Songs of Hà Tiên in An Nam) that was microfilmed by École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) in 1955.⁵⁵

Ten Songs of Hà Tiên by Nguyễn Cư Trinh (Written as a response to Mạc Thiên Tứ)

Few scholars have attempted to analyze Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poetic responses to Mạc Thiên Tứ's original ten poems of Hà Tiên. The little analysis that has been done comes in the form of translations of the poems, originally composed in Chinese, into the modern Vietnamese

⁵³ Đông Hồ, whose actual name is Lâm Trắc Chi, first published on the ten poems in 1926. Interestingly, he originally published poems that were composed in *chữ Nôm*. It was not until 1970 that he published the Chinese character versions of the poems. See Đông Hồ, *Văn Học Hà Tiên* [The Literature of Hà Tiên], (Hà Chí Minh City: Văn Nghệ Publishing House, 1999, originally published in 1970). Incidentally, this was published a year after Đông Hồ's death in 1969. The veracity of the *chữ Nôm* poems is undetermined, and I will not discuss the *chữ Nôm* versions of the poems in this dissertation except briefly in the conclusion, where I conceptualize a way in which to study them.

⁵⁴ Chen Ching-he, "On the Literary Works of the Mạc," p. 166.

⁵⁵ *An Nam Hà Tiên Thập Vinh* [Ten Songs of Hà Tiên in An Nam], (École Française d'Extrême-Orient [EFEO] microfilm A.441, no. 661, n.d.) Held in the Echols Collection of Cornell University.

language.⁵⁶ The translations into the modern Vietnamese language reveal the translator's interpretation of the original poems.⁵⁷ Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poems have never been studied with an adequate appreciation for the reason that they were originally composed, namely as responses to Mạc Thiên Tứ's poems. In my dissertation, I analyze all of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's response poems and juxtapose each one with the corresponding poem in Mạc Thiên Tứ's inaugural ten-poem suite. The juxtaposition reveals Nguyễn Cư Trinh's reaction to Mạc Thiên Tứ's civilizing project, and the poems themselves provide a precious record of the social and political interactions between two of the most educated men on Đàng Trong's frontiers in the eighteenth century. I base my reading of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poems on the version that was recorded by Lê Quý Đôn in his *Frontier Chronicles*, for which woodblock prints remain extant.

Clarifying Terms

My study focuses on what I repeatedly call “frontier regions,” “frontier provinces,” “the periphery,” and “peripheral lands.” The “frontier” has seen competition from terms such as “borderlands,” which rhetorically frees up the space for a better representation of the various actors who live on those lands.⁵⁸ Whenever I have used the fraught term *frontier*, I have chosen it

⁵⁶ See, for example, Lê Quý Đôn, *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* [Frontier Chronicles], part 2, trans. Nguyễn Khắc Thuần (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục Publishing House, 2008), pp. 69-87 and Phan Hứa Thụy, *Thơ Văn Nguyễn Cư Trinh* (Huế: Thuận Hóa Publishing House, 1989), pp. 104-119.

⁵⁷ The poems have not always been correctly interpreted, occasionally because the translators have tried to associate them to closely with the Vietnamese polity. To provide a small example, Nguyễn Cư Trinh referred to Guangzhou, the capital of the Chinese province Guangdong, in the last couplet of his second poem, but Phan Hứa Thụy understood the reference, through very tenuous logic, to mean the land of Đàng Trong extending southwards from the Hải Vân pass. See Phan Hứa Thụy, *Thơ Văn Nguyễn Cư Trinh*, p. 107.

⁵⁸ Leo Shin, for example, uses the term “borderlands” in order to describe places where “the reach of the state was limited by the presence of native chieftains.” Shin, *Making of the Chinese State*, p. 18. Stevan Harrell, on the other hand, chose to use the word “periphery”; one of the reasons for his choice is that it “reinforces the fact that [the peripheral peoples] are in this kind of mess” precisely because they are “far from the centers of institutional and

precisely because I wished to represent the Vietnamese point of view, as encapsulated in Nguyễn Cư Trinh's conceptualization of Quảng Ngãi's place in the Vietnamese kingdom. I have, moreover, used it to depict Mạc Thiên Tứ's domain in Hà Tiên because it draws out the complex position of Hà Tiên as an ethnic Chinese enclave situated on a marginal space, which the Vietnamese claimed as their own. Mạc Thiên Tứ himself had acknowledged Vietnamese suzerainty over Hà Tiên, effectively allowing Hà Tiên to be conceptualized as a part of the Vietnamese frontier. His ambitions for his domain, however, exceeded its position as a Vietnamese frontier province. The tensions that arose from the two conflicting geo-political conceptualizations of Hà Tiên will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Additionally, I have occasionally referred to the regions under study as the "southern frontier," which is conceptually different from the "southern Vietnamese frontier." The latter refers to the frontiers of the southern Vietnamese kingdom, Đàng Trong, in whichever direction they are located. As it happens, most of the frontiers lie to the south of the capital, thus allowing the two terms to be conflated. It is important to note, however, that the margins of the "southern frontier" and the "southern Vietnamese frontier" are not confined to the southern direction, but are located wherever there are borders with another polity or with groups of people considered external to the kingdom. The margin of Quảng Ngãi that was cause for worry, for example, was the western margin on the border with the mountain ranges. Hà Tiên, as another example, is located on the western margin of Vietnam's southern frontier, on the border with Cambodia. In lumping all the myriad places together as part of the "southern Vietnamese frontier," I risk conflating the individual histories of the separate regions into one homogenizing "frontier

economic power and of dense population concentrations." Harrell, "Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them," p. 3, fn. 2.

history.” The differences between the histories of Quảng Ngãi and Hà Tiên, for example, are instructive. Quảng Ngãi was part of Đàng Trong long before Hà Tiên, and is furthermore, located much closer to the center than is Hà Tiên. Categorizing both of these places as parts of the southern Vietnamese frontier, however, draws out their similarity, which is that they were conceptually imagined as peripheral places—culturally or geographically—distinct from the center of Đàng Trong.

Another set of terms that requires clarification pertains to the labels used to describe people and cultures in Đàng Trong’s realm, such as “Vietnamese,” “Chinese,” and “Sino-Vietnamese.” These terms necessarily create boundaries around groups of people and the cultures commonly associated with them. As a reaction against the nationalistic connotations inherent in the above categories, some have opted for “Việt,” “Han,” and “Han-Việt.” The latter group of terms nevertheless remains inadequate and, moreover, introduces an additional complication of ethnic associations. This has posed problems, especially on occasions when I have had to describe the shared cultural heritage of the Chinese and the Vietnamese or the ambiguous political spaces that straddle both realms. I have thus occasionally applied the inadequate terms “Chinese,” “Vietnamese,” and “Sino-Vietnamese” to much larger bodies of concepts, meanings, and identifications, and wherever possible have pointed out, through further elaboration, the complications associated with using such labels.

Organization

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first three chapters are devoted to a study of the *Sãi Vãi*, the vernacular Vietnamese language play composed by Nguyễn Cư Trinh in 1750. In Chapter One, I discuss the ways in which Nguyễn Cư Trinh used the public performance of the play to satirize errant power holders in society. His aim, however, was not for them to turn to the path of orthodoxy, about which he was equally critical. I take up the issue of orthodoxy in Chapter Two, where I describe Nguyễn Cư Trinh's challenge to the preeminence of conventional governing precepts and explore his invocation of a modified Confucian governing system suited to the conditions of frontier living. In Chapter Three, I investigate the presence of religious syncretism in Nguyễn Cư Trinh's proposal for a form of Buddhism adapted to the frontier. Through the first three chapters, I demonstrate how the *Sãi Vãi* performed, quite literally, Nguyễn Cư Trinh's civilizing project in Quảng Ngãi; moreover, the play reveals details of the literary and the prosaic life on the eighteenth-century frontier. Chapters Four and Five are devoted to the landscape poems in praise of Hà Tiên. In Chapter Four, I discuss Mạc Thiên Tứ's ambitious literary project for Hà Tiên and undertake a close analysis of his ten poems to discover the nature of his civilizing mission; in Chapter Five, I read Nguyễn Cư Trinh's responses beside Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten original poems, a juxtaposition that reveals the clash of two different civilizing visions.

Chapter One

Humor on the Frontier: Errant Power Holders and the Inadequacy of Orthodoxy

Nguyễn Cư Trinh carried out his civilizing project in Quảng Ngãi through a play that relied heavily on the use of humor. The *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện* notes that it was intended for a target audience in Quảng Ngãi, but the extensive way in which the play has been recorded and remembered suggests that its reach was much wider than that.¹ Nguyễn Cư Trinh would undoubtedly have circulated hand-copied transcripts to his contemporaries, as was common practice amongst the educated elite; it was possibly also memorized and recited by village storytellers, and very probably performed on stage for audiences ranging from the common villager to the king and his advisors in the central court. Because it was meant to be performed for Vietnamese insiders, the play was introspective in its attentiveness to Đàng Trong's societal problems and critical of weaknesses in contemporary governing philosophy and religious ideas. This is the first of three chapters in which I analyze the play, tracing its progression from start to finish. The present chapter confines itself to an examination of two aspects of social commentary contained within the play. The first is Nguyễn Cư Trinh's critique of errant power holders in society, and the second reveals the extent to which he considered orthodox religious and administrative models inadequate for the conditions of the frontier. To begin, I present a case for how humor was experienced on the southern Vietnamese frontier.

¹ As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, the play survives in the demotic script, *chữ Nôm*, in several private and published manuscripts. There are interesting textual variations in the various manuscripts. For instance, some words have been rendered using different *chữ Nôm* characters in the different manuscripts. This suggests that the manuscripts might have been recorded from oral renditions of the play, rather than copied from a standard scriptural source.

The Experience of Humor in Đàng Trong

The people of Đàng Trong were no strangers to the use of humor in public entertainment in politically sensitive situations on the expanding frontier region. Christoforo Borri, a Jesuit priest who lived in Đàng Trong from 1618-1622, published an account in 1631 of the kingdom of Cochinchina, in which he recounted a revealing anecdote that he dubbed “Mistaken Conversions.” Borri’s colleague, Father Francis Buzome, who had arrived in Cochinchina before Borri, knew that the interpreters of the chaplains of ships who had been there before him had converted several Cochinchinese to Christianity; the problem, according to Father Buzome, was that the converts might not actually have been aware of what they were agreeing to convert to. Father Buzome discovered this fact when he chanced upon a skit that was acted out in the public market place that featured an actor, in

... the habit of a Portuguese, brought in by way of ridicule, with a belly so artificially made, that a boy was hid in it; the player, before the audience, turn’d him out of his belly, and ask’d him, Whether he would go into the belly of the *Portuguese*? Using these words, *Con gnoo muon bau tlom laom Hoalaom chiam?* [*Con nhỏ muốn vào trong lòng Hoa Long chăng?*] That is, *Little boy, will you go into the belly of the Portuguese, or not?* The boy answered, *He would*: and then he put him in again, often repeating the same thing to divert the spectators.²

Father Buzome realized that this was the same phrase that the interpreters had used whenever they asked someone if they would like to be a Christian. He came to the conclusion that the

² Christoforo Borri, *An Account of Cochin-China*, republished in Olga Dror and Keith Taylor, *Views of Seventeenth-Century Vietnam: Christoforo Borri on Cochinchina and Samuel Baron on Tonkin* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2006), p. 139. In the quotation above, the modern transcription in square brackets is Dror’s. Originally written in Italian, the English translation of Borri’s account dates to 1704. For more information about the translation of this text into various languages, see to Dror and Taylor, *Views of Seventeenth-Century Vietnam*, p. 64.

Cochinchinese had mistakenly thought that they were being asked whether they would “cease being *Cochin-Chinese*, and become a *Portuguese*,” and so were making fun of the conversion process by making a child go into the belly of the actor who was playing a Portuguese man. Borri recorded that Father Buzome rectified this problem quickly by instructing the newly converted on the significance of baptism and being a Christian, and making sure that the interpreters changed their question to “*Muon bau dau Christiam Chiam?* [*Muón vào đạo Christian chǎng?*] That is, *Will you enter into the Christian law, or no?*” Borri assured his readers that “within a few days,” Father Buzome was successful in converting more people as well as in “the reformation of those who before were Christians only in name.”³

From the above anecdote, it appears that both Borri and Buzome thought that the Việt inhabitants of Đàng Trong made fun of the conversion process only because the Việt inhabitants did not understand what they were being asked to do; the two Jesuit fathers assumed that the public performance mocking the Portuguese priest made fun not of the act of conversion to Christianity but of the ridiculousness of asking a person to switch from being Cochinchinese to being Portuguese. The interpreters that Father Buzome referred to were probably using the word “*lòng*” in the context of the compound word “*lòng tin*,” meaning “faith”; the question asked of potential converts was most probably, “Will you enter into the Portuguese faith (*lòng tin*)?” The Cochinchinese, in their publicly staged mockery, had the stage character contract the word “*lòng tin*” so that it became only “*lòng*”; taken literally, the Portuguese character on stage would be asking the Cochinchinese person if he would like to enter the Portuguese gut (*lòng*), hence the act with the child repeatedly entering the actor’s fake belly. Even though Fathers Borri and

³ Ibid., p. 140. Modern Vietnamese transcription is Dror’s.

Buzome understood the literal meaning of the sentence, they appear to have reached the wrong conclusion that the question asked of potential converts was whether they would stop being Cochinchinese in order to become Portuguese.

Borri's account of the episode presents the object of ridicule as the heavily caricatured Portuguese man, with whom Borri and Buzome identified. Even though his account leads one to suspect that the two Jesuits did not identify the malapropism at that time, the creators of the little skit, in having the Portuguese character confuse the words "*lòng*" and "*lòng tin*," were indeed making a joke at the expense of an outsider's poor mastery of the local language. Borri and Buzome did not seem to adequately consider, however, that the Cochinchinese convert might have been under as much, if not more, ridicule than the Portuguese man. The local convert was represented using a small child while the Portuguese man had a very large presence on stage. The unbalanced visual representation highlighted the paternalistic relationship that the foreign priest had with the infantilized new convert. Moreover, the child did not have much of a role to play in the performance except to agree readily and repeatedly to an absurd request, creating an exaggerated impression of simple-mindedness. Much more than ridiculing the Portuguese priests, the play can be understood as a mockery of newly converted Christians in Đàng Trong.

The details of how this skit came to be staged, whether it was commissioned, and who the actors were are unknown to us. Borri's fortuitous inclusion of this anecdote in his account of Cochinchina, however, allows us knowledge of what some people of Đàng Trong in the early seventeenth century thought of Portuguese priests and newly converted Việt Christians. Borri gives his readers the impression that the number of converted was insignificant, but the existence

of the skit suggests that the conversion process left an impression on Đàng Trong's inhabitants. The skit parodying the conversion process could have been a way of dealing with a foreign experience: Việt inhabitants of Đàng Trong, in theatrically performing the foreign role, were familiarizing the foreign and giving themselves language and expression to encompass the foreign experience of religious conversion into their daily lives. Even more powerful than that, the fact that the skit was humorous at the expense of the foreigner would have given the local unconverted Việt inhabitant of Đàng Trong a sense of superiority and control over the foreigner; "foreigner" in this case came in the guises of both the priest from another land and the newly converted local Việt inhabitant of Đàng Trong.

Borri's anecdote reveals that the experience of humor in Đàng Trong was a fairly elaborate affair: the play was performed in a public market place and the actors armed with costumes imitating Portuguese dress, complete with a huge fake belly. It was in all likelihood a small-scale production made for mass consumption. Performances of this nature were probably one form of entertainment regularly available to the population of Đàng Trong. Jean Koffler, a missionary who lived in Vietnam from 1740-1755, wrote an account of Cochinchina in 1766 that was later edited and published in 1803.⁴ Because he was a royal doctor in the court of Nguyễn Phúc Khoát from 1747 to 1753, his account of Đàng Trong comes from a vastly different vantage point from Borri's.⁵ In his chapter "Of the Court and Royal Entertainment," Koffler related the importance of humor in royal entertainment:

⁴ Koffler wrote his account of Cochinchina while he was in prison in Lisbon. It was later published by Anselm d'Eckart and reprinted by Christophore Théophile de Murr in 1803. I refer to V. Barbier's 1911 French translation of this work as published in the *Revue Indochinoise*.

⁵ Koffler remained in Cochinchina in the capacity of royal doctor after most of the other missionaries were ejected from the kingdom in 1750.

There is no lack of comedians; they are divided into four troupes and on fixed days each year or whenever it pleases His Majesty, they act out dramas in which the subject is drawn from the most remarkable stories and they strive to imitate the stage acting of our best actors in Europe.⁶

Koffler's statement about the quantity of comedians, the frequency of performances, and the fact that he did not highlight any other form of drama besides the humorous tells us that comedians had a strong presence in entertainment for Đàng Trong's royal circle. Koffler's elevated position in Đàng Trong, being part of the royal entourage, does not allow us much more information about the frequency of this form of entertainment for the public audience. Taking Borri's account from the seventeenth century and Koffler's account from the eighteenth century together, however, light-hearted entertainment appears to have constituted an important part of staged performances in both royal and public entertainment in Đàng Trong.

Reading Satire: An Introduction to the Sãi Vãi

Most of the transcripts or notes from these plays, if they ever existed, are invisible in surviving historical records; we do not know much more about the subjects that were treated and details of performance. An important play from the mid-eighteenth century, however, has survived. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's *Sãi Vãi* (Monk and Nun) was written in the year 1750 while he was governor of Quảng Ngãi prefecture. The *Đại Nam Thực Lục* records that in the second month of

⁶ Jean Koffler, "Description Historique de la Cochinchine," *Revue Indochinoise* XVI, no. 9 (Sep 1911), p. 277. English translation my own. The text in French: "Les comédiens ne manquent pas; ils sont divisés en quatre troupes et aux jour fixés chaque année ou quand il plait à S.M. [Sa Majesté], ils jouent des drames dont le sujet est tiré des histoires les plus remarquables et s'efforcent d'imiter le jeu scénique de nos meilleurs acteurs d'Europe." This statement dates to the turn of the nineteenth century, which makes it an early example of the transition from "comedians" to "acteurs" as terms of reference for members of the acting profession. I translate "comédiens" as "comedians" instead of "actors" because Koffler uses "acteurs" in the same sentence to refer to actors in general; I understand "comedians" here as lighthearted entertainers.

1750, during the spring season, Nguyễn Phúc Khoát appointed Nguyễn Cư Trinh to be the governor of Quảng Ngãi. The edict states:

[If] minor officials are covetous, you have to investigate and put [them] straight; [if] village bullies trespass and rob, you have to prevent and eradicate [the problem]; [if] verdicts and prison terms are undecided, you must judge [the cases] to display reason clearly; [if] the number of inhabitants is insufficient, you must make [the place] prosper; [if] the people are stubborn, you must educate [them]; [if there are] cheats, robbers, and thieves, you must capture and bring [them] under control. In all, the state of affairs of the army and the plight and suffering of the people [I] hand to you to take appropriate action. Want only success; do not fear exhaustion.⁷

Nguyễn Cư Trinh was sent to Quảng Ngãi because of raids by the Đá Vách (Stone Wall) uplanders on the Việt lowlanders of the region. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's biography in the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện* states that he tried to reason with the Mọi Đá Vách to no avail; he was also unable to persuade the Việt inhabitants of Quảng Ngãi to advance and fight them for they feared the dangers involved. Nguyễn Cư Trinh responded by composing the *Sãi Vãi* in order to encourage the Việt frontier inhabitants to rise to the challenge.⁸

The *Sãi Vãi* is a play that depicts a lascivious conversation between a monk and a nun. It comprises 274 lines of rhyming couplets. In 1951, two Vietnamese scholars, Lê Ngọc Trục and Phạm Văn Luật, undertook to compile a standardized transcription of the *Sãi Vãi* out of six existing transcriptions that had been produced in the romanized Vietnamese alphabet, *quốc ngữ*, between 1885 and 1932. Although the play was originally produced in 1750 in the vernacular

⁷ Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn [Nguyễn Dynasty Historical Institute], *Đại Nam Thực Lục* [Veritable Records of the Great South], ed. Đào Duy Anh, trans. Nguyễn Ngọc Tinh, vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục Publishing House, 2002), entry for year 1750, p. 155.

⁸ Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn [Nguyễn Dynasty Historical Institute], *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên* [Biographies of the Great South, Premier Section], ed. Hoa Bằng, trans. Đô Mộng Khương (Huế: Thuận Hoá Publishing House, 1993), p. 139.

Vietnamese character script, *chữ Nôm*, it unclear whether Lê Ngọc Trục and Phạm Văn Luật relied on any *chữ Nôm* text. Lê Ngọc Trục and Phạm Văn Luật proposed a systematic rhyme scheme for the work that follows two main rules: the first concerns the syllabic count of the couplets, and the second concerns the rhyming pattern.⁹ The structure of the syllabic count works such that the first part of the couplet has the same number of syllables as the second part. The couplets in the entire satire, however, do not have a constant number of syllables, nor do they follow any consistent sequential structure in terms of syllabic count. In terms of a rhyming pattern, the last syllable of the second part of a couplet rhymes with the last syllable of the first part of the next couplet. See, for example, the following lines:

*Mới tụng kinh vừa xuống, nghe tiếng khánh giống lên.
Ngõ là chuông vua Hạ Võ chiêu hiên; ngõ là đạc đức Trọng Nhi thiết giao.
Sãi yêu vì đao, sãi dẫu vì duon.
Thấy mù vãi nhan sắc có hơn; sãi theo với tu hành kẻo thiết.¹⁰*

The first couplet has five syllables in each part, the second has eight syllables in each part, the third has four in each part, and the fourth has seven in each part. The rhyming pattern works such that “lên” rhymes with “hiên,” “giao” rhymes with “đạo,” and “duon” rhymes with “hơn.”

Lê Ngọc Trục and Phạm Văn Luật used this rhyme scheme to compile their standardized version. To make the transcriptions fit this proposed rhyme scheme, the authors had to modify, sometimes quite drastically, the original transcriptions. They claimed to have been able to make

⁹ See Lê Ngọc Trục and Phạm Văn Luật, *Nguyễn Cư Trinh với Quyển Sãi Vãi*, reprinted in Vô Danh Thị [Nameless Clan], *Truyện Nhị Độ Mai & Nguyễn Cư Trinh với Quyển Sãi Vãi* (Paris: Institut de l'Asie du Sud-Est, 1984), pp. 60-62.

¹⁰ I take these four lines from the transcription compiled by Lê Ngọc Trục and Phạm Văn Luật, *Nguyễn Cư Trinh với Quyển Sãi Vãi*, p. 69.

such decisions because it was impossible to identify an original version.¹¹ Comparing the four lines in the example given above to the lines that I transcribed from a *chữ Nôm* character text, which incidentally is not an exact match to any of the six transcriptions that the two authors worked on, the difference is as follows:

*Mới tụng kinh **rôi** vừa xuống, nghe tiếng khánh gióng lên;
Ngõ là chuông vua Hạ Võ chiêu hiền; ngõ là [X] đức Trọng Nhi **đạc** giao.
Sãi yêu vì đạo, sãi dẫu vì **duyên**.
Thấy mụ vãi ví nhan sắc có hơn, sãi theo với tu hành kẻo thiệt.¹²*

These four lines from the text on which I am working do not conform strictly to the rhyme scheme that Lê Ngọc Trụ and Phạm Văn Luật proposed. The words that are highlighted in bold type font are the places that differ from Lê Ngọc Trụ and Phạm Văn Luật's standardized transcription. "X" represents a character that is not in my transcription but present in theirs. In their compilation, the two authors dropped or added characters, and modified others, based on the variations that occur between the six transcriptions that form the basis of their standardized version. Instead of modifying my transcription to fit the rhyme scheme that the two authors have proposed, I keep a strict adherence to the *chữ Nôm* character text on which I am working.

The *Sãi Vãi* dealt with important topics relevant to the prefectural and larger political context through literary devices such as double entendres, exaggeration, juxtaposition, and parody. Like the performance that Father Buzome witnessed in which the actor dressed as a Portuguese man controlled the action on stage while the small Cochinchinese child performed

¹¹ Ibid., p. 59.

¹² My transcription and translation of the *Sãi Vãi* is based on the woodblock printed text edited by Duy Minh Thị (Uniquely Ming Clan) in Gia Định, published by the Kim Ngọc Lâu (*Pinyin*: Jin Yu Lou, 金玉樓, Golden Jade House) in Guangdong in the autumn of 1874. It can be found in the Bibliotheque de Langues Orientales in Paris.

the role of an important accessory, the monk in the *Sāi Vāi* is the protagonist and the nun interrupts his speeches to shift the monk's monologues from one topic to another. I cautiously refer to the *Sāi Vāi* as an example of a satirical work from mid-eighteenth century Vietnam. Satire is a term that has its own intellectual and creative genealogy, typically traced to Roman and sometimes Greek origins. When I refer to the *Sāi Vāi* as a satire, I refer to it only in the sense that it is a play that makes a social critique through humor-producing literary devices, many of which happen to be similar to the devices used in satires of European origin; I do not claim any direct influence from those works typically associated with the genre of satire. There is a striking similarity, in fact, between the *Sāi Vāi* and the non-musical entertainments that Stephen West and Wilt Idema describe as Song dynasty “variety show” (Song *zaju*) and Jin dynasty “performers’ texts” (*yuanben*). The “farces and comical skits” associated with these genres

... employed an ensemble or small troupe of actors. These farces were popular both on the urban stage and in the imperial court where the two core role types of the ensemble—the butt (*fujing*) and the jester (*fumo*)—were a staple of court events organized around banquets, poetic competitions, and other social activities. These dramatic entertainments excelled in the use of jokes, cleverly rhymed poetry, and slapstick comedy.¹³

Although the *Sāi Vāi* was produced in the eighteenth century, it fits this description well. It was composed in poetic meter, has slapstick elements, and clever jokes and puns; the monk performs the role of the jester while the nun takes the role of the butt. It is plausible that Vietnam could have shared in the development of the Song *zaju* and Jin *yuanben*.¹⁴ This genre merged with

¹³ Stephen West and Wilt Idema, *Monks, Bandits, Lovers, and Immortals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2010), p. x. Transcriptions in italics represent Chinese, not Vietnamese, pronunciations.

¹⁴ Sino-Vietnamese interactions in this time period include the episode where several hundred Song dynasty officials chose to seek refuge in Annam rather than serve the Mongols. Refer to Chan Hok-Lam, “Chinese Refugees in Annam and Champa at the End of the Sung Dynasty,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 7, no. 2 (Sep 1996), pp. 1-10.

others in Northern China to form new ones by the mid-thirteenth century, but it could have survived in a less modified form in Vietnam to result eventually in the creation of the *Sãi Vãi*.¹⁵ It is as likely that the influence, if any, could have come from the author of the *Sãi Vãi* reading texts that remain from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Moreover, a work like the *Sãi Vãi* could plausibly have arisen organically out of any society that had people with the level of erudition required to compose it.¹⁶ Regardless of these possible creative genealogies, it is clear that the *Sãi Vãi* follows in the tradition of humorous responses to politically sensitive situations in Vietnam, such as the public entertainment that Father Buzome witnessed in Hôi An sometime between 1616 and 1617.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh was proficient in both the vernacular script, *chữ Nôm*, and the Sino-Vietnamese script, *chữ Hán*, but chose to compose the play in the vernacular probably because the vernacular allowed for the largest audience base.¹⁷ The transcript of the play was probably

¹⁵ West and Idema discussed how Song *zaju* and Jin *yuanben* merged with the “all keys and modes” (*zhugongdiao*) in mid-thirteenth century Northern China to create new genres that retained parts of the original ones. Refer to West and Idema, *Monks, Bandits, Lovers, and Immortals*, p. x.

¹⁶ Around the same time that the *Sãi Vãi* was composed, *The Scholars* (*Rulinwaishi*, 儒林外史) was completed in Qing China. Both were written in the vernacular and there exist similarities in some themes discussed, but the literary forms of the two compositions differ significantly. The *Sãi Vãi* was composed in poetic meter while *The Scholars* was in prose form; *The Scholars* has been described as a novel or at least “a series of tenuously linked stories” whereas, in written form, the *Sãi Vãi* is a script of a play. One of the ways in which *The Scholars* and the *Sãi Vãi* share commonalities, however, is the way in which both are works of satire that incorporate the author’s “vision.” In *The Scholars*, this is a moral vision; in the *Sãi Vãi*, it is a political and cultural vision. Refer to C.T. Hsia, foreword to *The Scholars*, by Wu Ching-Tzu, trans. Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. xii.

¹⁷ In studies of humor on the American Southern frontier, the use of the vernacular dialect itself has been identified as a humor-device because speaking in the vernacular lends the characters naïve or gullible natures and the audience is able to laugh at the characters. The hackneyed vernacular is contrasted against higher forms of the English language. Refer to Bobby J. Chamberlain, “Frontier Humor in *Huckleberry Finn* and Caravallho’s *O Coronel e o Lobisomem*,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1984), p. 203. The vernacular in Vietnamese literature does not necessarily carry such connotations. The contrast is not between hackneyed and higher forms of Vietnamese; instead, the contrast is between two different languages, the vernacular Vietnamese that was used by the majority of the people including kings, and classical Chinese that was used in official correspondences and some literary works.

circulated among the author's contemporaries, and it would not be surprising if the play had also been performed in the king's court. The members of the audience, depending on their educational background, would have had varying degrees of comprehension of the depth of critique in the play. The play is contextualized in Quảng Ngãi only in its final section where Nguyễn Cư Trinh referred to the problem of the Đá Vách. Without specifying a particular location at the start of the play, Nguyễn Cư Trinh could put forward critiques that were relevant to the people of the wider Đàng Trong world and yet hide under a cover of ambiguity; since the play was eventually situated in a particular prefecture, the author could deny any intention of criticizing anyone of more significance than the inhabitants of Quảng Ngãi. The *Sãi Vãi* contains a social commentary of mid-eighteenth century Đàng Trong on two levels. On one level, it was a critique of errant power holders in society; on another level, it was the medium through which Nguyễn Cư Trinh pointed out the inadequacy of orthodox religious and administrative models.

The two groups of Đàng Trong elite that came under heavy criticism in the *Sãi Vãi* were the religious men, also known as *ông sãi*, and the state-appointed literati-officials. The *ông sãi* derived their influence and social status from several avenues, many of which were outside state control, while the literati-officials drew their authority from positions that were extensions of the power of the central state. As the most extreme example of the status of the Buddhist clergy, Koffler remarked that “the bonze who governed the royal monastery [...] enjoyed very great authority and was the only person in all the kingdom who did not prostrate himself before the king, as custom required.”¹⁸ Monks functioned to enable the laity to participate in religion itself

¹⁸ Koffler, “Description Historique de la Cochinchine,” *Revue Indochinoise* XVI, no. 12 (Dec 1911), p. 595. “le bonze qui gouverne le monastère royal ... jouit d’une très grande autorité et est le seule de tout le royaume qui ne se prosterne pas devant le roi, ainsi que le veut la coutume.”

by keeping temples and receiving their alms. They also performed social roles such as healing the sick and educating children. Their social status and influence originated outside of monarchical authority.

The source of authority of the literati-officials, on the other hand, was the central court. Koffler described two groups of mandarins in the king's service: "civil mandarins," comprising people drawn from the larger population pool, and "military mandarins," typically relatives of the king.¹⁹ There were three ranks of "civil mandarins": the first was the chief of government, who was the personal advisor of the king, in the second were high-ranking officials such as provincial secretaries and magistrates, and the third comprised of a large number of people including local officials and "satraps of the provinces."²⁰ "Civil mandarins," also known as literati-officials, may have derived their status from positions bestowed upon them by the king, but the central court was undoubtedly heavily reliant on them to exercise central authority. The caliber of these men, however, might have been suspect. An entry in the *Đại Nam Thực Lục* from the year 1632 records that whenever the government conducted a draft of soldiers, there would also be a day-long examination for students. Students who passed the examination were sent to staff the ministries, and if there were insufficient numbers of suitably educated candidates,

¹⁹ Koffler, "Description Historique de la Cochinchine," *Revue Indochinoise* XVI, no. 9 (Sep 1911), p 281. "Les plus nobles sont les mandarins militaires parce que ce sont pour la plupart des fils de mandarins qui sont admis dans le mandrinat militaire. Les mandarins civils sont, au contraire, généralement des gens, qui sortis du peuple, arrivent à ces hautes fonctions."

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 281-282. Koffler's use of the term "satrapes des provinces" is interesting. It is used beside "les mandarin locaux," suggesting a distinction between officials sent by the court (les mandarin locaux) and power holders with connections to the locality, such as members of non-Việt ethnic groups who had been co-opted into the Vietnamese bureaucracy.

anyone familiar with taxation would be promoted to fill the vacancies.²¹ Nguyễn Cư Trinh dedicated the first three out of a total of seven sections in the *Sāi Vāi* to a commentary of the excesses of Buddhist monks and the inadequacy of the literati-officials in Đàng Trong.

Misbehaving Monks and the Inherent Worldliness of Buddhism

The *Sāi Vāi* opens with a scene in which a monk, who has just finished reciting the scriptures, spies a beautiful nun who has “beauty beyond measure”; she has “eyebrows like willows and cheeks like peaches” and “eyes like stars and skin like snow.”²² He addresses her, telling her that upon casting eyes on her, he “heard the sound of a stone gong beating,” a reference to his heart beating with desire for her, but, rather piously, he initially mistook it for the sound of “Emperor Hạng Võ’s²³ bell summoning the sages” or “virtuous Confucius ringing a bell, calling his students.”²⁴ The monk attempts to persuade the nun to return to his chamber with him, telling her that a religious life could be led together with an appreciation of sexual pleasures. He says:

I love that which constitutes the way;
I also [love] that which constitutes beauty.²⁵

37

And,

²¹ *Đại Nam Thực Lục* vol. 1, entry for year 1632, p. 49.

²² *Sāi Vāi*, lines 38 and 40. Translation my own. In numbering the lines in my translation, I follow Lê Ngọc Trụ and Phạm Văn Luật’s numbering system in their standardized transcription for ease of cross-reference. The first line in my text is line 35 in their transcription.

²³ Emperor Yu of Xia, founder of Xia dynasty.

²⁴ *Sāi Vāi*, lines 35b and 36.

²⁵ The numbers on the right refer to the position of the couplet in the numerical sequence of the satire.

The human heart might be desirous,
[but] the time for the way is also near.

41

Nguyễn Cư Trinh takes up the theme of combining religious and worldly desires in this section of the satire. Here, the “sound of a stone gong beating” was at once the sound of a man’s heart beating with desire for a woman, and a sound that inspired religious thoughts: Emperor Hạ Võ welcoming the sages and Confucius calling his disciples to study. He emphasized this theme again in a powerful pun captured in the compound word “*phương trượng*” (方丈):

The passage to the Western Paradise
is still obstructed by mountains and spirits;
Behind, in the monk’s room (*phương trượng*),
[however], has been prepared a Buddhist altar.

42

“*Phương trượng*” is a monk’s room in a temple;²⁶ it also means the “isle of bliss,” which is the Western Paradise referred to earlier in the couplet.²⁷ The word “*phương trượng*” allowed the monk to audaciously refer to his earthly chamber as the heavenly paradise of enlightenment! In the lines that immediately follow, the monk describes his luxurious accommodations, in which can be found “bamboo blinds” and “coarse curtains” for privacy, “a blanket of eight silk” and “a fan of *phu* leaf” for when the weather is either cold or warm, a “sedge mat [that] is varnished smooth like grease,” “tobacco [that] has the scent of fragrant *ngâu* blossoms,” “rice wine [that has the color of] red chrysanthemums,” and “tea [that] has an everlasting fragrance that lingers in the air.”²⁸ All this he does in an attempt to tempt the nun into entering his “small back room”

²⁶ Bùi Phụng, *Từ điển Việt-Anh* [Vietnamese-English Dictionary] (Hà Nội: Thế Giới Publishing House, 2000), p. 1574; L.M. An-tôn Trần Văn Kiệm, *Giúp Đọc Nôm và Hán Việt* [An Aid for Reading Nôm and Hán Việt] (Đà Nẵng: Đà Nẵng Publishing House, 2004), p. 681.

²⁷ Robert Henry Matthews, *Matthews’ Chinese-English Dictionary* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), entry 200 (a) 8; Trần Văn Kiệm, *Giúp Đọc Nôm và Hán Việt*, p. 681.

²⁸ *Sãi Vãi*, lines 43-46.

with him to “cultivate incessantly, cultivate to exhaustion.”²⁹ The message that the monk has for the nun is that striving to attain enlightenment was too difficult; it would, however, be easier and still profitable for her to cultivate religion in his personal chamber since there was a Buddhist altar there!

Besides serving the purpose of delivering bawdy humor in a delightfully delicate manner, the monk’s preference for a form of religious cultivation that focused on present circumstances instead of rebirth in the Western Paradise echoes Buddhist debates that split the two main Mahayana schools in East Asia: the Pure Land school and the *Thiền* (Zen) Buddhist school.³⁰ One of the doctrinal differences between the two schools lies in the goal of cultivation. Whereas Pure Land sects believe in calling on the Buddha’s name to attain rebirth in the Pure Land Paradise, or Western Paradise, a place where one is then rid of suffering and able to attain enlightenment far more easily, *Thiền* Buddhist sects preach a focus on the paradise that is within the self. *Thiền* Buddhist ideology believes that enlightenment can be found in the performance of everyday activities instead of a place far removed from prosaic life. To focus the attention of the audience on this central issue, this section of the play is littered with words that give rise to the imagery of birth and rebirth:

²⁹ *Sãi Vãi*, line 48.

³⁰ The debate took place mainly at an intellectual level. In the common practice of Buddhism in Vietnam, influences from these two schools were harmonized and practiced without much contradiction. For more information on the history of Buddhism in Vietnam, refer to Nguyễn Tài Thư, Hoàng Thị Thơ et al., *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, 2008); Charles Wheeler, “Buddhism in the Re-ordering of an Early Modern World: Chinese Missions to Cochinchina in the Seventeenth Century,” *Journal of Global History* 2, no. 3 (Nov 2007), pp. 303-24; Nguyen Tu Cuong, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thiền Uyển Tập Anh* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997); and Thich Thien-An, *Buddhism and Zen in Vietnam in Relation to the Development of Buddhism in Asia*, edited, annotated, and developed by Carol Smith (Los Angeles: College of Oriental Studies, Graduate School, 1975).

There are things, there are fittings;	47
There is you, there is me. ³¹	
The small back room is also near here;	48
Enter with me to cultivate incessantly, cultivate to exhaustion. ³²	

Words such as “*sản*” (產) and “*hoài*” (怀), *Nôm* characters that I have translated as “there is/are” and “incessantly,” are at the same time *Hán* characters that mean “to bear offspring” and “to carry in the bosom,” which are reminiscent of a motherly embrace.³³ The character “*hủy*” (毀) that I translated as “to exhaust” is also “to destruct,” a word that creates the imagery of death and destruction, a condition for rebirth.³⁴

Nguyễn Cư Trinh cleverly corrupted a Buddhist doctrinal debate concerning the method and goal of cultivation to express his criticism of the corrupted practice of Buddhism in Đàng Trong. Significantly, Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s monk is able to use religious terminology to disguise his indulgence in sexual pleasures. The beating of the sexually desirous heart becomes the sound of religious bells; the blurring of boundaries captured in the word “*phương trượng*” gives Nguyễn Cư Trinh literary license to highlight how misbehaving clergymen hid under the cover of religiosity to conceal and even justify their misdeeds.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s theme of a misbehaving monk was one with which the audience would have found some resonance. Such behavior was, indeed, prevalent enough that Catholic

³¹ “*Sản đồ sản đạc, sản vãi sản thầy.*”

³² “*Liêu sau cũng gản đây, vào cùng sãi tu hoài tu hủy.*”

³³ *Nôm* character definitions found in Trần Văn Kiệm, *Giúp Đọc Nôm và Hán Việt*, pp. 722 and 457 respectively; *Hán* character definitions found in *Matthews’ Chinese-English Dictionary*, entries 163 and 2233 respectively.

³⁴ *Matthews’ Chinese-English Dictionary*, entry 2327.

missionaries writing from Cochinchina in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries noted with disdain the licentiousness of religious men and women there.³⁵ Koffler recorded in his account that Cochinchinese monks “boast of keeping perpetual chastity, nevertheless, it is truer to say that all, down to the last, are licentious.”³⁶ The idea of a lascivious conversation between a monk and a nun would have appeared familiar to the audience and would probably have appealed to them for comic effect. It should be clarified, however, that there were many different men in society who could have been referred to by the title “*sāi*”; not all of them had to be celibate. Borri, in his account of the conversion of a *sāi* named Lý, recorded that he “had but one wife, and had lived [...] so strictly up to the law of nature, that he had never [...] knowingly deviated in any matter of consequence from what was just and upright.”³⁷ Borri found nothing irregular with the fact that Lý, who was a *sāi* by virtue of his occupation as guardian of a temple, had a wife. Borri recorded further that there were “several sorts of *omsaiis*” in Cochinchina,

... some are clad in white, others in black, others in blue, and other colours; some living in community, some like curates, chaplains, canons, and prebends; others profess poverty, living upon alms; others exercise the works of mercy, ministering to the sick, either natural physick, or magick charms, without receiving any reward; others profess undertaking some pious work, as building of bridges, or other such things for the publick good, or erecting of temples, and going about the kingdom, begging alms to this purpose, even as far as the kingdom of *Tonchin*; others teach the doctrine of their religion, who being very rich, have publick schools, as universal masters. There are also some *omsaiis* who profess the farriers trade, and compassionately cure elephants, oxen, and horses, without

³⁵ Nola Cooke, using materials from the archive of the Société des Missions-Étrangères de Paris (such as the letter of de Cappony, 8 December 1701, MEP 728, p. 184), notes that “local society had often buzzed with rumors and scandals concerning the sexual improprieties of Buddhist monks with nuns (or with other women who came to live near the pagodas), as exposed by the resulting pregnancies.” See Nola Cooke, “Strange Brew: Global, Regional, and Local Factors behind the 1690 Prohibition of Christian Practice in Nguyễn Cochinchina,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (October 2008), p. 403.

³⁶ Koffler, “Description Historique de la Cochinchine,” *Revue Indochinoise* XVI, no. 12 (Dec 1911), p. 595. “[ils] se vantent de garder une chasteté perpétuelle et, cependant, il est plus vrai de dire que tous jusqu’au dernier sont des libertines.”

³⁷ Borri, *Account of Cochin-China*, pp. 168-169.

asking any reward, being satisfied with anything that is freely given them. Lastly, Others look to the monasteries of women, who live in community, and admit of no man among them but the *omsaii* who looks to them, and they are all his wives.³⁸

Monks performed many different functions in society, and Nguyễn Cư Trinh was clearly not referring to all of them in his critique of religious men in *Đàng Trong*. Monks who desired relations with women did not necessarily have to be in contravention of religious precepts. The misbehaving protagonist of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s play, however, was indeed supposed to be celibate as the next section of the play shows. It becomes clear that the subjects of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s critique were the monks who were involved in serious religious cultivation—the same monks who would have had the most social and religious influence.

In the nun’s reaction to the monk’s opening lines, she makes it very clear that she found his argument for the combination of religious cultivation and sexual gratification to be unacceptable; she draws conclusions about his character based on his desire for worldly pleasures:

[Your] words, why do they speak falsehoods;	49
[You] must not be true in character.	
In religious cultivation, why [does one] worry about loss and gain?	50
In religious cultivation, why [is one] greedy for worldly possessions and sexual desires?	
That is not nourishing virtue;	51
Do not cultivate those things.	

The nun accuses the monk of straying from orthodox religious cultivation because he was “greedy for worldly possessions and sexual desires.” Her speech serves to introduce the themes

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

of the next section: the first is the idea that worldliness was inherent even in orthodox forms of religious cultivation and the second theme hints at the complicity of the religiously orthodox towards the worldly behaviors of their errant clergymen. After the nun chides the monk for his opening speech, the monk seems to be chastened and tries to explain why he is unable to cultivate his religion in the correct fashion. He claims that he “too, want[s] to practice religious cultivation; unfortunately [he] lack[s] the things that must be used.”³⁹ He then goes on to recite a long list of things that he lacked. These items include “a bell” and “a drum,” “the prayers” and “the sutras,” “castanets” and “clackers,” “a flute” and “cymbals,” “a jar” and “a stone bowl,” “beans” and “soy sauce,” “a flower vase” and “incense burner,” “a doily of *phu* leaf,” “shoes” and “a hat,” “a tunic” and “a robe,” “a front hall”⁴⁰ and “a bamboo fence,” “an ornamental hall” and “carpets,” “a vermilion stick” and “sprinkling vase,”⁴¹ “an abbot’s staff” and “a Buddhist cassock,” “incense” and “flowers,” “the sutras” and “a wooden fish.”⁴²

This list is comprised of implements used in a Buddhist temple or parts of a temple building, the place where religious cultivation is performed. It is clear that a lot of implements and accessories are necessary for the practice of Buddhism. Given that this section was a response to the nun’s accusation that the monk was too interested in aspects of the world, the author Nguyễn Cư Trinh made the point in drawing up such a list that practicing Buddhism does in fact require a lot of worldly things, a fact that is quite ironic for a religion that preached and aspired towards renouncing the world.

³⁹ *Sāi Vāi*, line 52.

⁴⁰ A front hall is used to house the ancestral altar.

⁴¹ Instruments used in sprinkling holy water.

⁴² *Sāi Vāi*, lines 53-60.

The section takes a hilarious turn when the monk lists the things he would acquire should he have the means. “Whichever is more important,” he says, “[I] must acquire [it] first.”⁴³ The audience would be expecting the monk to prioritize the items on the list of religious implements he had just made as a justification for his inability to properly cultivate the way. The first things he names, however, are wardrobe items and accessories, including a “young follower of the way”:

Shanghai silk! I [will] buy a pair of trousers for good occasion;	63
Cloth of hemp! I [will] buy a shirt to be nice and pretty.	
A broad-rimmed hat! I [will] buy a very handsome one;	64
A fan of spotted bamboo! I [will] buy one to have as a treasure.	
[A pair of] red shoes! [I will] buy in order to tread on;	65
An emerald turban! [I will] buy in order to cover my head.	
I [will], moreover, train a young follower of the way, very small;	66
to carry under his arm my pipe, [that I] be a marvel.	

The slapstick nature of the above lines paints a wonderful picture of how a monk, who is supposed to have austere tastes and live an ascetic life, decks himself in the finery of the moment, including silk specifically from Shanghai. The colorful attire that this monk dreams up contrasts with the typical clothing in which a monk is attired. Some monks’ robes are “ash-colored and crude” while others “are clad in white, others in black, others in blue.”⁴⁴ This extravagant image of the monk has a lot of room for exaggerated movement and has immense comic potential in performance.

⁴³ *Sāi Vāi*, line 62.

⁴⁴ “ash colored...” from Koffler, “Description Historique de la Cochinchine,” *Revue Indochinoise* XVI, no. 12 (Dec 1911), p. 595; “are clad in white...” from Borri, *Account of Cochinchina*, p. 169.

The hilarity of the monk continues when he goes on to describe two types of accommodations he would prepare—a room in the temple and a small villa away from the village—and explains that he needs them in order to hide his activities from the view of people:

I will furthermore prepare a monk's room, ⁴⁵	69
in order [to have] a deserted small back room to be by myself.	
On the surface it is spacious and silent,	70
[but] underground, [it is] for hiding away. ⁴⁶	
When I am eating a meal of meat,	71
And see a layperson about to arrive,	
[Or] hear that small child calling softly,	72
Several plates of meat I [will] toss in there.	
I [will], moreover, prepare a villa, very small,	73
to stay, in order to be from the hamlet, very far.	
To provide shelter when a layperson becomes pregnant,	74
that it be easy for me to fold my arms, sitting thus.	

It is interesting that one room is within the confines of orthodox religious space and the other is far away from the village. The monk, who is expected to be vegetarian, hides the meat in his private chamber in the temple when laypersons visit so that they will not see him committing the offense. There is no mention that he has to hide the fact of his eating meat from his fellow clergymen or from the young novice who acts as his accomplice. In the opening section of the play, when the monk was trying to convince the nun to sleep with him, he invited her to return with him also to a room in the temple and not to a villa far away from the village. This monk, knowing that eating meat and having sexual intercourse with women were unorthodox activities,

⁴⁵ Nguyễn Cư Trinh uses the word “*phương trượng*” to refer to the monk’s chamber, the same word that he used in the first section of the play.

⁴⁶ In the *Nôm* text AB383, after lines 70, 73 and 78, the nun interjects with the phrase “And why would you buy that?” (*sấm để làm gì*), giving the impression of a performance where the monk scandalizes the nun by revealing what he intends to do with the what he buys, prepares and trains. It could also be a build-up to the nun’s speech where she scolds the monk for his very worldly desires.

still considered it permissible to carry out those activities in his chamber within the temple. If he were to get a woman pregnant, however, he would have to move her out of the village so he would be able to “fold [his] arms, sitting thus.” In drawing out the different functions of the two abodes that the misbehaving monk wanted to keep, Nguyễn Cư Trinh directed attention to the complicity of the orthodox religious order in regard to the behavior of their errant monks. Furthermore, as long as the misdeed was hidden from the public and, as in the case of pregnancy, also from his fellow clergymen, the monk would not be punished and would be able to continue his vocation as before. Nguyễn Cư Trinh leveled his accusation of hypocrisy not only at misbehaving monks, but also at other monks and even the formal religious order for condoning the misbehavior.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s satire included snide criticisms of monks’ daily activities—activities that Borri had recorded as ones in which *omsaiis* were engaged—such as “ministering to the sick” and overseeing “monasteries of women.”⁴⁷ Borri believed that the nuns in the monastery were all wives of the monk in charge of them; Nguyễn Cư Trinh took a similar swipe when he charged that the monk, who was in a superior position to a hypothetical nun that he dreams up by virtue of the fact that he wants to “train” her, desired to teach the “young nun to say sweet and sugary things.”⁴⁸ As for making medicines for the sick, the concoctions in Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s play were “medicines for strength,” a reference to male potency medicines, and “spells of love charms” to make women fall in love with him.⁴⁹ Nguyễn Cư Trinh planted the seed of doubt

⁴⁷ Borri, *Account of Cochin-China*, p. 169.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* and *Sāi Vāi*, line 78.

⁴⁹ *Sāi Vāi*, line 77. Making medicines and charms points to Daoist influences in Vietnamese Buddhist practices.

concerning the veracity and goodness of monks' daily activities, the same activities from which monks drew a lot of their social influence.

In featuring the misbehaving monk prominently in his satire, Nguyễn Cư Trinh highlighted his criticism of one important group of power holders in Đàng Trong society. Nguyễn Cư Trinh exaggerated the misbehavior of the monk as a humor-device to caricature Buddhist clergymen in general. Besides rendering the monk as a joke and discrediting Buddhist clergymen in the process, the audience of the performance is able to invert conventional positions and take one of moral superiority vis-à-vis religious men. This would be an especially powerful sensation for the common people, who would not have any difficulty understanding most of the jokes in this section of the play. Moreover, Nguyễn Cư Trinh dismantled orthodox Buddhism by pointing out the worldliness inherent in the cultivation of it, both in terms of the implements required for proper practice and the tolerance of orthodox members towards the misbehavior of its errant clergymen. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's message was not a call for the reform of errant monks to a path of orthodoxy; his message included an attack on orthodox Buddhism itself. In the next section of this chapter, I evaluate how Nguyễn Cư Trinh employed a different set of literary devices to achieve a similar result of discrediting orthodox Confucian practices through an attack on errant literati-officials.

“Virtuous” Officials and the Deception Behind “Correct Techniques of Cultivation”

As with other parts of the play, the nun speaks to change the topic and to move the performance into its next section. Here, the nun condemns the monk to hell for failing to adhere

to orthodox forms of practice:

Although [your activities] are kept hidden [within the] hall, 85

[They are] not correct techniques of cultivation!

The distant heaven sees clearly and is not blind; 86

The vast [heavenly] net is cast widely and nothing passes through.

For one word that falls short of the law, 87

ten thousand lifetimes cannot compensate [for it].

[To] the heavenly places, you, sir, alas have yet to ascend; 88

[To] the hellish places, you, sir, are about to quickly descend.

The nun believes that the monk cannot hide his misdeeds from heaven and that he is destined for hell. For the nun, people who do not cultivate “correct techniques of cultivation” (*phải đạo tu*, 滄道修) will go to hell and, by extension of the same logic, people whose words and actions constitute “correct techniques of cultivation” will go to heaven.⁵⁰ The monk seizes upon the idea that there existed “correct techniques of cultivation” to retaliate against the nun’s charge that he was doomed for hell. Here, Nguyễn Cư Trinh switched his target of attack from one group of people—the misbehaving Buddhist clergy—who tried to hide their misdeeds from public view, to another group of people—officials in the region, typically learned men selected through examinations—who conspicuously performed virtue for public consumption. The fact that the performance of empty goodness was literally performed on stage, and that the same actor who was the misbehaving monk was now making a performance of “performing virtue,” highlights powerfully the hypocrisy of real-life “performers of virtue.”

This section of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s play introduces the audience to what seems to be the caricature of a model Confucian gentleman, but not quite. On the surface, this gentleman seems

⁵⁰ I read 滄 as a *Nôm* character meaning “correct.” Refer to Trần Văn Kiệm, *Giúp Đọc Nôm và Hán Việt*, p. 662.

to be all that a gentleman should be: his virtue exceeds his talent;⁵¹ he is upright with his king, and filial to his father.

Whoever is a gentleman,	91
then virtue triumphs over talent.	
When venerating his king, he is completely upright;	92
when venerating his father, he is completely filial.	

At first glance, the play appears to be extolling the virtues of Confucian gentlemen; closer attention, however, leads one to the conclusion that Nguyễn Cư Trinh was really mocking the cultivated airs of the “virtuous” officials. One of the techniques that Nguyễn Cư Trinh employed in this section was the use of “emphasis words.” In the line: “When venerating his king, he is completely upright; when venerating his father, he is completely filial,” Nguyễn Cư Trinh slyly demonstrated the exaggerated degree of the gentleman’s uprightness and piety in his veneration of both king and father by employing the adjective “*hết*” (歇),⁵² which could be understood as “completely exhausts.” Line 92 can thus read: “When venerating his king, he *completely exhausts* his uprightness; / when venerating his father, he *completely exhausts* his piety.” The emphasis word highlights the extent of the “virtuous” official’s conspicuous performance of goodness. Nguyễn Cư Trinh applied the same technique to the next line with a different emphasis word:

⁵¹ Sima Guang (1019-1086) wrote in volume 1 of his *Zizhi Tongjian* (*Comprehensive Mirror to Aid the Government*, 资治通鉴): “Therefore, [if his] talent and virtue are complete and to the utmost call him a sage, [if his] talent and virtue have both perished call him a fool, [if his] virtue exceeds his talent call him a gentleman, [if his] talent exceeds his virtue call him a petty man” (是故才德全尽谓之圣人，才德兼亡谓之愚人，德胜才谓之君子，才胜德谓之小人). In several places within this satire, Nguyễn Cư Trinh employed lines from famous classical texts but changed and corrupted the meaning behind those phrases through the ways in which he introduced them. This is one example of it.

⁵² This is a *Nôm* reading of the character. *Ibid.*, p. 451.

A word saying [one] must be humane and follow the way: that is cultivating speech. 93
A deed done that does not harm or act for selfish benefit: that is cultivating action.

Speech and action are two concepts typically paired together to suggest a trustworthy person—if one’s actions matched one’s speech, then one is “*xin*” (信).⁵³ Here, Nguyễn Cư Trinh used the pairing of speech and action as outward manifestations of a person’s virtue and cultivation. This couplet could be understood on the surface as a call for cultivating speech through speaking for humanity and the way, and cultivating action through deeds that are not harmful or selfish. The couplet, however, emphasizes the singularity of the word and action through the use of the character “*một*” (蔑), which refers to the number one, before “word” and “deed.”⁵⁴ As such, the criticism behind this couplet is that the questionable gentleman thinks he is cultivating speech and action just by speaking a *single* word for humanity and performing a *single* action that does not cause harm, suggesting a shallow form of cultivation instead of an engaged and deeper process of refining himself in these areas. On second reading, the couplet should read: “A *single* word saying [one] must be humane and follow the way; [he thinks that] that is cultivating speech. A *single* deed done that does not harm or act for selfish benefit; [he thinks that] that is cultivating action.” Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s “virtuous” official thus demonstrates his virtue elaborately, yet espouses only a shallow form of cultivation. The next line expands on the result of this shallow cultivation of virtue:

Taking up humaneness, [he] cultivates his personality; 94
taking up virtue, [he] cultivates his physical self.

⁵³ D. C. Lau, introduction to *The Analects*, by Confucius, trans. D.C. Lau (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 25.

⁵⁴ This is a *Nôm* reading of the character. Refer to Trần Văn Kiệm, *Giúp Đọc Nôm và Hán Việt*, p. 591.

The above couplet seems to be in praise of a person who takes up humaneness and virtue to cultivate himself; however, in the case of the hypocritical gentleman, the couplet can be understood as a criticism against a person who takes these admirable characteristics not to benefit the people but to cultivate an image for himself. This charge of maintaining only an image of virtue and humaneness for personal benefit is expanded in the next few couplets in poem:

[He] cultivates luminous virtue in order to renew the common people;	95
[he] cultivates running a household in order to govern a country.	
That is a hero, worthy and virtuous;	96
A refined person must make a path of cultivation. ⁵⁵	

Line 95 is the famous opening line from the *Great Learning* (大学), one of the four books in the canon of Confucian classics, but in this context the line was employed for the words “*minh đức*” (明德). “*Minh đức*” is usually translated as luminous virtue, taking “*minh*” as an adjective modifying the noun “*đức*.” Grammatically, however, it is just as accurate to understand “*minh đức*” as a verb-object sequence, so that it translates as “to illuminate virtue.” The line from the *Great Learning* is thus used in a corrupted form here to refer to someone who cultivates showing off virtue in the name of renewing the people. Line 96b, “*người tu phải đạo tu,*” can be translated as “a religious person must make a path of cultivation,” where “*người tu*” as a compound word and the subject of the sentence “a religious person,” “*phải*” as the modal verb “must”, and “*đạo tu*” as a verb-object sequence where “*đạo*” means “to make a path of” and “*tu,*” “cultivation,” is the object of this path. There is, however, a second possible reading: “[he is] a person who

⁵⁵ *Sāi Vāi*, lines 95-96, reading 1.

cultivates correct techniques of cultivating [himself].” In this reading, I take “*người*” as the subject “a person,” “*tu*” as the verb “to cultivate,” “*phải*” as the adjective “correct,” and “*đạo tu*,” “techniques of cultivation,” functions as a noun. In the second reading of the couplet, the gentleman cultivates the correct “way” or “techniques” of cultivation, “*đạo tu*” (道修), instead of correctly cultivating the way, “*tu đạo*” (修道)! The couplets, on second reading, are as follows: “[He] cultivates *illuminating virtue* in order to renew the common people; [he] cultivates running a household in order to govern a country. That is a hero, worthy and virtuous; [*he is a*] *person who cultivates correct techniques of cultivating [himself]*.”⁵⁶ In other words, Nguyễn Cư Trinh criticized “virtuous” officials for showing off their virtuous acts merely for the sake of performing the motions of cultivation, rather than engaging in sincere attempts to cultivate the way.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh tied his discussion of “virtuous” officials back to the nun’s lines that sparked off this section by incorporating in his response the nun’s very words from line 85, “*Tuy là mật thất, nào phải đạo tu*,” which I translated as “Although [your activities] are kept hidden [within the] hall, [they are] not correct techniques of cultivation.” Nguyễn Cư Trinh demonstrated that “*phải đạo tu*” or the “correct techniques of cultivation,” the practice of which the nun had deemed worthy of the reward of ascending into heaven, was nothing more than a charade to hoodwink the naïve into believing that the “gentleman” was truly virtuous. Nguyễn Cư Trinh ended the monk’s defense of himself by describing the type of heaven these “gentlemen” could expect:

⁵⁶ *Sãi Vãi*, lines 95-96, reading 2.

If [he] correctly makes a way of cultivating his actions,	99
[he will] then be increasingly full of happiness and felicitous deeds.	
Naturally, [he will] get official status, get position;	100
get a long life, get a reputation,	
Get wealth and honor and glory and splendor;	101
as for that, heaven it is indeed.	
Whoever is worthily spoken,	102
[he is] cultivating ascending to heaven.	

In this system of rewards, should the gentleman be successful in correctly performing the techniques of cultivating himself, he will “naturally” get all the good things in life. Orthodox Confucian ideology believes that being moral does not necessarily come with any rewards. According to D.C Lau, “[s]ince in being moral one can neither be assured of a reward nor guaranteed success, morality must be pursued for its own sake. This is, perhaps, the most fundamental message in Confucius’ teachings, a message that marked his teachings from other schools of thought in ancient China.”⁵⁷ With the above lines, Nguyễn Cư Trinh made it clear that the earthly rewards were the extent of the “virtuous” gentleman’s “heaven.” His lot was not the heaven that the nun intended.⁵⁸ These lines, moreover, also contained the author’s critique of the central system, where men who merely made a show of being virtuous received earthly rewards—which the king in court bestowed.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s criticism of the officials of Đàng Trong did not end there; it continued with a juxtaposition of the “gentleman” against the “petty man.” As a contrasting technique, the “gentleman” is typically compared with the “petty man” to demonstrate two ends

⁵⁷ Lau, introduction to *The Analects*, p. 13. Lau cites as evidence XIV.38 of *The Analects*, “Is that the K’ung who keeps working towards a goal the realization of which he knows to be hopeless?”

⁵⁸ *Sāi Vāi*, line 88.

of a spectrum. In moral terms, the petty man, who is characterized by moral depravity, is the opposite of the gentleman, who is characterized by strong virtues and moral cultivation. In terms of social hierarchy, the gentleman rules over petty men, who are probably people who held low-ranking office since the term “petty man” is typically used to distinguish between them and “the people” (*dân*, 民)—people who are ruled over and have no office.⁵⁹ Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s discussion of petty men can be understood, on the one hand, as a literary device for judging whether the “gentleman” he had discussed earlier in the section was really better than the “petty man,” the worst that society can offer; his discussion of petty men can also, on the other hand, be read as a condemnation of lower-ranking officials who embraced the worst attributes of humankind.

The main technique that Nguyễn Cư Trinh used in this part of the section is the play on the word “to cultivate,” “*tu*” (修). Nguyễn Cư Trinh employed “*tu*” as the verb when discussing the bad habits of petty men:

A petty man’s customs and manners, <i>cultivate</i> worldly natures.	104
[They] <i>cultivate</i> hearts that are ungrateful and cruel, treacherous, and greedy; [they] <i>cultivate</i> minds that are stubborn, ferocious, tyrannical, and wicked.	105
Having been nurtured to adulthood, [they] yet <i>cultivate</i> hearts that are unfilial; Having eaten to fullness, [they] yet <i>cultivate</i> stomachs that are disloyal. ⁶⁰	106

This is not a typical usage of the word “to cultivate”; in fact, the word is never used to refer to the cultivation of bad habits except perhaps in jest, as is the case here. The petty man in the *Sãi Vãi*, moreover, actively cultivates physical manifestations of virtue, such as his appearance and

⁵⁹ Lau, introduction to *The Analects*, p. 14.

⁶⁰ Italics my own.

his speech, in order to “flatter” and to “beget a reputation beyond his merits.”⁶¹ At the same time, he cultivates dishonest ways, such as a lying tongue and harmful schemes, to “take property and position” and to “harm people who have made him angry.”⁶²

Comparing the “virtuous” gentleman, who cultivates speech and action minimally to demonstrate virtue for his own personal benefit, and the petty man, who cultivates his physical appearance and speech to gain for himself more than he deserves, one gets a hint of an idea that there may not be that much of a difference between the “virtuous” gentleman and the petty man. Nguyễn Cư Trinh was possibly gesturing towards the idea that the gentleman and the petty man were not necessarily two groups of people but two aspects of the same group of people. If the “virtuous” gentleman cultivated shallowly and only for the show of it, beneath this pretense lay the “true” nature of their cultivation as described in the section on the petty man, which is harmful to the people. Bringing this discussion back to where it had started with the nun’s accusation that the monk would quickly be descending to hell, Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s monk concludes that it is not he, but such a man, who is “entering hell”:

Whoever is a petty man,	113
[He] cultivates unrighteousness paths. ⁶³	
In this way, in the darkness [they] are those that spirits and ghosts harm,	114
In the daylight [they] are those that the king’s laws punish.	
That is the cultivation of a petty man,	115
[He] cultivates entering hell.	

⁶¹ *Sāi Vāi*, line 107.

⁶² *Sāi Vāi*, line 109.

⁶³ Nguyễn Cư Trinh keeps to the theme of “techniques” or “paths” of cultivation but uses a different expression here. Previously, he used “*đạo tu*” to refer to techniques of paths of cultivation. Here, he uses “*những lộ bất ngãi*,” where “*lộ*” is the “road” or “path.”

Nguyễn Cư Trinh's monk defends himself by indirectly comparing himself with the petty man. The monk points out that his type—misbehaving religious men who did not actually harm anyone—were not cultivating a journey to hell whereas the petty men were. For the petty man, he experiences hell in two ways. One is the earthly hell, the corresponding concept to the earthly heaven in the earlier part of this section, where he has to fear both day and night because he is both haunted by spirits and chased by the laws. On top of this, the petty man will be *entering* hell, the hell that the nun referred to in line 88.

We do not have stage directions to this play, and can only use the imagination to re-create the performance in the mind's eye. Compared with the previous section featuring the scandalous monk, the jokes in this section might be comprehensible only to an educated audience unless the emphasis words were acted out and the second meaning behind the lines brought out through performance. The actor could, for example, make a show of the *single* word and *single* deed that the gentleman counted as the only actions necessarily in cultivating speech and action, and act out preening when speaking the lines indicating that the gentleman used humaneness and virtue to cultivate his personality and physical self. In talking about dubious gentlemen *and* petty men in social terms, Nguyễn Cư Trinh made the point that there were officials at every level of the bureaucracy who were not up to the standard of a properly cultivated official. The double entendres in this section serve two purposes. On one level, they make the author's criticism less blatant, as double entendres are supposed to do. On another level, the author's use of double entendres mimics social reality: where double entendres say one thing but mean something else, so do the virtuous gentlemen of the region perform virtue ostensibly for the good of the people but in fact strive for personal benefit from the performance of virtue. Significantly, Nguyễn Cư

Trinh's critique *against* the literati-officials leaves one wondering what he was arguing *for*. Nguyễn Cư Trinh dismantled the idea that simply practicing "correct techniques of cultivation" constituted sufficient moral cultivation for literati-officials. Just as with the case of the misbehaving monk, Nguyễn Cư Trinh was not promoting a return to orthodox practices as a relevant corrective to the problem of errant power holders in Đàng Trong society. Instead, Nguyễn Cư Trinh attempted to spell out a new vision for the frontier, an idea that I take up in the next chapter.

Conclusion: Evaluating Exaggeration

The *Sãi Vãi* portrays southern Vietnamese frontier society as one that was plagued with errant power holders; a critical study of the first three sections reveals further the extent to which Nguyễn Cư Trinh, an important member of the Vietnamese literati, viewed orthodox religious and administrative models as inadequate for the situation on the frontier. In using the *Sãi Vãi* to evaluate social problems extant in the eighteenth century, one runs into the problem of having to decide how much of that which is contained in the *Sãi Vãi* constitutes exaggeration and how much amounts to an accurate portrayal of the situation on the frontier.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh's opinion about the inadequacy of literati-officials is, in fact, contained in another document.⁶⁴ In the winter of 1751, Nguyễn Cư Trinh submitted a petition to the Nguyễn lord, Nguyễn Phúc Khóat, in which he openly condemned the local officials of Quảng

⁶⁴ Given the paucity of sources for a detailed study of any prefecture in eighteenth-century Vietnam, Quảng Ngãi is notable for having several documents that address issues pertaining to it. They are, however, penned by one person, Nguyễn Cư Trinh; the methodological challenge is to evaluate the sources against each other while cognizant of the fact that they share the same authorship and presumably the same biases.

Ngãi. Two out of four sections of his petition were dedicated to the dishonesty and incompetence of the local officials:

1) The prefect and sub-prefect are offices with the responsibility of governing the people but nowadays [it seems as if they] cannot be entrusted with the responsibility of doing their job, and are only given to investigating and interrogating to start lawsuits. Please prevent this now; riceland tax and other different taxes should all be gathered by the sub-prefectural officials and then submitted to the officials in Quảng Nam [at the higher provincial level] in order to reduce the annoyance.

2) The prefects and sub-prefects from past until present have typically sought profit from arresting and interrogating the people in order to take as bounty their money and possessions; as the possessions of the people get exhausted, the manners and customs of the people get increasingly ungrateful. Now please give a regular salary [to the officials], and promote and demote them according to whether the official is honest or greedy, diligent or lazy.⁶⁵

Nguyễn Cư Trinh charged that the prefecture was facing difficulties because local officials were not performing their duties in the ways that they should. He presented solutions to these problems in his petition to the king, which included limiting the power of the prefectural and sub-prefectural officials, demoting incompetent and dishonest ones, and giving appropriate salaries and promotions to competent ones. When his petition received no reply from the king, Nguyễn Cư Trinh tried to resign from his position but the king assigned him a different appointment, which he accepted.⁶⁶

It was not uncommon for officials sent to take care of problems in particular locations to exaggerate the extent of the problem so as to emphasize their own contribution in finding

⁶⁵ The petition can be found in both the *Đại Nam Thực Lục* and the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*. Refer to *Đại Nam Thực Lục* vol. 1, entry for year 1751, p. 156 and *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên*, pp. 140-41. The two other points raised in this petition are the issue of tax dodgers and tackling real poverty, and the problem of Việt people hunting on the mountains and harassing the highland groups. I discuss these points in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

⁶⁶ *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên*, p. 141.

solutions. Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s petition is different in that at the time of his writing it, he had already resolved the problem of the invading “Stone-Wall Barbarians”; he memorialized the king, however, about problems he had not solved.⁶⁷ In his petition, Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s description of the problem of corrupt officials in Quảng Ngãi was intended for a small audience—the king and his closest advisors. Evaluating this petition against the *Sãi Vãi*, where Nguyễn Cư Trinh displayed his contempt for errant monks and incompetent officials for a much larger audience, it appears that Nguyễn Cư Trinh sincerely felt that the problem deserved attention. The petition was written about a year after the *Sãi Vãi* was composed. If our assumption is correct and the *Sãi Vãi* was in fact performed not only at the local village but also in the king’s court, Nguyễn Cư Trinh could have been attempting to send the message to Nguyễn Phúc Khoát a second time through the petition since no action was taken after the *Sãi Vãi* was performed. Nguyễn Cư Trinh identified a pressing problem on the frontier and tried, through composing satire and then a formal petition, to correct the problem by addressing the villagers, the errant power holders themselves, and finally the king. There is also the possibility that Nguyễn Cư Trinh petitioned the king detailing the problem and proposing a solution so that he would not be blamed should unrest occur in Quảng Ngãi. In this case, the problem of errant power holders would still be real and not exaggerated, since he feared the consequences enough to memorialize the king and even resigned from his position when his proposals were not implemented. The petition, then, supports the claims that Nguyễn Cư Trinh made against monks and literati-officials within the *Sãi Vãi*.

⁶⁷ Even though the chronicles claim that the problem of the Đá Vách was solved, they were to continue causing problems for the Việt people. Several campaigns were fought against them in the following decades.

In this chapter, I explored how Nguyễn Cư Trinh used politicized humor to address the Việt-speaking society of the frontier. The focus on the Việt-speaking members of society demonstrates Nguyễn Cư Trinh's emphasis on educating the Việt insiders rather than the peripheral outsiders of frontier society. The *Sãi Vãi* is a record of frontier experience in several ways: First, the *Sãi Vãi* is in itself an experience of the frontier and the performance of humor within it an important aspect of entertainment and education on the frontier. Second, embedded within the *Sãi Vãi* is information about the mid-eighteenth century social and cultural world of Quảng Ngãi in particular and Đàng Trong in general. Third, the satire is itself a product of the southern Vietnamese frontier and the text a remnant of the culture created by and within the southern Vietnamese realm. This chapter has shown how critiques against errant power holders in Đàng Trong have also functioned to highlight the inadequacy of orthodox forms of religious and administrative models. In the next chapter, I discuss the alternative vision that the author of the *Sãi Vãi* articulated for the political and cultural inhabitation of the southern Vietnamese frontier.

Chapter Two

Skeptical Confucianism: Transcending Conventionality for Best Governance

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s critique of the cultivation of hypocritical gentlemen was not a call for them to adhere more closely to orthodox behavior; instead, it was a critique of the inherent inadequacy of orthodoxy, of which the “correct techniques of cultivation” were symbols. Whereas the previous chapter explicates the objects of his satirical critique, the present one addresses the position that Nguyễn Cư Trinh advocated. I focus here on the ways in which Nguyễn Cư Trinh modified classical Confucian governing philosophy into a form that he considered best suited for governing the frontiers of the southern Vietnamese realm, Đàng Trong.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s proposal for best governance demonstrated the complicated relationship that he had with orthodox Confucian philosophies in regard to matters of governance: on the one hand, he promoted adherence to Confucian doctrines above Buddhist and Daoist philosophies; on the other hand, he displayed a healthy dose of skepticism towards standard Confucian precepts. Nguyễn Cư Trinh was not exceptional in his skepticism of the classical canon. Lê Quý Đôn (1726-1784), a contemporary of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s who lived in the northern Vietnamese polity (Đàng Ngoài) and was perhaps the most prolific scholar in eighteenth century Vietnam, also exhibited such tendencies.¹ Rather than accept conventional notions of good governance as an unalterable prescription, Lê Quý Đôn’s political thought was

¹ Lê Quý Đôn’s works include *Đại Việt Thông Sử* (A General History of Đại Việt), *Phủ Biên Tập Lục* (Frontier Chronicles), *Kiến Văn Tiểu Lục* (Small Chronicle of Things Seen and Heard), and *Vân Đài Loạ Ngữ* (The Classified Discourse of the Library).

committed to a discourse on the relationship between “form” and “rules.” He believed that “form” was the element of governance that transcended human action; it was to be accepted as the divine moral order. “Rules,” however, were devised by human beings and as such could be challenged and modified to fit the social and political circumstances of the times. Lê Quý Đôn advocated political and social change as long as change was limited to the domain of “rules” and did not challenge the moral order, which constituted the “form” of governance.²

Alexander Woodside comments that Lê Quý Đôn’s skepticism, which ranged from his dissatisfaction with conventional Confucian ideas of governance to his reluctance to embrace traditionally accepted views of cosmology that revolved around the Middle Kingdom’s geocentricity, “betrayed a definite cultural anxiety, a refusal to suspend disbelief as readily as had past generations of Vietnamese thinkers.”³ Attributing Lê Quý Đôn’s skepticism to the all-encompassing notion of “cultural anxiety,” Woodside emphasizes the distinction between “Vietnam” and “China” in the minds of eighteenth-century scholar-officials. He traces evidence of this phenomenon back to a fifteenth century scholar Hoàng Đức Lương’s preface to a small anthology of Lý (1010-1225) and Trần (1225-1400) dynasty poems compiled in the year 1497. In the preface, Hoàng Đức Lương expressed regret that he should be “confined so much to contemplating the merits of Chinese Tang dynasty poems” on account of the dearth of poetry produced in Vietnam.⁴ The preface reads:

² Alexander Woodside, “Conceptions of Change and of Human Responsibility for Change in Late Traditional Vietnam,” in *Moral Order and the Question of Change: Essays on Southeast Asian Thought*, eds. David K. Wyatt and Alexander Woodside (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1982), p. 121.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

Ever since the Lý and Trần established the kingdom, it has been called a domain of manifest civility. Poets and talents [during those two dynasties] all did their best to make a name for themselves, did they not? However, the great scholars and senior ministers were all too busy with official matters to take the time to compile anthologies. Meanwhile, those retired from office, lower officials and scholars studying for exams paid no heed...

When I go to study poetry I only see works by Tang dynasty poets. Writings from the Lý and Trần cannot be verified. Sometimes when I come across half of a couplet on some crumbling wall, I will open a scroll [from the past to try to find the rest of the poem], but only end up sighing. The blame for this I place on the worthies from previous generations.

Goodness! How can we call ourselves a domain of manifest civility, a kingdom that has been established for thousands of years, if we have not a single scroll as proof, and when all go back to reciting Tang dynasty poetry? Is this not distressing?!⁵

It is clear that the author of the preface distinguished the kingdom in which he lived, Đại Việt, from the Middle Kingdom, the kingdom against which he compared his own. But whereas Woodside believes that “[m]odern Hanoi scholars are surely right to point out the patriotic emotions” behind this question of why Đại Việt lacked a healthy amount of poetry, Liam Kelley convincingly argues that Hoàng Đức Lương’s anxiety resulted not from a need to be distinct from the Middle Kingdom, but from the desire to match up to it so that his kingdom would be worthy of the appellation “domain of manifest civility,” an appellation that the Middle Kingdom embodied.⁶ Instead of seeking to establish distinctiveness from the Middle Kingdom, the literati of Đại Việt were participants in a similar movement to one in which they believed the literati of

⁵ Hoàng Đức Lương, *Trích diễm thi tập* [A poetry collection of selected beauty], quoted in Lê Quý Đôn, *Kiến văn tiểu lục* [Jottings about things seen and heard] (1777), A.32, 4:15a-16b. Originally translated by and cited in Liam Kelley, “Vietnam as a ‘Domain of Manifest Civility’ (*Văn Hiến chi Bang*),” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34, no. 1 (Feb 2003), p. 70.

⁶ Woodside, “Conceptions of Change and of Human Responsibility,” p. 127; Kelley, “Vietnam as a ‘Domain of Manifest Civility’ (*Văn Hiến chi Bang*),” pp. 63-76. Kelley demonstrates convincingly that the pre-nineteenth century intellectual worldview of the world political order differed significantly from the twentieth century concept of equality amongst nation states.

the Middle Kingdom were engaged, which was to ensure that their domains had sufficient literary and institutional records so as to have “manifest civility.” The preoccupation with Vietnam’s cultural distinctiveness from China, as opposed to the desire to be similar to it, appears to lie more in the intellectual domain of twentieth century scholars than the eighteenth century literati-officials’.

I believe, in fact, that a similar process is accountable for the skepticism of intellectuals active in mid-eighteenth century Vietnam. In his biography of Yuan Mei (1716-1798), a scholar-official who retired at the age of thirty-two and thereafter lived extravagantly as a well-known poet in the Middle Kingdom, Arthur Waley observes that “[t]he men of the early eighteenth century were on the whole stern and puritanical, those of the mid-century pleasure-loving and tolerant, those of its closing years and the early nineteenth century once more straightlaced and censorious.”⁷ Yuan Mei belonged to the mid-century, and lived in a time when “belief was crumbling”; Confucian classics were no longer regarded as sacred and were in fact subjected to criticism and treated as ordinary texts.⁸ Yuan Mei himself was accused of “perverting the minds of the young” by (mis)using the classics to support his own hedonistic ideas.⁹ He irreverently titled his book of “strange stories,” which included ghost stories, *What the Master Did Not Talk Of* (主不语), a reference to a passage in the seventh book of Confucius’ *Analects*: “The Master never talked of wonders, feats of strength, disorders of nature or spirits.”¹⁰ Waley’s biography of Yuan Mei shows clearly that the jovial poet had many friends who admired his work and enjoyed

⁷ Arthur Waley, *Yuan Mei* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1956), p. 131.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

his company; his entourage included Jiang Shiquan (1725-1785), the foremost dramatist of the eighteenth century, and Luo Ping (1731-1819), an artist famous for his paintings of ghosts and spirits.¹¹ The world in which the mid-eighteenth century intellectual of China lived was a time in which intellectuals challenged the classics and conventional modes of literary expression.¹²

It was this intellectual world with which Nguyễn Cư Trinh had contact, both through books that were in circulation, carried by merchants traveling between the ports of Vietnam and China, and his own participation in literary exchanges. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's irreverence for the classics is evidenced in his *Sãi Vãi*, and his dissatisfaction with conventionally prescribed forms of governance can be attributed to this common intellectual trend rather than to a notion of "cultural distinctiveness" from China. In this chapter, I perform a close analysis of sections four, five and six of the *Sãi Vãi*, sections that I have grouped together because I believe that they form the crux of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's thought on governance. Part of this satire's significance derives from the fact that it is one of few texts that documents a Vietnamese scholar-official's thoughts about Confucian ideology. In fact, Olga Dror observes that "no indigenous Vietnamese works elaborating Confucianism have been discovered."¹³ On this account alone, the *Sãi Vãi* proves to be an extremely important historical document. While not a Confucian tractate in a conventional sense, the *Sãi Vãi* is a literary work that engages with the topic of Confucian, Buddhist and to a

¹¹ Ibid., p. 72 and 119.

¹² The Chinese intellectual's world was simultaneously exciting and terrifying, since this was also the time of the Literary Inquisition of the Emperor Qianlong, who sought to eradicate literary works and intellectuals associated with any hint of anti-Manchu tendencies.

¹³ Olga Dror, translator's introduction to *Opusculum de Sectis apud Sinenses et Tunkinenses (A Small Treatise on the Sects among the Chinese and the Tonkinese): A Study of Religion in China and North Vietnam in the Eighteenth Century*, by Adriano Di St. Thecla, trans. Olga Dror, with collaboration of Mariya Berezovska in Latin Translation (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2002), p. 39. Scholars do not seem to have considered Lê Quý Đôn's scholarship as works explicating Confucianism, perhaps because he is far more famous for his encyclopedias and records of court and frontier histories.

lesser extent Daoist ideologies in *Đàng Trong*, particularly in regard to matters of governance. Considered broadly, the play is not so different in format from classical works such as the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. It is written as a dialogue between a monk and a nun in which one of the interlocutors (the nun) asks questions or makes statements, to which the other (the monk) responds. The key to understanding the monk's lengthy speeches lies in the nun's much shorter lines; the monk's speeches need to be understood as responses to key issues that the nun's lines introduce. In terms of literary technique, there is a significant difference between the sections under consideration in this chapter and the ones preceding them, which I analyzed in Chapter One of this dissertation. Particularly in the case of sections one and three, the author's message was delivered through the use of puns and double entendres. The momentum of sections four, five, and six, however, is generated through the use of examples from history, particularly of historical personalities, which Nguyễn Cư Trinh provided as a way of elaborating views he was professing and promoting.

A notable point is that all the figures cited in the play come from what we would categorize as Chinese history and not Vietnamese history; no Vietnamese leaders or dynasties are mentioned at all. A member of the Vietnamese literati, however, would not have considered these "Chinese" characters extraneous to his own cultural heritage. His personal education would have been founded on the same classical texts on which the imperial examinations of the Middle Kingdom were based. The use of such historical examples in a play, moreover, does not necessarily presume a high level of classical literacy amongst the audience. It is difficult to ascertain the full extent to which the common people were conversant with allusions to classical heroes and villains; later sources suggest, however, that they were better acquainted with

classical allusions than one might imagine. Nineteenth-century villagers of the Red River delta region (northern regions of Vietnam), for example, exhibited an astonishing degree of comprehension of classical allusions. Cao Bá Quát, who was executed in 1854 for leading a revolt against the Nguyễn dynasty, succinctly explained his revolt in a slogan written in classical Chinese characters which translates as: “Bình Dương (Pingyang) and Bồ Bản (Puban) lack their Nghiêu (Yao) and Thuần (Shun); Mục Dã (Muye) and Minh Điều (Mingtiao) have their Vũ (Wu) and Thang (Tang).” These references to battles from the *Book of Changes* did not require further explication. Villagers in the Red River delta region understood it to mean that the relationship between their polity and the Nguyễn Emperor Tự Đức was like that of Bình Dương and Bồ Bản, capitals of the mythical sage emperors Yao and Shun, without Yao and Shun. As a consequence of such bad governance, Mục Dã and Minh Điều, sites where King Wu of Zhou and King Tang of Shang had defeated bad rulers respectively, had the right to throw off their bad rulers. Cao Bá Quát positioned himself as the Wu or Tang that Vietnam needed, and the Nguyễn ruler Tự Đức as the bad ruler who deserved to be deposed.¹⁴ Like the allusions in Cao Bá Quát’s slogan, most of the historical figures cited in the play were well known figures—Yao, Shun, Qin Shihuang, and Han Wudi—who formed part of the Vietnamese cultural tradition transmitted through stories told and plays performed, including at the popular level. Examples from Vietnamese history, moreover, were perhaps even more obscure to a general audience than popular “Chinese” examples; consequently, there would not have been reason for a member of the Vietnamese literati to feel that using the popular “Chinese” examples would render his work less relevant to an audience in Vietnam.

¹⁴ Woodside, “Conceptions of Change,” pp. 112-113.

The question remains, however: why did Nguyễn Cư Trinh not feel the need to include *some* historical examples from Vietnamese history? Possible answers to this question are: given that the ruling Nguyễn king had declared himself a “king” only six years before the play was written, thereby breaking tradition with the seven Nguyễn rulers before him who had styled themselves “lords,” it is possible that Nguyễn Cư Trinh found it inappropriate to use historical examples from Vietnamese dynastic history, which highlighted the fact that there was another more legitimate Vietnamese king, the Lê king, residing in the northern Vietnamese kingdom. Because the Nguyễn king had in fact seceded from the Lê, Vietnamese historical figures belonged to the legacy of the Lê dynasty in the north and not the Nguyễn king in the south. Another reason could be that Nguyễn Cư Trinh himself wanted the cultural realm in which he lived to be a part of the larger cultural realm of the Middle Kingdom, and so populated his play with historical figures from the larger cultural tradition in order to establish the Vietnamese people as participants in that tradition. Nguyễn Cư Trinh had no reason to separate his work from the larger body of works produced within the Sino-Vietnamese intellectual circle by referring to examples within Vietnamese history that did not belong to the literary language of the larger cultural world of the literati. Nevertheless, the most probable reason was that citing examples from Vietnamese history was simply not the form that was commonly used, especially if the author intended for his work to resemble a classical treatise on governance. The strength behind citing the mythical sages as examples of good governance, for instance, far surpassed anything that later history, Vietnamese or Chinese, could offer. The full extent of the treachery of bad leaders and traitorous officials could be most dramatically displayed when the dynasties they destroyed were the glorious ones of old.

The historical personalities invoked in sections four, five, and six of the *Sãi Vãi* give force to Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s discourse on the form of governance that was most appropriate for Đàng Trong. In using historical personalities to elaborate upon his proposal for good governance, his argument had the strength of classical orthodoxy behind it. Surprisingly, he then challenged orthodox Confucian doctrines of good governance by introducing modifications and qualifications—addressing firstly the neglect of women and secondly the all-consuming nature of didactic precepts—to hone it for the social and political circumstances of the southern Vietnamese frontier. The rest of this chapter examines how he proceeds to do so.

To Be Free from Mere Conventionality

I discussed previously how Nguyễn Cư Trinh criticized the hypocritical gentlemen of Đàng Trong for publicly performing the “correct techniques of cultivation” (*phải đạo tu*, 沛道修) merely to obtain worldly rewards for themselves. Section four of the satire begins with Nguyễn Cư Trinh introducing an alternative to the practice of “correct techniques of cultivation.” He proposed a form of cultivation that eschewed formulaic prescriptions, a “cultivation that is free from mere conventionality” (*tu mà thoát tục*, 修麻脫俗):

[As for] cultivation that is free from mere conventionality;
There remain those with the cultivation of superior wisdom.

116

Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s choice of the phrase “free from mere conventionality” (*thoát tục*, 脫俗) is especially interesting. On a fundamental level, “*thoát tục*” is to be free from prescribed forms of behavior, the implication being that this freedom elevates one to the level of being “refined in

manner and taste.”¹⁵ For Nguyễn Cư Trinh, “*thoát tục*” means to be free from the “correct techniques of cultivation,” which he found highly inadequate. In a Buddhist context, “*thoát tục*” takes on a contextually specific meaning and is understood as “renouncing the world” by freeing oneself from the conventions of this world and retreating into the life of a religious recluse.¹⁶ The lines that follow this one in the satire show that Nguyễn Cư Trinh was clearly not prescribing religious reclusiveness as an appropriate form of cultivation. What he actually prescribed, which the remainder of the section of the *Sãi Vãi* expands upon, was an adaptive engagement with the world. This was a concept akin to the idea of being a vessel appropriate to the times, a theme in governance that has been fashionable since the Warring States period. In using the phrase “*thoát tục*,” which has a specific meaning in a Buddhist context, in a completely different sense, Nguyễn Cư Trinh compellingly proposed an alternative mode of action for the two concepts he found objectionable: first, the formulaic and prescriptive “correct techniques of cultivation,” and second, Buddhist renunciation of the world.

Line 116 marks a significant shift in the *Sãi Vãi*. The next few sections in the sequence of the play focus on the topic of good governance, particularly governance as it pertains to the highest-ranking member of society, the king himself. Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s coupling of the categories of “superior wisdom” and “cultivation that is free from mere conventionality” demonstrates clearly the didactic nature of these sections. He further contrasts the category of “superior wisdom” (*thượng trí*, 上智) with another two, “middling wisdom” (*trung trí*, 中智) and

¹⁵ *Matthews’ Chinese-English Dictionary*, entry 6468(6): to drop ceremony—as among friends; free from mere conventionality; refined in manner and taste.

¹⁶ Nguyễn Đình Hòa, *Từ điển Việt-Anh* [Vietnamese-English Dictionary] (Vietnam: Thế Giới Publishing House, 1998), p. 732.

“inferior wisdom” (*hạ trí*, 下智), to set up a framework through which to explicate his proposal for best governance in the southern Vietnamese realm. The categories of “superior,” “middling,” and “inferior wisdom” can be found in a few classical texts, one of which lists these as the first three in a sequence followed by the categories of “reasonable judgment” (明达), “ordinary” (尋常), and “stupid” (愚痴).¹⁷ Mostly, the category of “inferior wisdom” has not been used derogatorily and can perhaps be translated as “lesser wisdom.” For the purpose of demonstrating contrast, “superior wisdom” is in fact typically paired with and contrasted against “inferior stupidity” (*hạ ngu*, 下愚).¹⁸ I choose to translate “*hạ trí*” as “inferior wisdom” instead of “lesser wisdom,” however, because Nguyễn Cư Trinh made plain, in the lines explicating this category, that he considered the cultivation that arose from the people he placed in that category to be “very stupid” (*rất ngu*). The irreverence that Nguyễn Cư Trinh exhibited towards the conventionally defined concept of “wisdom” suggests that he held a limited view of the effectiveness of this proposal for model governance; in fact, he follows this section with two other sections on additional aspects of governance to complete his proposal for best governance.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s didactic message is softened considerably because it is delivered through the voice of the mischievous monk. The incongruity of the misbehaving monk delivering a message promoting Confucianism at the expense of Buddhism and Daoism exaggerates the superiority of Confucianism; the subsequent modifications to this pro-Confucian message, one of which is delivered by the same monk, captures the spirit of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s skepticism of

¹⁷ This sequence can be found in a Song Daoist text called *Yunjiqian* (雲笈七籤). The text describes how the hearts of these different categories of people have varying numbers of “openings” (孔): the wisest have seven, and the number reduces steadily until the last category, the “stupid,” have none.

¹⁸ This comparison occurs in Kong Anguo’s (孔安国) biography that is found in the *Book of History* (尚书).

orthodox Confucian doctrine. Beginning with the “cultivation of those with superior wisdom,” the monk introduces typical classical heroes:

Recall the ancient times of Đường ¹⁹ and Ngu; ²⁰	117
When sages were proclaimed the Two Emperors.	
The Two Emperors were people who cultivated themselves;	118
consequently all under heaven were stable.	
The Three Kings ²¹ were people who cultivated humaneness;	119
consequently the ten thousand peoples were in order.	

Nguyễn Cư Trinh, sent to Quảng Ngãi to solve the problem of the Đá Vách who were harassing the lowland Việt inhabitants, was unsurprisingly concerned with issues of stability and order. Moreover, his choice of Yao and Shun (“Two Emperors”) and the founders of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties (“Three Kings”), although following conventional examples for the category of “sages,” was particularly relevant to Đàng Trong at that moment. The historical and mythical personalities he selected were all associated with the founding of dynasties. Previously ruling under the mandate of lordship over the southern Vietnamese realm, Nguyễn Phúc Khoát had declared himself Võ Vương (King Võ) in 1744, just six years before the *Sãi Vãi* was written. Of the Three Kings, only Yu, founder of Xia, was selected by the previous ruler, Shun, to inherit his kingdom. And even in the case of Yu, he was not related to Shun but was an outstanding official during the time of Shun’s reign. Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s choice of examples for this category posed little contradiction to Võ Vương’s self-elevation to the position of a king. Võ Vương’s change in status was in many ways more symbolic than real; the Nguyễn family had effectively been ruling Đàng Trong autonomously since the early 1600s and had not remitted taxes to the Lê kings in the

¹⁹ 唐 Tang. The name of Yao’s dynasty.

²⁰ 虞 Yu. The name of Shun’s dynasty.

²¹ Founders of Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties.

northern Vietnamese realm for more than a century. In terms of symbolism, however, it was a significant move. Võ Vương's elevation marked a deliberate break away from the Lê dynasty, by then completely under the control of the Trịnh family, and signified the impending end of a weak dynasty giving way to a stronger one.²²

Elaborating on the necessary elements for ensuring stability and order within the polity, Nguyễn Cư Trinh promoted flexibility in governance so as to ensure that the polity would be able to adapt “to the times”:

[As for] cultivating civil administration and cultivating military might, People cultivated these according to the times.	122
In times of great peace, [they] abandoned military [cultivation] to cultivate civil administration;	123
[in times of] rebellion and suppressing chaos, [they] abandoned civil to cultivate military might.	
When just one person cultivated himself sufficiently, then all under heaven was victorious and peaceful.	124

Again, although clichéd, Nguyễn Cư Trinh believed that cultivating the polity's talents according to the needs of the times had to be the guiding principle in governance. The two categories of “military might” and “civil administration” represent two ends of a spectrum, and Nguyễn Cư Trinh's intention behind these lines can be understood more broadly as a call for leaders to embrace a form of cultivation that eschewed conventions in a way that took into account the needs of the times. His framework of “superior,” “middling,” and “lower wisdom” allowed him to lay this principle out in the first category and then populate the next categories with examples of historical actors who failed to live by this principle.

²² Because of a lack of Qing recognition, the Nguyễn continued to date their written documents using the reign name of the Lê until 1802.

The category of “middling intellect” explicates how philosophies that did not take into account the guiding principle of being relevant for “the times” were all eventually rendered useless. Beginning with another clichéd pairing, the monk introduces the examples of Mozi and Yang Chu:

There still remains the cultivation of those of middling wisdom.	126
Mozi ²³ and Yangchu; ²⁴	127
They each cultivated something for people or for the self.	
[Even if] by plucking just one tiny hair he could benefit all of humanity,	128
Yangchu would not be happy to do it.	
To exhaust all of his strength in order to benefit just one person,	129
From this Mozi would wholeheartedly not flinch.	

Mozi and Yang Chu are classical examples of philosophers considered heterodox by the Confucianists because their philosophies posed a direct challenge to the Confucian philosophy of practicing human kindness that respected social hierarchy. Mozi and Yangchu stand as opposing schools of thought regarding the idea of love. Mozi preached “love without discrimination,” something that the Confucianists found unacceptable because it disrespected a major teaching of Confucianism, which advocated that love should be greatest towards one’s own parents, then in lesser degrees other members of one’s family, and finally, as an extension of this principle, towards the whole of humanity. Yang Chu, on the other hand, stood for hedonism and individuality, since he would not “pluck one hair” to “benefit the whole of humanity.” D.C. Lau argues that this categorization misrepresents Yang Chu’s school of thought, which really

²³ Mozi preached universal love in an extension of Confucius’ teaching about love for one’s family.

²⁴ Yang Chu stands for hedonism, to act only for one’s own benefit. Mozi and Yang Chu were 4th century BC historical figures, a generation or two before Mencius. Mencius (ca. 372-289 BC) and Xunzi (c. 312-230 BC) made critiques of them.

preached that life was so precious that one should not even sacrifice a tiny hair in exchange for possession of the whole empire.²⁵ Regardless of the accuracy of the portrayal, the pairing of Mozi and Yang Chu has come to represent a range of ideologies considered heterodox by the Confucianists. By the time that Nguyễn Cư Trinh composed the *Sãi Vãi*, these philosophies had lost their force and relevance; his inclusion of this clichéd pairing, however, served as an intimation of his sentiments about the next pair of philosophies that he introduced into this category, philosophies which were much more relevant to Đàng Trong and posed a real challenge to Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s preferred vision of how the southern Vietnamese frontier should be culturally and politically inhabited:

As for those who cultivate the Buddha ²⁶ on the one hand, the Bodhidharma ²⁷ on the other;	130
Cultivating assiduously was Kumarajiva, ²⁸ cultivating with agonizing effort was Manjusri. ²⁹	131
This is how it all started, ³⁰ foreigners [came] discursing according to the customs of the Middle Hoa civilization.	132
Spurning the affairs of life: wealth and honor and glory and splendor, Seeking pleasure in quietness, idleness, reclusivity, and happiness.	133

²⁵ D.C Lau conjectures that Mencius was possibly right in giving Yang Chu’s school of thought this much attention, even though it lost its influence relatively quickly, because it might actually have become the precursor of Daoist philosophies. D.C. Lau, introduction to *Mencius*, trans. by D.C. Lau (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 29-31.

²⁶ I translate Buddha from Thích Ca, which refers to the historical Buddha.

²⁷ I translate Bodhidharma from Đạt Ma, which refers to the semi-legendary 6C figure who came from India to China.

²⁸ Kumarajiva is rendered as Cưu Ma Thập Ha. He was a fourth century translator of Sanskrit that came into China.

²⁹ Manjusri is rendered as Văn Thù Bồ Tát. He was a Bodhisattva who some believe had lived in Wutai mountain and is associated with wisdom.

³⁰ “số là” (數羅) *Nôm* reading of the word. Trần Văn Kiệm, *Giúp Đọc Nôm và Hán Việt*, p. 729; Nguyễn Định Hoà, *Từ điển Việt-Anh*, p. 617.

Calling themselves by the name of Buddha, 134
[written with] the characters “not” and “human;”³¹
Just as [their] logic in the purest form 135
is not knowing about human affairs.

Kumarajiva, a fourth century translator of Sanskrit who came to China, and Manjusri, a Bodhisattva popular in China ironically associated with wisdom, embody aspects of Buddhism that Nguyễn Cư Trinh found to be at odds with his guiding principle of being relevant to the times. He sought to undermine their philosophies in two ways: first, he highlighted the fact that they were foreigners, thus lending emphasis to his point that their philosophies were unsuitable and irrelevant for the people of his own culture, which he did not differentiate from that of the “Middle Hoa civilization.”³² Second, he charged that Buddhist philosophy was fundamentally irrelevant to governance because the aim of Buddhism, as embodied in the word “Buddha” (佛 combines the characters 弗, which means “not,” and 人, which means “human”), was to be ignorant of human affairs. The logical extension of this denial of one’s own humanity was to neglect the responsibilities that Nguyễn Cư Trinh considered crucial to the maintenance of stability within the polity and order amongst the population:

And so it goes: whoever is bad leave [him] as bad, 136
whoever is good leave [him] as good.³³

³¹ 佛 is made up of the characters 弗, meaning “not,” and 人, meaning “human.”

³² “Middle Hoa” has sometimes been rendered as “Central Efflorescence.” See, for example, Kelley, “Vietnam as a ‘Domain of Manifest Civility,’” p. 70.

³³ “Bad” here is rendered using the *Nôm* character 與 (*dữ*); “good” is rendered using the *Nôm* character 荅 (*lành*). Trần Văn Kiệm, *Giúp Đọc Nôm và Hán Việt*, pp. 365 and 523 respectively.

Households may prosper or die out: fathers and sons need not even defend
them!³⁴ 137

Countries may be in order or in chaos: lords and officials need not even pay
attention!³⁵

In spite of their ignorance, however, Nguyễn Cư Trinh found that those professing to distance themselves from the world and from humanity still presumed to speak about human affairs:

Nevertheless,³⁶ [they] speak of humaneness and speak of propriety, 138
speak of human nature and speak of human affections.³⁷

Nguyễn Cư Trinh regarded the topics of “humaneness,” “propriety,” “human nature,” and “human affections,” topics fundamental to the Confucian discourse on governance, as issues about which followers of Buddhism should have no knowledge. His indignation towards their discourse on such topics indicates his displeasure against their participation in and advice regarding governance, potentially to the detriment of the polity and its people. The result of the cultivation of those of “middling wisdom” is futility:

A worldly person who is greedy for Heaven necessarily does good, 139
[or he is] afraid of Hell so rids [himself] of bad habits.

Ten thousand generations making offerings; 140
That is the cultivation of middling wisdom.

The people of “middling wisdom” make no impact in the world, and do good or rid themselves of bad habits not in order to pursue a higher form of cultivation but for greed of heaven or fear of

³⁴ “*Bênh*” (兵). *Nôm* character meaning “to protect.” Trần Văn Kiệm, *Giúp Đọc Nôm và Hán Việt*, p. 269.

³⁵ “*Đoái*” (兌). *Nôm* character meaning “pay attention to.” See Trần Văn Kiệm, *Giúp Đọc Nôm và Hán Việt*, p. 394.

³⁶ “*Vậy mà*” is “nevertheless.” See Nguyễn Đình Hòa, *Từ điển Việt-Anh*, p. 803.

³⁷ The implication is that the Buddhists presume to speak of these aspects even though their logic is to not know about them.

hell. The futility of their actions characterizes the inhabitants of the category of “middling wisdom.”

The examples used to elucidate the category of “middling wisdom” differ from those in the other two categories in that they are not political leaders. Mozi, Yang Chu, Kumarajiva, and Manjusri were philosophers and religious teachers; they were not leaders who attempted to apply those philosophies to governance. For all the futility, the philosophers did not actually cause harm to the people. In the next category, “inferior wisdom,” the monk demonstrates how the application of heterodox philosophies to governance had historically caused great harm to the people:

[As for] cultivation that is very stupid, there are many people of inferior wisdom.	141
Yonder like Hán Võ Đế, ³⁸ who was a highly illustrious genius;	142
Here like Tần Thi Hoàng, ³⁹ who was a ferocious and cruel fellow.	143
[One was] greedy to cultivate the Way, [The other] dived and forded to cultivate immortality.	144
[They] exhausted the strength of the people: all under heaven suffered worry and cares;	145
[they] spent the resources of a country: ten thousand peoples shouted in hardship. A hundred strategies to cultivate religion, there were [But even] a tiny hair of result, there was not.	146

³⁸ Han Wudi, Emperor Wu of Han. This version of the text mistakenly records Liang instead Han. Liang Wudi appears later. Han Wudi was a famous conqueror in the Han dynasty.

³⁹ Qin Shihuang, the first emperor of Qin.

In the land of Luân Đài,⁴⁰ did Hán [Võ Đế] not have to repent his heart? 147
 Only on the mountain pass of Hàm Cốc⁴¹ did Tần [Thĩ Hoàng] realize
 [that there were] rebellious intentions.
 Alas! Many resemble Hán [Võ Đế]; 148
 [many are] unreasonable like Tần [Thĩ Hoàng]!⁴²

The monk singled out Han Wudi (Hán Võ Đế) and Qin Shihuang (Tần Thĩ Hoàng) for the ways in which they carelessly “exhausted the strength of the people” and “spent the resources of the country.” Again, it is clear that the stability of the polity was central to Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s concerns. He highlighted how adherence to heterodox philosophies, in this case Daoist beliefs, was to be blamed for the behavior of those leaders; he showed how seemingly harmless actions that resulted from being “greedy for heaven” in the category of “middling wisdom” translated to disastrous results in the category of “inferior wisdom,” when Han Wudi’s greed for “the way” and Qin Shihuang’s quest for immortality resulted in much suffering for their people. Moreover, the monk made it clear that “inferior wisdom” was not limited to leaders who actively wreaked havoc, but also included those who caused the downfall of their dynasties through their passivity, a topic about which he had much to say:

In what age [has anyone] cultivated to keep up with Tống Đạo Quân,⁴³ 149
 in what age [is anyone] esteemed to be the equal of Lương Võ Đế?⁴⁴

⁴⁰ 輪台 (*luntai*), represented in this text as 論臺. Emperor Wu of Han realized that he had made many mistakes and apologized in what became known as the Edict of Luntai.

⁴¹ 函谷 (*hangu*). On this pass, Zhang Liang of the state of Han tried to assassinate Qín Shihuang but failed.

⁴² The couplet reads: “*Hỡi nhiều như Hán, chẳng phải như Tần.*” “*phải chẳng*” means to be reasonable; inverting it would render “*chẳng phải*” as “to be unreasonable.” Definition of “*phải chẳng*” in Nguyễn Đình Hòa, *Từ điển Việt-Anh*, p. 519.

⁴³ Emperor Daojun of the Song, literally “Emperor Patriarch and Sovereign of the Way” (教主道君皇帝), was the Emperor Huizong (1082-1135) of the Northern Song dynasty. He fervently cultivated Daoism and elevated Daoism’s position in the period of his reign.

⁴⁴ Emperor Wu of Liang (464-549), founder of the Liang dynasty. He instituted Confucian forms of government, such as the civil examinations, and was at the same time a devout Buddhist.

Nevertheless, why did immortals not appear to give [Tống Đạo Quân] urgent assistance? ⁴⁵	150
[when Lương Võ Đế was] hungry in Đai Thành, ⁴⁶ why did Buddha himself not avert the disaster?	
A pity about the foundations, the merit of establishing rivers and mountains; ⁴⁷	151
[They] destroyed the work that [their] virtuous ancestors created.	
The army of Châu ⁴⁸ already echoed and resounded their famed artillery;	152
why did Tề Nguyên ⁴⁹ lean on the table to discuss the Way endlessly? ⁵⁰	
The Khitan ⁵¹ had already encircled [them] inside and outside;	153
Why did Vương Khâm ⁵² still close the door to cultivate?	
[Dynasties] decayed: their time was up;	154
[Leaders] died: nobody mourned them.	

Here, Nguyễn Cư Trinh demonstrated the disastrous consequences of applying the philosophies found in the category of “middling wisdom” to governance. He questioned why Emperor Huizong and Liang Wudi, a pious Daoist and Buddhist respectively, met such terrible ends even though they were fervent worshippers. Not only had their cultivation amounted to nothing, they had destroyed the dynasties that had been built with their ancestors’ merit. The examples of Qi Yuan (Tề Nguyên) and Wang Qin (Vương Khâm) were possibly even worse, since they persisted in their religious habits even when enemies were at their doorstep. He was equally contemptuous

⁴⁵ Emperor Huizong was unprepared in military affairs. When the Jin attacked the Song in 1126, he abdicated; the Jin took the Song capital Kaifeng in 1127, held Emperor Huizong prisoner and humiliated him until his death in 1135.

⁴⁶ At the end of his reign, he was kept in his house and it was rumored that he died of starvation when deprived of his food supply.

⁴⁷ Rivers and mountains refer to a dynasty.

⁴⁸ Zhou (周) dynasty.

⁴⁹ Emperor Yuan of Qi (齊元). This is probably a reference to the battle of Pingyang.

⁵⁰ “lean on the table” can also be “rely on” the “high desk/altar.”

⁵¹ Northeastern Manchurian tribe from the early 11C.

⁵² In my text, this name appears as Wang Qin (王欽). Several other versions record it as Qin Ruo (欽若).

of people who actively or passively destroyed the polities under their charge. Summarizing the full range of “wisdoms,” those of “superior wisdom” were so because they brought stability to the people, those of “middling wisdom” contributed nothing, and those of “inferior wisdom” wrought damage to their dynasties through their cultivation of Daoist and Buddhist ideologies. The monk closes this section by reminding the audience, a member of which was the king himself, of the responsibilities of kingship:

As for the ways of being an emperor or a king,	155
Cultivate humanness and cultivate administration;	
Cultivate power and cultivate influence,	156
Cultivate regulations and cultivate laws and principles	
First cultivate [to be like] Nghiêu ⁵³ and Thuán ⁵⁴ and Vũ ⁵⁵ and Thang, ⁵⁶	157
then cultivate the classic books, moral law, tactics and strategy.	
Where does anyone imitate masters and monks in order to cultivate?	158
Consider the matter of cultivation to hone and obtain magic;	159
Ponder that way of governing, what benefit has it for the country?	
How many people have really received blessings?	160
Know that all [those ways] brought disaster.	
Always mesmerized with the way (<i>mê đạo</i> , 迷道) endlessly;	161
In cultivation, why emulate the correct techniques of cultivation?	

Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s support of his king’s elevation in status was contingent upon the king embracing what he considered to be good governance. He advised the king to follow the examples of the people with “superior wisdom” and to learn from the mistakes of those of “middling” and “inferior wisdom.” The historical personalities that he selected amplified his

⁵³ Yao

⁵⁴ Shun

⁵⁵ Yu, founder of Xia dynasty.

⁵⁶ Tang, founder of Shang dynasty.

message that proper governance had to be modeled on Confucian fundamentals, such as being adaptable to the times, and not on the practices of “masters and monks.”

Line 161 wraps up Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s discussion of “cultivation that is free from mere conventionality,” which he had proposed as the preferable alternative to practicing the “correct techniques of cultivation.” The phrase that I translated as “mesmerized with the way” (*mê đạo*, 迷道) can also be translated as “losing the way.” The standard phrase used to describe the phenomenon of losing one’s sense of orientation is “*mê lộ*” (迷路), literally “losing the road,” a contraction of the phrase “*mê li đạo lộ*” (迷離道路).⁵⁷ Since “*đạo*” can refer to “a path” as well as “the way” in the philosophical sense, and Nguyễn Cư Trinh had in fact been using these various meanings for “*đạo*” in his satire, substituting “*mê đạo*” for “*mê lộ*” would be in character with the rest of the satire. “*Mê đạo*,” according to this reading, would refer to losing the philosophical “way.”

These two translations for the phrase “*mê đạo*” have contrary meanings: in the first, “mesmerized with the way,” “the way” appears to be something negative that should be de-emphasized; in the second, “losing the way,” “the way” is emphasized positively because the implication is that one should find the way that one has lost. Using the phrase “*mê đạo*” combines the two meanings so that being “mesmerized with the way” resulted in fact in “losing the way;” in both cases “the way” refers to the philosophical and religious “way” so sought after by many. Line 161 has to be understood as a response to lines 84-88, where the nun condemned the monk to hell for being irreligious and not practicing the “correct techniques (*đạo*) of

⁵⁷ *Matthews’ Chinese-English Dictionary*, entry 4450(29).

cultivation.” Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s monk shows her how leaders in history who had followed those “correct techniques (*đạo*) of cultivation” had in fact all “lost the way (*đạo*)” because they were too “mesmerized with the way (*đạo*).”

In this section, Nguyễn Cư Trinh laid out the foundations of his proposal for best governance for the southern Vietnamese realm. His guiding principle was to cultivate oneself in a way that was suited to the times and so ensure the stability of the polity and order amongst the people; he was particularly dismissive of leaders who adhered to religious philosophies to the detriment of the dynasties under their charge. As I alluded to earlier, his irreverence for the category of “wisdom” suggests that he considered these principles to be somewhat limited or lacking. Indeed, his proposal for good governance did not end with this section. He continued, in the two that follow, to promote two other aspects of governance that he felt were necessary inclusions to address the lack in the conventional Confucian doctrine for good governance.

Addressing the Neglect of Women

In response to the monk’s discussion about the falsity of “correct techniques of cultivation,” the nun admits that he has surprised her. She had initially thought that he knew of only one way of cultivation, the corrupted one that combined religious practice with indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh; instead, she now realizes that he knows a lot and is not the fool that she had thought him to be:⁵⁸

⁵⁸ I discussed the theme of combining religious and worldly practices in Chapter One of this dissertation.

[I had] mistakenly thought that you, sir, Knew of but one way of cultivation.	162
[I had] falsely imagined you a foolish fellow; Only now [do I] know that [you] are a polite person [You are] sagacious, pure, and clean, Knowledgeable and well-behaved.	163 164
Certainly, gold here is not yet alloyed; Truly, there is jade there that is still hidden. [You are] not arrogant and not deceitful; [You] know honor and know how to let good things to others.	165 166
[You] know that a petty man [is like] rubbish so you throw [him] out; [You] know that a gentleman [is like] jade and gold so [you] cherish [him]. [You] know about despising and about respect; [You] know about property and about people	167 168
If, by chance, you know stories of the times, Speak and [I will] listen, it is enjoyable and also good.	169

There are two key points in this little speech that shape the direction of the next two sections of the play. First, the nun wants to know “stories of the times” (*chuyện đời*) and invites the monk to educate her. Second, the nun misunderstands the monk and thinks that he adheres to the conventional way of judging people, categorizing them as petty men and gentlemen. The first point is the theme that will be addressed by the monk in the following sections of the play; the second point functions as a way for a small but very meaningful detour. The monk is appalled that the nun has failed to understand what he has been saying. He refuses to tell her “stories of the times” and instead insults her:

This nun is somewhat strange, Don't speak [you make me] miserable.	170
To waste a 5-stringed instrument plucking it for the ear of a buffalo; To waste 10,000 <i>hộc</i> of water washing the head of a duck. ⁵⁹	171

⁵⁹ A *hộc* is a unit of measure.

I know nothing, I discern nothing.	172
Pay attention to avoid my arm,	173
or else I might trespass and touch your breast.	

The monk considers the nun an unworthy interlocutor and insults her on two counts: first, by using the allusion of playing an instrument to entertain a buffalo, which is unable to appreciate the complexity of the music, the monk tells the nun that she too ignorant for his stories. Second, the allusion to the head of a duck tells the nun that she is too insignificant for him to waste that amount of attention on. The monk’s rudeness opens the way for the nun to defend herself:

This mister lacks manners, and moreover is unfaithful.	174
You, mister, see that I am going to lead a religious life;	175
You, mister, think that I do not understand the affairs of the times.	
It is already known that men	176
Have the ambition for administration	
However, illustrious women	177
Also have many talents to assist the world.	

On the count of ignorance, the nun refutes the monk’s belief that leading a religious life was necessarily accompanied by an ignorance of the world. Her assertion can be read both as a response to the monk’s insults and also to his proposal for good governance in the previous section, where the historical actors who had peopled the category of “middling wisdom” had sought to pursue religion to the detriment of their participation in the world they lived in.⁶⁰ The nun refutes also the charge of her insignificance. She retorts that stories about men’s abilities for administration is old news, lesser known is that women have always shown the ability to “assist the world.” In her response to him, she adopts the same method that he had used in the previous section, where he enlisted the help of historical figures to elucidate his point. Here, she lists

⁶⁰ The *Sāi Vāi* picks this theme up again later in the play; I discuss this in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

examples of superior women in history to demonstrate both her own erudition and facility in the classics, and the significance of women in the past who had proven themselves to be the equals of, or even superior to, their male counterparts:

Yonder like Châu Thái Tì, ⁶¹	178
[whom] the classics still praise for her virtue and honor in the women's quarters.	
Here like Tống Tuyên Nhơn, ⁶²	179
[whom] history still praises as a woman who attained the level of Nghiêu and Thuấn. ⁶³	
A woman like Tạ Đạo Uân; ⁶⁴	180
a woman who knew how to sing: snow became poetry.	
A woman like Thái Văn Cơ, ⁶⁵	181
A woman who knew her lot: her lute became music.	
[As for] the plot to help the lords to abandon a place of idleness,	182
[It is attributed to] no one but Đường Huệ, the second rank wife. ⁶⁶	
[As for] the plan to help her father escape a place of tragedy and danger,	183
[It is attributed to] no one but Hán Đề Oánh, the young girl. ⁶⁷	

⁶¹ Queen Taisi of Zhou (周太妣) was the wife of the King Wen of Zhou, the founder of the Zhou dynasty (1046-221 BC) and the mother of the next king of Zhou, King Wu. She was famous for her virtue.

⁶² Empress Xuanren of Song (宋宣仁), a Song dynasty empress who ruled in her son's infancy.

⁶³ Yao and Shun.

⁶⁴ Xie Daoyun (謝道韞) from the Eastern Jin dynasty. In a competition with her elder cousin to come up with a poem about snow, she won.

⁶⁵ There appears to be some ambiguity regarding this name. The text that I work on renders it as Song Banji (宋班姬). There is a mistake here because Banji (班姬), also known as Ban Zhao, did not live in the Song dynasty but in the time of the Han dynasty. Banji helped to finish the *Hanshu (History of the Han Dynasty)*, which her father Ban Biao had started, and her brothers Ban Chao and Ban Gu continued but died before its completion. She also wrote the *Admonitions for Women*. Other *Nôm* versions of the *Sãi Vãi* record this name as Thái Văn Cơ or Cai Wenji (蔡文姬), a woman who also lived in the time of the Han dynasty. She lost her first husband early, was captured by the Xiongnu and bore the Xiongnu leader two children while she was in captivity. She was later ransomed by Cao Cao and returned without her two children. Qing dynasty portrayals of her typically show her playing an *erhu* (a string instrument). A modern Vietnamese (*quốc ngữ*) transcription of the *Sãi Vãi* by Lê Phước Thành even records the name as Thái Ban Cơ, a combination of the two names. See Lê Phước Thành, *Sãi Vãi Luận Đàm* (Sài Gòn: Dục Lưu Phương Publishing House, 1929). I chose the name Thái Văn Cơ because she is a better fit for the couplet, which refers to the woman's understanding of her lot in life and her talent for musical composition.

⁶⁶ This is a reference to a seventh century Tang concubine, Hui of Tang (唐惠), who helped the officials to persuade the emperor not to build a pleasure palace.

⁶⁷ Tiying of Han (漢提莖), the youngest of five daughters of physician Chunyu Yi.

Among men, there are many who are heroic men,	184
Among women, there are many who are heroic women.	
A cypress boat drifts for a thousand miles, on and on;	185
Han books left aside for ten thousand years remain bright.	
[About] women who have talent and who have beauty;	186
Women who have virtue and who have merit.	
[Among] the beautiful women there is no lack of heroes;	187
You, Mr. Monk, dare to bully me, a venerable nun!	

As a response to the dismissive monk, the nun effectively demolishes his stereotypical characterization of her as an ignorant and insignificant religious woman. More importantly, this section on the great talents of historical women functions to address a topic that the monk, in his previous elucidation of the appropriateness of Confucian philosophy for governance, had failed to consider. Conventional Confucian philosophy generally prescribed a submissive role for women. In this section, however, the nun introduces six women in history who used their talents to “assist the world.” She praised the first two women, Queen Taisi of Zhou (Châu Thái Tì), the wife of the great King Wen of Zhou, and Empress Xuanren of Song (Tống Tuyên Nhơn), an empress who ruled in her son’s infancy, for their virtue, the result of which was that good governance could ensue since they were wives and mothers of great leaders.⁶⁸

The second two women, Xie Daoyun (Tạ Đạo Uẩn) and Cai Wenji (Thái Văn Cơ), were women famous for their excellence in poetry and music. Xie Daoyun is best known for the story of how her uncle, Xie An, had convened a competition for the children at a family gathering by challenging them to come up with a couplet describing the snow that was falling outside. Her

⁶⁸ The virtues of Queen Taisi of Zhou are celebrated in two poems – “Zhounan” and “Shaonan,” also known as the “Two South” poems – that are recorded in the “songs of the states” (*guofeng*) in the *Book of Odes*. See Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 85.

elder male cousin, the eldest son of Xie An, quickly rose to the occasion with the couplet, “Could it be salt shaking down through the air?” Xie Daoyun, however, bested him with a fast response, “More like willow catkins tossed up by the wind!”⁶⁹ Xie Daoyun is the embodiment of a precocious young child who delights in besting men. Cai Wenji, on the other hand, features in a story of an erudite and literarily talented woman whose sad lot during the time of the Xiongnu invasion of the Han—forced marriage and then separation from the two children that she had borne in captivity in order to return to her homeland—was channeled into her beautifully sorrowful poetry and music.⁷⁰ Unlike Xie Daoyun, who represents raw talent and excellence, Cai Wenji represents women who have risen above their lot to realize the full extent of their talent.

The third two women, Concubine Hui of Tang (Đường Huệ) and the young Tiying of Han (Hán Đè Oánh), helped men—officials in the first case and her father in the second—through their skills in persuasion and in so doing prevented wrongdoing from being committed.

⁶⁹ Xie’s cousin: *san yan kong shong cha ke ni*

Xie Daoyun: *wei ruo liu xu yin feng qi*

The text is recorded by Liu Yiqing (ca. 430). Originally cited in Mann, *Precious Records*, p. 83

⁷⁰ For more information on Cai Wenji, refer to William Nienhauser, Jr., ed. and comp., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 944. Cai Wenji is also known for another story. After she was ransomed, she remarried, this time to an official by the name of Dong Si. Her sad life reached another moment of crisis when her husband Dong Si was sentenced to death for a crime he had committed. She managed to plead for his life and saved him in the nick of time. This story is recorded in the *Houhanshu* (*History of the Later Han*):

Si was functioning in the capacity of the colonel of a *tun tian* (a type of military – plantation system) when he violated the law to the level that matched the death penalty. Wenji went to see Cao Cao to plead on behalf of Si. At that time, those present, including high-ranking officials, reputable members of the gentry class who were not in service, and ambassadors from distant regions, filled the reception hall. Cao said to the guests, “Cai Bojie’s daughter is outside now, on behalf of you various lords, I present her to you.” Upon the time when Wenji entered, unkempt, disheveled, and barefooted, she prostrated herself and begged for mercy; her voice and words were clear and well-spoken, the expression of her words were grief-stricken and moving. As for those present, all altered their countenance on her behalf. Cao said, “Truly, I pity you, yet the official paper has already been sent, what can I do?” Wenji said, “Your eminence, you have ten thousand horses in your stable, your ferocious fighters are as numerous as the trees in the forest, why are you stingy about one quick-footed horse and rider to save a life that is on the verge of death!” Cao felt moved by her words; only then did he chase back his sent-out official paper and forgive Si’s sins. (Translation my own.)

Concubine Hui of Tang represents the perfect concubine who entreats the emperor to do right; this representation is in sharp contrast with caricatures of other concubines who distracted the emperor from performing his duties well. Tiying, on the other hand, is known for her filial piety that moved the emperor to the extent of changing the law. Her father, a physician, had been sentenced to the harsh punishment of bodily mutilation because he had offended a powerful patient; Tiying memorialized the emperor, asking to be a slave to the court in exchange for her father's freedom. The emperor was so moved by her petition that he not only released her father, he also abolished corporal punishment.⁷¹

The nun in the *Sāi Vāi* celebrates women who contributed to the betterment of the societies they lived in through their assistance in governance, the full expression of their literary and musical talents, and their persuasive skills that righted potential wrongs. Significantly, she omitted examples of “chaste widows” who had resisted remarriage in order to remain faithful to their dead husbands. This omission is significant because the “widow chastity cult” had reached a high point during Qing rule in China. Susan Mann records that Qing government campaigns to promote widow chastity

⁷¹ Tiying's story was recorded by Sima Qian in the *Shiji (Records of the Historian)*:

In the fourth year of Emperor Wen's reign, someone submitted a memorial reporting on Yi. On the basis of an offense that merited corporal punishment, Yi was required to be transported westward to go to Chang An. Yi had five daughters who trailed him (as he was being transported) and wept. Yi was incensed and cursed them, saying, “When you give birth to children you really should give birth to a son; otherwise, in case of an emergency, you lack those you can use.” Upon hearing this, the youngest daughter Tiying was hurt by her father's words, only then did she accompany her father west. The submitted letter said, “When my father served as an official, in Qi they praised him as honest and fair; today he is arrested and facing corporal punishment. I am grieved, for one who is dead cannot return to life, and one who is corporally punished cannot be made whole again; even if he committed an offense and wished to turn over a new leaf, there is no path for him to follow and in the end he would not be able to fulfill this. I am willing to offer myself to be taken into the court to become a slave of the court, by this to redeem my father's crime and to allow him to change his conduct and start anew. The memorial was presented to the emperor and he was grieved by what she said. In that year, in addition to pardoning her father, he also abolished corporal punishment. (Translation my own.)

... were based on a system of rewards in which leaders of local communities were asked to nominate exemplary women and send their names, along with a brief biographical sketch, to the county magistrate for consideration for imperial honors. To be eligible for recognition as a chaste widow in High Qing times, a woman had to be widowed before the age of 30 *sui* and remain celibate past the age of 50. If the evidence supporting her case passed muster at the capital, where it was examined at the Board of Rites, her family might be rewarded with a commendation written in the emperor's calligraphy, which could be displayed at the entrance to their home. In some cases, the woman's family members or, if appropriate, community leaders were given a sum of money to construct a monumental stone arch honoring her. The names of all women so honored were inscribed on special lists in shrines to honor the "celebrated officials and local worthies."⁷²

The Qing promotion of this cult continued a trend that had been popular in the Ming; the difference, however, was that during the Ming dynasty, widow suicides had been honored because young widows who either followed their husbands to their deaths, or died resisting a forced remarriage, were dramatized and celebrated as exemplars of faithfulness and chastity. Qing policy, although in praise of the chaste widow, frowned upon the practice of widow suicide, considering it "a cowardly way to escape Confucian family duties."⁷³ Not only does the nun in the *Sāi Vāi* not celebrate any widow suicides, she does not even acknowledge chastity as a virtue worthy of inclusion in her list. The nun's concern was not with guarding the female body against moral violence but with demonstrating how females in history have shown agency even in domains that supposedly belonged to men.

The inclusion of a section dedicated to women in the *Sāi Vāi* was in keeping with the literary fashion of the times. In Qing China, one of the outcomes of the drive to return to the

⁷² Mann, *Precious Records*, p. 24.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 25. This view was captured in an edict issued by the Yongzheng emperor in 1728.

classics was the unearthing of stories of exemplary females who had been neglected in favor of those who exhibited virtues in keeping with the cult of “chaste widows.” Stories of highly educated women, in particular, caused some unease amongst certain scholars. For men, a literary education was a means to an official post. Educated women, however, posed a problem. For some, educated women from the past embodied “pure erudition untainted by the competition for degrees and office”; some male scholars in the Qing dynasty employed this imagery to criticize the corruption and competition of their own time.⁷⁴ For others, the debate was about the role of educated women in the Qing dynasty. Contrasting images of the “moral instructor” and the “brilliant prodigy” emerged as opposing symbols of the purpose and nature of a woman’s erudition.⁷⁵ Women’s real participation in the production of literature during this time, moreover, expanded exponentially. The poet Yuan Mei could boast of and for his numerous lady pupils; poetry clubs comprised solely of women existed during this time.⁷⁶ Vietnamese histories also recorded the achievements of elite literary women in the eighteenth century. Nguyễn Thị Kinh Phi (d. 1715), wife of the sixth Nguyễn lord Nguyễn Phúc Chu, is remembered for her composition of four poems complaining against heaven for the transience of her beauty. Upon her death, her husband Nguyễn Phúc Chu was moved to compose four parallel poems, accusing heaven of “hating” his wife. Embedded in the poems are admonishments telling readers not to “laugh” at such poetry; those poems were probably based on topics that exceeded conventional

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

⁷⁵ Mann identifies Zhang Xuecheng and Yuan Mei as the two chief proponents of these views respectively. Ibid., pp. 83-94.

⁷⁶ Waley, *Yuan Mei*, p. 183.

norms.⁷⁷ The female literary voice was also used at this time to convey messages that would otherwise have been considered dangerous; examples include “Song of a Soldier’s Wife” (*Chinh Phụ Ngâm*), composed by a male Đàng Ngoài scholar Đặng Trần Côn (1710-1745). The *Sãi Vãi*, although not composed by a woman, captured some of the spirit of its time.

The double feminine voice in this section of the *Sãi Vãi*—first the voice of the nun herself and second the voice of the historical female personalities that she invokes—serves to emphasize the importance of recognizing the agency of the female. Particularly in the context of an expanding frontier, women’s labor and participation in the building of frontier society were crucial. The *Sãi Vãi* sought to overturn a traditional caricature of women, the submissive female, in favor of a portrait of an active and lively woman who saw her role as an important contributing member of the society she lived in. The nun’s speech served to remind female members of the audience of their worth to society; it also served as a reminder to the king that the issue of female participation was not one that could be neglected in any proposal for best governance of the southern Vietnamese realm.

Stories that Cannot be Told

The monk is delighted by the nun’s response to his provocation. He mollifies her by telling her that he was merely testing her, and is now willing to reveal his stories to her:

Very true, very true!
how happy, how happy!

188

⁷⁷ Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn [Nguyễn Dynasty Historical Institute], *Đại Nam Thực Lục* [Veritable Records of the Great South], ed. Đào Duy Anh, trans. Nguyễn Ngọc Tinh, vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục Publishing House, 2002), entry for year 1715, pp 133-35.

[Like when] thirsty in a drought, there [one] sees clouds;	189
[Like when] holding a lute, [one] meets an audience!	
If the tree is not hard, how does [one] know the axe is sharp?	190
[One] knows a good horse by means of a long road.	
Therefore [I] will roll away clouds and fog, clear away spikes and thorns;	191
So that you can see a blue sky and find the main road. ⁷⁸	
[I] do not lack strange tales;	192
all the unusual things.	
Bring [your] ear close in order to listen;	193
Pay attention to [your] breasts or else [I might] bump against [them].	

He tells the nun that he will help her to “find the main road,” perhaps a reference to line 161 where he stated that being “mesmerized with the way” was in fact “losing the way.” Nguyễn Cư Trinh makes it a point, here in line 191, not to use the word “*đạo*” to refer to the road, using the vernacular Vietnamese word “*đường*” instead, to prevent the audience from misunderstanding his intentions; his monk is not about to show them a new “way” (*đạo*). The monk reveals that he would like to tell the nun stories about four issues. The first is about the relationship between a lord and his officials, the second the relationship between a father and his son, the third the relationship between wealth and humaneness, and the fourth the relationship between wealth and population stability. The first two themes spell out two central relationships in Confucian philosophy that are essential not only to the smooth running of the state but also to the stability of all under heaven. The monk omits one other important hierarchical relationship, the relationship between husbands and wives, a significant fact especially when considered against the previous section highlighting the historical contributions of women. In regard to the model relationships between lords and officials and between fathers and sons, however, the monk

⁷⁸ The word that Nguyễn Cư Trinh uses for “road” here is “*đường*” (*Nôm* character: 唐).

speaks and yet claims not to be able to speak about them because of the cases of historical personalities who have acted to the contrary:

I want to tell a story from a long time ago for you to ponder on; That is in the classics, written down and already transmitted.	194
I want to speak of a recent story for you to listen to; That is in stories that have been written down and already become a stack.	195
Tales of Hán, tales of Đường, tales of Tống, Tales of Thương, tales of Hạ, tales of Châu. ⁷⁹	196
Stories in which the relationship between fathers and sons is of first priority; Stories in which the relationship between lords and vassals is very important.	197
I want to talk about a story “The lord sends out his official according to the rituals”;	198
I am, on the other hand, afraid that Tần and Hán ⁸⁰ would be irritated	
I want to talk about a story “A vassal serving a lord using loyalty”;	199
I am, on the other hand, afraid that Mãng ⁸¹ and Tào ⁸² would be resentful.	
I want to talk about a story “To be a father is to be compassionate” for you to be certain of;	200
I am, on the other hand, afraid that Mr. Cỗ Tâu ⁸³ would scold this idea as stupid.	
I want to talk about a story “To be a son is to have filial piety” for you to know;	201
I am, on the other hand, afraid that Tỳ Dương ⁸⁴ would criticize [it] as strange.	

Qin Shihuang and Han Wudi, mentioned earlier in the category of people of “inferior wisdom,” did not act as model lords in their relations with their officials. Wang Mang and Cao Cao, on the

⁷⁹ Tales of Han, Tang, Song, Shang, Xia, and Zhou.

⁸⁰ Qin Shihuang and Han Wudi, mentioned earlier in the play.

⁸¹ Wang Mang (45BC – 23 AD) sought to replace various Han emperors whom he felt had lost the mandate of heaven.

⁸² Cao Cao (155-220 AD) was an extremely powerful statesman in the Eastern Han. He compared himself to King Wen of Zhou, who refused to depose King Zhou of Shang as he was the subordinate of the king; King Wen’s son destroyed the Shang and posthumously named him King Wen of Zhou. True to his wishes, Cao Cao’s son deposed the king and gave him the posthumous title Emperor Wu of Wei.

⁸³ Gu Sou (瞽瞍), Shun’s wicked father who was apparently intent on killing him.

⁸⁴ Emperor Yang of Sui (隋楊).

other hand, were hardly model officials to their lords. Wang Mang, a scholar-official who rose through the ranks, eventually seized power for himself and founded a “new dynasty,” which lasted from 9AD to 23 AD. Cao Cao represents a crafty statesman who rose to immense power in the Eastern Han. He did not, however, seize the throne, leaving that work to his son. The monk of the *Sāi Vāi* claims, moreover, to be unable to tell stories of model relationships between fathers and sons, because of the cases of Gu Sou (Cổ Tẩu), Shun’s wicked father who allegedly tried to kill him by trapping him on a burning roof and inside a dry well, and Emperor Yang of Sui (Tùy Dương), who murdered his father in order to become the emperor.

The first two themes relate to basic social relationships integral to the tenets of Confucianism. The next relationship, between humaneness and wealth, is slightly more complicated:

I want to talk about a story about “humaneness without wealth”; 202
I am, on the other hand, afraid that Mr Nhan Tũ⁸⁵ would scold, saying:
“Anyone who opens his mouth is offering praise”.
I want, moreover, to talk about a story about “wealth without humaneness”; 203
I am, on the other hand, afraid that Thạch Sùng⁸⁶ heaps reproach, saying:
“Why be clever at blowing at feathers to find fault?”

The monk claims to be unable to tell a story about “humaneness without wealth” not because it did not exist, but because Yanzi (Nhan Tũ), a favorite disciple of Confucius who was very poor, would find fault with the monk for trying to flatter him; the monk is, moreover, unable to discuss “wealth without humaneness” because Shi Chong, a rich and unethical man who lived during the Jin dynasty, would think that the monk was trying to find fault with him. Whereas in the case of

⁸⁵ Yanzi (颜子), allegedly Confucius’ favorite disciple.

⁸⁶ Shi Chong (石崇), a nasty and unethical rich man who lived during the Jin dynasty.

the first two relationships the monk finds himself unable to tell stories about them because there were historical personalities who acted to the contrary, the issue preventing the monk from telling stories about the relationship between “humaneness and wealth” is that people who acted in precisely those fashions, whether good (humaneness without wealth) or bad (wealth without humaneness), would think that he was speaking of those issues on the basis of the monk’s own false righteousness. Even though humaneness to the point of poverty was a praiseworthy virtue, the monk of the *Sāi Vāi* found himself unable to either praise it or condemn practices to the contrary because both praising it and condemning it exposed the monk to accusations of false righteousness.

In the final relationship, that between “wealth and population,” the monk seems finally able to tell a story even though it is as short as the stories that he claims he cannot tell:

I want to talk about a story “When wealth accumulates, the population scatters” 204
for you to know;
then the reason that the Thung⁸⁷ dynasty was lost must be revealed.
I want to talk about a story “When wealth scatters, the population gathers” 205
for you to know;
then the reason that the Châu⁸⁸ dynasty prospers must be spoken of.

The story of the fall of the Shang and the prosperity of the Zhou is really one story instead of two. Significantly, the monk considers the story about the Shang princes, who were corrupt and hoarded wealth thus causing unrest, and the story about the Zhou prince distributing wealth which resulted in population stability, as a story that he is able to talk about. The theme of wealth

⁸⁷ Shang dynasty

⁸⁸ Zhou dynasty

distribution was especially pertinent to the Vietnamese frontier situation. One of the points in Nguyễn Cư Trinh's petition to the king, in fact, finds its focus on this very matter:

There are two types of dodgers in the village: there are those who are fleeing to dodge taxes and so become vagabonds, and there are those who are hungry and cold and so disperse and scatter. Now, not differentiating between the two categories, displaying them altogether on the roll of taxpayers, those who do not pay their own taxes are naturally afraid and disperse to live secretly in the mountains and forests; the people of the commune (*xã*), however, have to shoulder the cost of the damages, why then would they suffer [this]! Now please examine the number of dodgers in the village, [as for] whoever still has a trade then tax [him] according to the regulation, [as for] whoever is hungry and cold, poor and needy then exempt [him] from taxes, as a manner of comforting [him], so that [he can] associate himself with the people and live again.⁸⁹

Although the subject of the third point of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's four-point petition was tax collecting, it was also a plea to the king to differentiate between cheats and real cases of poverty.⁹⁰ Real cases of poverty should concern the king and the government; Nguyễn Cư Trinh felt that a better attempt at wealth distribution so as to "comfort" the poor had to be put into action, at least in his jurisdiction of Quảng Ngãi. This would prevent population dispersal, which was important to the expanding Vietnamese kingdom because people were needed to populate the new lands.

The four themes discussed, or not discussed, in this section all pertain to Confucian notions of good governance. Maintaining proper relationships between the lord and his officials and fathers and sons was considered necessary to ensure stability in the realm; humaneness was

⁸⁹ Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn [Nguyễn Dynasty Historical Institute], *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên* [Biographies of the Great South, Premier Section], ed. Hoa Bằng, trans. Đỗ Mộng Khương (Huế: Thuận Hoá Publishing House, 1993), pp. 140-41.

⁹⁰ I discuss the points one and two in Chapter One of this dissertation and point four in Chapter Three.

of utmost importance and praiseworthy; wealth distribution was integral to the issue of population stability. The monk selected stories to demonstrate the fact that there were many that he could not talk about, and only a few that he could. This technique highlights the importance of the moral behind the story that he eventually does reveal. Although the monk speaks in an obscure fashion that can hardly be considered an attempt to “roll away fog and clouds and clear away spikes and thorns,” the message, or “the main road,” is to be found in this obscurity itself. On one level, his reluctance to “tell stories” suggests the fruitlessness of the activity and the uselessness of stories for moral didacticism. More important for the monk is that the nun should accompany him back to his chamber, his naughty intention right from the start of this play, so that they can tell a story together when it is “quiet and deserted”:

As for the affairs of the nun, you know them;	206
As for the affairs of the monk, I know them.	
Let's labor and practice cultivation for many days;	207
When it is quiet and deserted then I will speak together [with you] one story.	

The humor generated in these lines maintains the comic equilibrium throughout the play. On another level, “telling stories” refers to the prescriptive nature of philosophies about governance. In refusing to tell some stories, the monk presents the final modification to his proposal for best governance of the southern Vietnamese realm. If one maintained a rigid stance regarding all the precepts contained in the conventional philosophy of governance, then governance cannot be adaptive, which is the main guiding principle of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s thought. Hence, even though precepts abound that should be respected, they should not be all consuming. The circuitous route of telling “stories that cannot be told” in fact tells the story that overly prescriptive governing precepts were detrimental to the principle of being adaptive to the times.

Conclusion

Nguyễn Cư Trinh's proposal for best governance respected Confucian philosophies over those promoted by other schools of thought, and yet reflected his skepticism of conventional Confucian doctrines. To an even greater degree than Lê Quý Đôn, Nguyễn Cư Trinh promoted significant modifications to classical conventions. Like Lê Quý Đôn, Nguyễn Cư Trinh's skepticism was a product of his time. The *Sãi Vãi* represents an example of the literature that was produced within the context of the literary trends fashionable in the mid-eighteenth century, spanning at least China and Vietnam.

The *Sãi Vãi*, moreover, appears to be a text documenting a Vietnamese scholar-official's thoughts about Confucianism. Contemporary scholars do not believe that Confucianism had very much of a foothold in Vietnam in general, and Đàng Trong in particular. Dror, evaluating the state of Confucianism in northern Vietnam in the eighteenth century, believes that "Confucianism in Vietnam never gained the status it acquired in China but has largely remained an artificial 'superstructure' amidst a Vietnamese reality permeated with Buddhist and other religious practices."⁹¹ Li Tana notes that "[t]he symbols of trappings of Lê imperial Neo-Confucianism were hardly appropriate, even if they had been considered by the early Nguyễn ruling circles. These men, after all, were no Confucianists..."⁹² She further explicates that "... Confucianism in Đàng Trong played a political and social role that was relatively minor

⁹¹ Dror, translator's introduction to *Opusculum*, p. 40.

⁹² Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, p. 103.

compared to its role in the north, where the Chinese-style examination system ensured neo-Confucianism never lost its grip on the literati elite.”⁹³

The existence of the *Sãi Vãi* gives reason to reconsider the position of Confucianism in southern Vietnam. Even though Nguyễn Cư Trinh proposed a modified form of Confucianism that allowed for a degree of deviation from some of Confucianism’s core precepts, his thought had its basis on Confucian governing ideology and moral principles. Moreover, the language through which he delivered his proposal for best governance of the southern Vietnamese frontier was classically Confucian. Because this was a well-known work that was most probably performed for audiences ranging from the common villager to the king and his advisors in court, the reach of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s thought was considerable. The *Sãi Vãi* is proof of how the medium of theatrical performance constituted an important outlet through which the ideas of scholar-officials were promoted. The southern Vietnamese literati’s thoughts about Confucianism were not confined to insular intellectual circles; Nguyễn Cư Trinh, at least, attempted to bias the inhabitants of Đàng Trong in favor of Confucianism over other philosophies, as well as educate the inhabitants of Đàng Trong about the intricacies of good classical governance. This present chapter has focused on how the *Sãi Vãi* promoted a form of governance that the author thought to be most suitable for Đàng Trong, a form that relied heavily on a “skeptical application” of Confucian governing philosophy. In the next chapter, I elaborate on how the final sections of the play advocate a synthesis of various aspects of Confucianism and Buddhist religious thought to rally the population to fight the troublesome Đá Vách people. More significantly, the final sections reveal Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s desire to create a moral and

⁹³ Ibid.

civilizational separation between the Việt inhabitants and the Đá Vách people so as to discourage the Việt inhabitants of Đàng Trong's frontiers from crossing over into the ranks of the ethnic minority uplanders. In so doing, Nguyễn Cư Trinh protected the borders of the Đàng Trong kingdom.

Chapter Three

The Illness of Human Emotions: Embracing Humanity to Smite the Barbarians

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Nguyễn Cư Trinh's skepticism of Confucian governing precepts shaped his proposal for the best form of governance on the southern Vietnamese frontier. Nguyễn Cư Trinh explicitly addressed the importance of women's contribution to society, a topic not typically a part of the classical Confucian discourse on governance, and stressed the need for governance to be adaptive to the times, even at the expense of some classical Confucian precepts. In this present chapter, I bring my analysis of the *Sãi Vãi* to a close with my study of the final sections of the play. These sections show clearly that Nguyễn Cư Trinh's ultimate purpose in composing the *Sãi Vãi* was to encourage the Việt frontier inhabitants to stay firmly on the land in the face of conflict with local ethnic groups, instead of abandoning their lands in favor of more peaceful parts of the Đàng Trong kingdom or, worse yet, moving up the hills in order to join the ethnic minority uplanders. Only with a stable population could Quảng Ngãi be effectively incorporated into the expanding Vietnamese empire. In the final sections of the *Sãi Vãi*, Nguyễn Cư Trinh promoted a syncretic religious and moral worldview to accompany the modified version of Confucian governance that he had proposed earlier in the play. This worldview articulated a clear distinction between the civilization of the Việt insiders and that of the ethnic outsiders, thereby encouraging the Việt inhabitants of Quảng Ngãi to remain loyal to the Vietnamese center in Phú Xuân, Huế.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh's religious and moral worldview is the subject of this present chapter. Drawing from Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist thought systems, Nguyễn Cư Trinh developed a

then surely you are the “One in Lô who seeks the fortune star.”²

Your time has not yet come, your star still awaits its meritorious name; 211
Your destiny has yet to be met, your star, indeed, will boast your fame!

The lines above indicate the harmonizing nature of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s religious philosophy. In her little speech, the nun praises the monk for two things. First, she admires his knowledge of history and the classics, and compliments him for holding them close to his heart. Second, she points out his physical Buddhist attire—his robe and his bowl—and declares that his transmission is correct. These lines address and resolve a tension within the play that I had raised in Chapter One: Nguyễn Cư Trinh did not introduce a new stage-character to promote Confucian over Buddhist thought in the *Sãi Vãi*. Instead, the Buddhist monk delivers those pro-Confucian lines, which adds to the light-heartedness of the play but also highlights a contradiction between the lines and the delivery. In this section, the nun finds a resolution to this contradiction for the members of the audience. She declares that the monk must be correct on two counts, declaring both his Confucian and Buddhist orientations orthodox.

The question then arises: Does Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s framework constitute a historical case of religious syncretism between Confucian and Buddhist-Daoist religious ideas?³ “*Tam giáo*”

² The phrase “One in Lô who seeks the fortune star” is “*nhất lộ phước tinh*” (*yilu fuxing*, 一路福星). “Lô” (*Pinyin: Lu*, 路) was an administrative region in the Song dynasty. The phrase refers to a senior official who seeks good fortune for the people of his administrative region. See *Ci Yuan* [辭源] (Beijing: Shang Wu Yin Shuguan, 2010 reprint), p. 0016.3.

³ Throughout history, Buddhist and Daoist religious sects have often competed to claim important texts and popular cults as their own. Olga Dror, for example, has analyzed the competition between Buddhist and Daoist schools to write Liễu Hạnh into its respective pantheon of deities from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries in Vietnam. Refer to Olga Dror, *Cult, Culture, and Authority: Princess Liễu Hạnh in Vietnamese History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), pp. 106-116. See also Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Daoism Face-to-Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008) for a discussion of the ways in which Buddhist and Daoist sects have appropriated sutras and texts from each other by blatantly substituting “Buddha” for “Laozi,” and vice-versa, in the copied versions of the texts. While these

(Pinyin: *sanjiao*, 三教), also called the “three teachings,” referring to Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian thought and practices, has had a place in Chinese vocabulary since a time prior to the Tang dynasty. Although the phrase “*tam giáo*” is familiar, the particularities of the system of thought that lies behind the phrase is less than clear. In attempting to shed light on the practice of *tam giáo*, scholars have suggested that the three religions should be considered as repositories of practices and information from which a practitioner draws upon to use as fits his or her needs.⁴ This broad and useful explanation for the workings of *tam giáo* addresses the practical nature of *tam giáo* and allows for a large degree of ambiguity concerning the details of the three teachings extricated for this integration. As a result of the ambiguity, however, little is revealed about the nature of the eventual mixture that results from the syncretism of the teachings. Questions regarding the type of interaction that occurs among appropriated aspects of each religious doctrine, as well as the nature of the resultant combination, remain unanswered.

Timothy Brook, in an illuminating essay that cautions against applying the interpretive framework of syncretism to the combination of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism in Chinese religious thought, suggests that *sanjiao* (Vietnamese: *tam giáo*) ideology, especially amongst the elite, might productively be conceptualized as something other than syncretism; this is because the process of mixing religions did not necessarily produce something new and

competitive practices highlight the distinction between Buddhist and Daoist sects historically, the process of borrowing texts and sutras from opposing schools have also served to blur the lines distinguishing between Buddhist and Daoist thought. In the *Sāi Vāi*, what is presented as Buddhist thought is very often influenced by ideas with Daoist origins, and nothing in the text acts to distinguish between the two. In my dissertation, I mimic the *Sāi Vāi* by referring to Buddhist-Daoist religious ideas as “Buddhism.”

⁴ See, for example, Robert Ford Company, “On the Very Idea of Religions (In the Modern West and in Early Medieval China),” *History of Religions* 42, no. 4 (May 2003), pp. 287-319.

fundamentally different from its component parts.⁵ Brook proposes that the various historical examples of *sanjiao* in Chinese history have not demonstrated the creation of new religious thought or logic; instead, they have shown that the three teachings have been able to undergo a degree of coexisting without having had to reconcile their differences.⁶ One category of analysis that he proposes as a replacement for syncretism is *inclusivism*; he argues that a dominant religion survives in instances of religious interactions in such a way that elements of other religious thoughts that have been included into the combination do not fundamentally modify the ideas and principles of the dominant religion. In Brook's category of *inclusivism*, the result of religious interaction appears ostensibly syncretic when viewed from the perspective of the non-dominant religion; only when observed from the perspective of the dominant religion does it become clear that particular elements of other religions had merely been included without resulting in fundamental changes to the dominant religious ideology. Brook's analysis, in which he questions the relevance of the conceptual category of religious syncretism in China, is important in its pursuit to clarify the concept of syncretism. I wish, however, to complicate his substitute category of *inclusivism* in order to accommodate an aspect that I believe to be of utmost importance when evaluating cases of religious intermixing. That aspect is practitioner-perspective. Brook's reading of *inclusivism* privileges the perspective of the religion that has undergone the least modification in the inter-mixing—labeling it the “dominant religion”—at the expense of the perspective of the proponent of the particular style of religious inter-mixing or the

⁵ Timothy Brook, “Rethinking Syncretism: The Unity of the Three Teachings and their Joint Worship in Late-Imperial China,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 21 (Fall 1993), p. 16.

⁶ Instead of syncretism, Brook proposes four categories through which to evaluate religious interaction: ecumenicism, inclusivism, compartmentalism, and eclecticism. He argues for the ability of these four categories to accommodate the variety of religious intermixing in China without having to rely on the concept of syncretism. See *Ibid.*, pp 14-15. Brook borrows these categories from Gavin D'Costa's work on Christianity. Refer to Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

perspective of the practitioner of the resultant religion. I argue that it is of the greatest importance to take into account the intentions of the proponent or the practitioner when determining the “dominant religion” of the religious mix. And when the “dominant religion” proves to be the religion that has in fact undergone modification, then the category of syncretism is an appropriate interpretive lens through which to understand that particular religious mix.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s religious thought, articulated through the *Sãi Vãi*, is one example in which the dominant religion is not the religion that has undergone the least modification. Judging from the parts of the *Sãi Vãi* examined so far, Confucianism *appears* to be the best candidate to play the part of the dominant thought system into which acceptable practices from other religions could be incorporated. Indeed, the organizing principle of the section in the *Sãi Vãi* that discusses religious inter-mixing is a protracted discussion of the “seven emotions” (*thất tình*, 七情).⁷ The *locus classicus* of the “seven emotions” is the Confucian classic, the *Book of Rites*:

何謂人情? 喜怒哀懼愛欲, 七者, 弗學而能.⁸

(What are human emotions? Happiness, anger, sadness, fear, love, hate, and desire; of these seven, there is no need to study in order to acquire them.)

The *Book of Rites* lists the seven emotions—happiness, anger, sadness, fear, love, hate, and desire—as the full range of feelings that are natural to mankind. They exist in man without his having had to learn them. These emotions are considered neither good nor evil, and should be

⁷ The seven emotions—happiness, anger, sadness, fear, love, hate, and desire—are believed to reside in the heart of mankind and, when aroused, are pushed to the outside. See Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Lữ Huy Nguyên, *Từ Ngữ Điển Cổ Văn Học* (Hà Nội: Văn Học Publishing House, 1999), entry 217.

⁸ This line can be found in Book 9 of the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*, 禮記), “The Conveyance of Rites” (*Liyun*, 禮運). A more popularly known list, shortened from this set of seven emotions, comprises only four emotions: happiness, anger, sorrow, and joy.

regulated in accordance with the rules of propriety. In the *Sãi Vãi*, however, the seven emotions are considered “an illness” (*một bình thất tình*), which in fact turns the reference to the seven emotions into a Buddhist reference.⁹ In Buddhist thought, emotions were seen as an impediment to the passage of attaining enlightenment. This thought is, for example, captured in the following lines:

*Thà mượn thú tiêu dao cửa Phật,
Mối thất tình quyết dứt cho xong.*
- Nguyễn Gia Thiều¹⁰

([I] would prefer to be like a quadruped, strolling easily through Buddha’s gate;
Decisively terminate the seven [human] emotions to the point of their extinction.)

The seven human emotions are deemed to be negative in Buddhist philosophical thought because their presence in a person indicates that he has not succeeded in crossing the threshold into the Buddhist paradise. In an echo of the Buddhist thought above, the *Sãi Vãi* casts human emotions as something to be considered negatively when it labels the seven emotions as “an illness.” Far from being distressed about this sickness, however, the monk in the *Sãi Vãi* cheerfully embraces his “illness of seven emotions”—he delights in having this shortcoming. The monk’s response to his illness is clearly a reaction against the Buddhist doctrine of self-negation; he rejoices in the fact that he continues to feel the very elemental impulses that make him human. Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s framework for presenting a moral and religious worldview for the southern Vietnamese frontier audience is, then, a celebration of the presence of the seven human emotions in man. In

⁹ *Sãi Vãi* line 216.

¹⁰ These are lines 109-110 from Nguyễn Gia Thiều’s *Cung Oán Ngâm Khúc* (宮怨吟曲) [Elegy of Resentment in the Palace]. See Nguyễn Gia Thiều, *Cung Oán Ngâm Khúc* (Hà Nội: Văn Học Publishing House, 1994), p. 36. This is an eighteenth-century *Nôm* work composed in the “7/7/6/8” rhyming pattern. The theme of this 356-line poem is a palace concubine’s lament at being abandoned after an initial period of being in the king’s favor. This text is an important example of how the feminine literary voice was used in the eighteenth-century to level important political and social criticisms in a less threatening manner.

taking the step of first labeling the seven emotions as an illness, thereby marking it as a Buddhist thought, then making it clear that this illness was one that his audience should in fact embrace, Nguyễn Cư Trinh was responding directly to Buddhist thought, using Buddhist terminology. I propose, then, that Buddhism, and not Confucianism, constituted the dominant religion in Nguyễn Cư Trinh's proposal for a religious and moral worldview that melded aspects of the two religions. Nguyễn Cư Trinh appears to have been actively changing the tenor of Buddhism by incorporating Confucian doctrines into a modified Buddhist doctrinal system, rather than trying to include select aspects of Buddhism into a dominant Confucian system. Even though Confucian thought remains largely unchanged in Nguyễn Cư Trinh's religious and moral worldview for the frontier audience, I argue that his framework represents a historical example of religious syncretism precisely because the audience was directed to view the combination not from the perspective of Confucianism, the unaltered component, but from the perspective of Buddhism, the significantly altered religion.

The most prominent aspect of Buddhism that has been raised in the *Sāi Vāi* thus far is its relationship to worldliness—for good or for ill. At the start of the play, the Buddhist monk was criticized for his desire to mix his religious cultivation with worldly desires such as sexual indulgences and the acquisition of material objects. The orthodox practice of Buddhism came under criticism as well, as it necessitated the acquisition of a host of religious implements.¹¹ The next time Buddhism was criticized was in the author's discussion of governing philosophy. Adherents of Buddhism were criticized for presuming to be able to participate in governance,

¹¹ *Sāi Vāi*, lines 53-60.

when Buddhist doctrine preached transcendence from the affairs of this world.¹² They were criticized both for being too much a part of this world—in their sexual indulgences and material acquisitions—and for being too out of touch with this world, and therefore mismanaging affairs of governance. In his discussion of a religious and moral worldview best suited to the conditions of the frontier, Nguyễn Cư Trinh put forward a form of this-worldly Buddhism that conformed to particular Confucian moral principles. He took care to qualify the form of engagement that Buddhists should have with the world, so that they would resemble less the mischievous monk and more an active participant of frontier society who was engaged with humanity.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s belief in the superiority of this moral and religious worldview is made apparent in the *Sāi Vāi*. The monk appears to be very relieved that the nun understands his religious and philosophical position, and compliments her for her perceptiveness. He says:

It has been written, “Women are hard to teach”;
Where do you, oh nun, get your knowledge? 212

With a hook beside the river, Lữ¹³ waited for the nobles;
Plowing in the fields, Doãn¹⁴ expanded the ways of Yao and Shun. 213

Not known yet not indignant;
With virtue one will surely have neighbors. 214

¹² *Sāi Vāi*, lines 130-135.

¹³ Lữ refers to Lü Shang (呂尙), a famous sage who lived in the time of the last king of Shang. He disapproved of the king of Shang and waited for a worthy man to ask for his help in overthrowing the Shang king. He fished with a barbless hook while waiting, symbolizing the fact that the worthy man would come of his own accord when the time was right. He was found by King Wen of Zhou.

¹⁴ Doãn refers to Yi Yin (伊尹). He is sometimes referred to as a chef, other times a farmer, who, in spite of his lowly position, made use of his proximity to the lord to help found the Shang dynasty and advised the lord to lead in the ways of Yao and Shun.

In youth, Cam La¹⁵ wore an official's hat on his head;
Late in life, Khương Tử¹⁶ approached his turn to seek a generalship.

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The monk describes two incidences in history that demonstrate divergent paths to recognition. In the first case, the pairing of Lữ and Doãn shows two different ways in which wise men found official recognition. In the case of Lữ, he did not go to the nobles but waited for them to come to him, even though the king had requested his advice. In the case of Doãn, he sought out and helped the founder of the Shang dynasty in spite of his lowly position. The second pairing of Cam La and Khương Tử demonstrates that a person's destined moment for officialdom was independent of his age. Cam La was a prodigy who became an official at twelve years old, but Khương Tử had to wait until he was in his seventies to become an official.¹⁷ The monk asserts, through cases from history, that the recognition for his ideas will eventually come when the time for it arrives. He then elaborates on the particularities of his ideas, which involve the combination of Confucian and Buddhist thought, through the framework of the "illness of seven emotions."

¹⁵ Cam La refers to Gan Luo (甘羅), a prodigy of the State of Qin who became an official at 12 years old. His grandfather, Gan Mao (甘茂), who was Prime Minister, offended the king and as punishment was given the impossible task of finding an egg produced by a rooster. Gan Luo took his grandfather's place at court and when questioned by the king, said that his grandfather could not be present because he was at home giving birth. The king, caught at his own game, could not kill Gan Mao but demoted him. Gan Luo, on the other hand, was made an official at his young age.

¹⁶ Khương Tử is probably a reference to Jiang Ziya (姜子牙), another name for Lü Shang (呂尙), the man who fished with a barbless hook. Because he was waiting for the lord to search him out, he became an official only late in life.

¹⁷ See notes 12 and 15 on the possibility that Lữ and Khương Tử refer to the same person.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s monk in the *Sãi Vãi* almost never speaks plainly. His words convey one message directly, but the audience inevitably gains another level of understanding from the structure of the speech itself. Previous examples include the passage in which the monk listed all the religious implements that were necessary to the proper practice of Buddhism, which led the audience to realize the extent to which worldliness was inherent in orthodox Buddhism; another example is the passage where the monk told stories that could not be told, which eventually told the story that strict adherence to Confucian precepts in governance would be detrimental to a society’s ability to be adaptive to changing circumstances.¹⁹ In this section on the “illness of the seven emotions,” the monk announces from the outset that he would be speaking in a “round-about fashion.” He says:

Because I am skilled at talking in a round-about fashion,	216
I carry an illness of seven emotions.	
What truly is within has yet to attain peace and harmony;	217
Its manifestation without cannot be centered and moderate.	

The “illness of seven emotions” (*một bệnh thất tình*) encapsulates the essence of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s modified Buddhism. This phrase captures the worldliness that was the single-most necessary element in the practice of this particular transmission of Buddhism. Nguyễn Cư Trinh promoted to the frontier audience a form of this-worldly Buddhism that did not seek to transcend

¹⁸ The version of the *Sãi Vãi* that I work with only records five emotions. Of the transcriptions and *Nôm* texts that exist, it appears that the same two emotions—fear and greed—have dropped out of more than half of them. This might indicate that many of the copies that remain today stem from the same textual record or oral tradition. It is possible that the parts associated with the two emotions were not dropped accidentally. This section of the play, on the illness of the seven emotions, is perhaps the slowest moving; it could have been intentionally shortened to five emotions, which would still be substantial enough to sustain the message of the section, but reduces the overall drag by a significant percentage.

¹⁹ *Sãi Vãi* lines 53-60 and 194-205.

the human condition of having attachments and emotional responses; instead his form of Buddhism led to greater engagement with this world. In the sections that follow, the monk demonstrates that he not only possesses human emotions, he embraces them and engages with them to such an exaggerated extent that his appearance is neither “centered” nor “moderate,” aspects considered important to conventional transmissions of Buddhism.

The *Sāi Vāi* takes the audience through the seven emotions in turn, and within each emotion the monk explicates why he feels that particular emotion. In this way, Nguyễn Cư Trinh, through the character of the monk, provided the audience with useful details of how to achieve the synthesis of Buddhism and Confucianism that he advocated as necessary for life on the frontier. In the course of the performance of the *Sāi Vāi*, the monk would have been portrayed first as an errant religious figure, then as a promoter of Confucian governing philosophy. The ambiguous and changing character of the monk allowed Nguyễn Cư Trinh to render his proposal of religious syncretism applicable to as many members of the audience as possible. It was not merely a call for religious and societal leaders of the community to adopt these ideas, but a plea to the frontier audience, the villager and the soldier, man and woman, that they should consider participating in the type of Buddhism that would allow them to embrace their humanity.

This framework works on two levels. First, it establishes the importance of the physical environment to Buddhist and Daoist historical and mythical beliefs. This ensures that the audience is aware of the necessity of *this world* to their religious system, even as the same religious system advocates transcending it. Second, it teaches the audience to direct their human emotions towards particularly Confucian humanistic principles. In this way, the audience is

given a moral compass with which to navigate this world. They are taught to love, hate, have compassion for, be angry about, and to take delight in things that are grounded in Confucian moral principles. In the sections that follow, I will explicate how Nguyễn Cư Trinh developed this framework through which he presented his ideal moral and religious worldview for the Vietnamese frontier society.

Happiness and the Physical World

The monk begins his speech on the illness of human emotions with a conversation about happiness. It is in this discussion that Nguyễn Cư Trinh makes most explicit his ideas of the importance of the physical world to Buddhist and Daoist thought:

[I] cultivate as [I] please and with much feeling; 218
I have the illness of knowing happiness.

I am happy because, below, there is the broad ground; 219
I am happy because, above, there are the expansive heavens

[I am] happy with the blue waters and green mountains, splendid, splendid; 220
[I am] happy with the clear and radiant moon, dazzling, dazzling.

Unsurprisingly, the first message that the monk has for the frontier audience is that they should, like him, take delight in being in the physical world—bounded safely by the “broad ground” below and the “expansive heavens” above. Rather than trying to escape from it, he finds joy in the beauty of the elements of the physical environment, such as the “blue waters,” “green mountains,” and “radiant moon.” To strengthen his case for the importance of this world to Buddhism, he demonstrates the significance of the physical environment to Buddhist philosophical and mythical thought:

Internally, [as for the] the three thousand, I keep them in a gourd;²⁰ 221
 Externally, [as for the] six ways,²¹ I penetrate and understand the three worlds.²²
 [Towards] Bồng Lai Mountain,²³ [I] step forward; 222
 I am happy together with the eight immortals.

[For] the scenery of Sơn Nhạc,²⁴ [I] go up in search; 223
 I am happy together with the four hoaryheads.²⁵
 [I am] happy with humaneness and with the way; 224
 [I am] happy with sages; happy with worthies.

The monk establishes his religious position clearly by stating that both “internally” and “externally” his thoughts are informed by Buddhist ideas of existence. The “three thousand” refers to the three thousand realms of existence believed to exist in one moment, and the “six ways” refers to the six realms of karmic existences. He accepts that Buddhist worlds are conceptualized differently from the physical world in which the frontier inhabitants lived. One such world is the “gourd,” a reference to the concept of the perfect world that is to be found in a “gourd-heaven,” and another is described as the “three worlds,” a reference to states of desire,

²⁰ “Three thousand” appears to refer to the “three thousand realms of existence” which are thought to exist in a single moment. The gourd is a container with a narrow entrance but spacious interior; a secluded and perfect site, comprising a mountain and a stretch of water, is referred to as a “gourd-heaven.” For more information on the “gourd-heaven,” see Rolf A. Stein, *The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern Religious Thought*, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 58-77.

²¹ “Six ways” refers to the six paths of metempsychosis—*devas* 天, man 人, *asuras* 修羅, beasts 畜生, hungry ghosts 餓鬼, and hell 地獄. See *Matthews’ Chinese-English Dictionary*, entry 4189.23. These are the six realms of karmic existences.

²² “Three worlds” (三界) are the regions associated with the three-fold division of the universe: desire, form, and formlessness. See *Matthews’ Chinese-English Dictionary*, entry 5415.103.

²³ The Bồng Lai Mountain (*Pinyin*: Peng Lai 蓬萊) is believed to be the base of the eight immortals of Chinese mythology.

²⁴ Sơn Nhạc (*Pinyin*: Shan Yue 山岳) refers to a cluster of five famous mountains: Thai Sơn, Hoa Sơn, Hành Sơn, Hăng Sơn, and Trung Sơn.

²⁵ The “four hoaryheads” refers to four white-haired Han dynasty recluses. This couplet implies that Sơn Nhạc is the home of the four hoaryheads; for a discussion of various names to refer to the location of the four hoaryheads, see Alan Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement: The Practice and Portrayal of Reclusion in Early Medieval China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 78-79.

form, and formlessness, into which the universe can be divided. But the same monk also steps towards Bồng Lai Mountain, the home of the eight immortals of Daoist mythology, and goes in search of Sơn Nhạc, a cluster of five famous mountains believed to be the home of the four recluses. These mountains, parts of the physical environment of this world, are important and recognizable elements of the Buddhist and Daoist mythological tradition. Through the lines above, Nguyễn Cư Trinh demonstrated to the audience that the physical world was as important to Buddhist religious thought as the other Buddhist universes.

These religiously significant mountains are joined by another important aspect of the physical world integral to the Buddhist tradition—waterways:

[I am] happy with the bell's ringing, repeatedly urging pilgrims as they depart 225
in their boats;²⁶
[I am] happy with the sandal, as [pilgrims] open sails to rely on the wind.²⁷
[Because it] blocks out vulgar customs, I am happy with the course of Prajña; 226
[Because it] washes away the dust, I am happy with the waters of Ma Ha.²⁸

The monk describes pilgrimages made possible by the natural waterways. He delights in the repeated ringing of the temple bell as it accompanies pilgrims leaving the sacred site in their boats; he finds happiness in the thought of Bodhidharma's sandal, that pilgrims meditate on as they unfold their sails to catch the wind on their journey home. Prajña, which means wisdom or understanding, is imagined as a coursing river separating the vulgar from the enlightened life.

²⁶ Pilgrims typically sound a bell if one is present at a pilgrimage site; the sound of the repeated ringing stays with them as they depart from the site.

²⁷ The sandal is a reference to the story of Bodhidharma, who, upon his death, left China for India barefooted, swinging a sandal on his staff. When his coffin was opened, his body was missing and there was only one sandal left buried in it.

²⁸ It is not completely clear what Ma Ha refers to. Given the earlier reference to washing off the dust, it could be the Ganges River.

Ma Ha is possibly a reference to the Ganges River, a sacred river in Buddhist religious mythology.²⁹ In highlighting mountains and waterways important to Buddhist beliefs, Nguyễn Cư Trinh demonstrated the importance of the natural world to Buddhist religious thought. These natural elements exist alongside the monk's belief in the various meta-physical elements of Buddhist thought. He concluded his thoughts on happiness by affirming aspects of Buddhism that reside in this world:

[For] the way of having compassion for people, I am happy with the teaching of the Buddha; 227
[For having] humaneness to save the people, I am happy to remember the Bodhisattva.

The monk is happy with Buddha's teachings on compassion, and with the Bodhisattva's emphasis on humaneness. These teachings have a place in the present social world of the frontier inhabitants. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's monk demonstrates in this section on happiness that even though he believed in the meta-physical aspects of Buddhism, his focus was on the present world; as seen in the examples set by the Bodhisattvas and in Buddha's teachings of compassion for the people, this presentist focus that Nguyễn Cư Trinh desired for his frontier audience was congruous with mainstream currents of Buddhist thought.

A Moral Compass: On Compassion, Hatred, Love, and Anger

To orient the audience towards *this* world, Nguyễn Cư Trinh advocated an attachment to the physical world and called for the members of Đàng Trong frontier society to embrace that

²⁹ Ma Ha is listed as one of eight large rivers in India of importance to Buddhism. See entry for Eight Rivers (八水), in *Từ Điển Phật Học Hán Việt*, vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Nông Nghiệp Publishing House, 1992), p. 127.

which made them human—the full range of human emotional impulses. He was careful, however, to guide them towards what he considered to be the proper ways through which to express those emotions. For Nguyễn Cư Trinh, Confucian humanistic and moral precepts offered a guiding principle for channeling these emotions—compassion, hatred, love, and anger—appropriately. Below, I list sample couplets of these examples of moral instruction.

On having compassion:

- [I have] compassion for King Yao,³⁰ [who wore] a coarse shirt and hemp; 233
trousers
- [I have] compassion for King Shun,³¹ [who] plowed in the clouds and hoed by
moonlight.
- [For] eating stale rice, [I have] compassion for King Võ³²—My compassion is 234
increasingly intense;
- [For] suffering imprisonment, I have foremost compassion for King Văn³³ —
My compassion is burningly painful.
- [I have] compassion for the Duke of Châu,³⁴ whose loyalty was the ideal of 235
loyalty yet was trapped by slanderous talk;
- [I have] compassion for Khương Tử,³⁵ a sage who had already become a sage,
yet many times faced adversity.

³⁰ Yao, a simple and thrifty man, was satisfied wearing coarse clothes even when he became king.

³¹ Out of filial piety to a cruel father, Shun worked the ground on Li Mountain through the night. It is believed that the creatures of the earth were so moved by his actions that the elephants came to plough for him and the birds helped him weed.

³² Being of frugal nature, Emperor Yu, founder of the Xia dynasty, was content to eat stale rice.

³³ King Wen, the benevolent founder of the Zhou dynasty, was imprisoned for seven years in Youli by King Zhou of the Shang dynasty.

³⁴ The Duke of Zhou was the uncle of a child king who was the founder of the Zhou dynasty. He could have taken control of the dynasty but instead handed everything over to his nephew when the boy was old enough and himself faded away.

³⁵ The text that I am using records this name as Phu Tử, perhaps mistaking Khương Tử for Confucius. This is the same barbless fisherman who became an official only when he was in his seventies.

[I have] compassion for the strategizing advisers of Han,³⁶ who, although 236
played no part in [treasonous] affairs, died unjustly;
[I have] compassion for the scholars of Qin,³⁷ who, although carrying no
weapons, were buried alive.

[Because he] sat out in the winter night, [I have] compassion for the person 240
who lay on ice, crying to bamboo;³⁸
[For] being on the northern pass, [I have] compassion for the fellow who herded
goats and drank snow.³⁹

Discussed under the category of “compassion” are included examples of historical actors who acted out of filial piety and loyalty but suffered because of those very actions. The Duke of Zhou, for instance, was a capable and loyal royal uncle who willingly gave up his regency when his nephew came of age to ascend the throne. Nonetheless, he suffered slanderous gossip from those who thought that he would wrest the throne from his young nephew. The advisers of Han, Han Xin and Peng Yue, and the Confucian scholars of Qin were loyal to their respective kings but falsely accused of treason. Han Xin and Peng Yue suffered cruel deaths even though they played no part in the rebellions of which they were accused. Qin Shihuang considered the Confucian scholars of his realm to be a threat even though they carried no weapons; he buried more than four hundred of them alive. The allusion to ice and bamboo refers to the story of Meng Zhong (孟宗), a filial son who lived in the period of the Three Kingdoms. His ill mother craved bamboo shoots in the winter, and his tears of despair as he lay on the ice on a wintry night

³⁶ The strategizing advisers of Han refer to Han Xin (韓信) and Peng Yue (彭越). They assisted Liu Bang, the future Emperor Gaozu of Han, defeat the Chu and received high honors but were eventually falsely accused of treason and executed.

³⁷ Qin Shihuang buried more than four hundred Confucian scholars alive because he viewed them as a threat; he did not want them to compare him with previous rulers.

³⁸ In the wintertime, an ill mother wanted fish and bamboo. Her filial son, Meng Zhong (孟宗) lay on ice to catch fish, and cried out to the bamboo that then sprouted out of the snow.

³⁹ A Han envoy, Tô Vĩ (Su Wu, 蘇武), also known as Tô Tử Khanh (Su Ziqing, 蘇子卿) was captured by the Xiongnu; for nineteen years he tended goats and drank snow.

caused bamboo to sprout from the snowy ground. Su Ziqing (蘇子卿) was the Han envoy who “herded goats and drank snow” on the northern pass; he was captured by the Xiongnu and for nineteen years drank snow and tended to goats in the cold. Through these examples, Nguyễn Cư Trinh directed the audience towards having compassion for those who suffered for the sake of honoring moral principles such as filial piety and loyalty.

On knowing hate:

I hate [when] humane governance is not practiced; Causing all dynasties to perish.	245
[It] pushes my hatred to its extreme— I hate a fellow who betrays his father, betrays his lord.	246
[I] hate the wicked fellow seeking to flatter by killing his son; ⁴⁰ [I] hate the sycophantic man so greedy for wealth he harmed his wife. ⁴¹	251
[For their] curled tongues bent crooked, I hate the people of the state of Sô; ⁴² [For their] stomachs greedy to be filled, I hate the people of the state of Tê. ⁴³	252
[I] hate a wicked fellow who relies on power and opportunity; [I] hate a violent fellow who harms his household and stirs up his country.	253
I hate a fellow who sees [a chance for self-] benefit, and races upstream and downstream;	254
[I] hate [a fellow who] sees [a chance for] righteousness, but worries about loss and gain.	

⁴⁰ Dịch Nha (*Pinyin*: Yi Ya, 易牙) was the chef of Duke Huan of the state of Qi. In order to please the duke, who had tried all foods except for human flesh, Dịch Nha killed and cooked his own son and served him as an exotic dish for the duke.

⁴¹ Ngô Khởi (*Pinyin*: Wu Qi, 吳起), a military strategist originally from the state of Wei, became Prime Minister in the state of Chu after leaving the service of Lu and Wei. His success in the state of Chu brought him many enemies; rumors about him include one in which he allegedly proved his loyalty to the state of Lu by killing his own wife, since his wife came from a noble family in the rival state of Qi.

⁴² State of Chu. “Curled tongues” are used to produce a trill. This could be a reference to Chu musical culture, which was also associated with shamanistic rituals. Some Confucians frowned upon the culture of Chu, which they considered to be vulgar and barbaric.

⁴³ State of Qi. The people from the state of Qi were stereotyped as greedy. For stereotypes of people from the various warring states, see Allyn Rickett, *Guanzi: Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China: A Study and Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 106-107.

I hate people who are selfish and harm others;	255
I hate adulterers and adulteresses.	
[I] hate fellows who are querulous and quarrelsome; ⁴⁴	256
[I] hate people who are untruthful and dishonest.	

Under the category of “hatred,” Nguyễn Cư Trinh expounded on behaviors that should warrant the derision of his audience. The issues that he addressed under “compassion”—filial piety and loyalty—feature in this category in the form of hatred for the “fellow who betrays his father, betrays his lord.” Familial relationships, moreover, had to be esteemed by all parties involved; the man who cooked his son for the sake of pleasing the king’s palate, and the man who murdered his wife from a neighboring rival state in order to appease those suspicious of his loyalty, both deserved the hatred of the audience. Nguyễn Cư Trinh defined the field of despicable behaviors by drawing up a list of harmful actions. Although some of these actions were explained to the audience through referencing historical examples, many of the bad behaviors were simply stated, so that the audience would realize the widespread prevalence of these behaviors. Poor behavior included the quest for profit and personal advancement without consideration of the costs involved and the harm that it might inflict on others, a calculating spirit in the face of opportunity for performing good, selfishness and adultery, and nastiness and deceitfulness.

On loving:

[I] love the man who is expansively open and generous;	263
[I] love the gentleman with a disinterested heart that is never embarrassed.	
[I] love strong courage that, when ground, is not worn down;	264
[I] love a vermilion heart that, when dyed, does not turn black.	

⁴⁴ The line reads: “*Ghét đũa hay co hay cú*”; although no longer in use today, “*co-cú*” (孤句) can be found in Taberd’s 1838 *Vietnamese-Latin Dictionary* as a compound word meaning “quarrelsome.” See J. L. Taberd, *Dictionarium Anamitico-Latinum* (Hà Nội: Văn Học Publishing House, 2004 reprint), p. 80.

[I] love ears that are familiar with hearing loyal and upright words;	265
[I] love eyes that see clearly the affairs of past and present times.	
In the wintry years, I love the impressive cypresses and pines; ⁴⁵	266
From a great distance, I love the experienced <i>kì</i> and <i>kí</i> horses. ⁴⁶	
[If] a son is devoted to his father, I love [him] like jade and gold;	267
[If] a subject is upright with his lord, I love [him] like pearls and treasures.	
In considering loving the way—I love the doctrine of the mean;	268
In considering loving the heart—I love a heart that is humane and proper.	
[As for] love that will benefit the household, country, and entire realm,	269
Nothing can compare with loving the sages	
[As for] love that will develop talent, virtue, riches and honor,	270
Nothing can compare with loving an official.	

In directing the audience's capacity for "love," Nguyễn Cư Trinh relied largely on making general statements about excellent qualities in people. Whereas his generalized discussion of despicable behaviors that warranted his audience's hatred demonstrated the prevalence of such bad behavior, the generalized descriptions of behaviors that should merit the love of his audience indicated the ideal form of those qualities. These include, of course, sons and subjects who observed proper relationships with their fathers and lords, kings who loved the sages in order to benefit their country and who at the same time loved their officials, as this love then develops talent, virtue, riches, and honor. Outside the realm of proper relational behaviors, the audience is encouraged to love those who embraced generosity, disinterestedness, courageousness, loyalty, and humaneness.

On knowing anger:

I am angry that I have little virtue and little talent;	276
In thinking about talent and virtue, my anger increases to its utmost.	

⁴⁵ Unlike other plants that fade, cypresses and pines are able to survive the winter weather.

⁴⁶ *Kì* (Pinyin: *qí*, 騏) is a breed of piebald horse and *kí* (Pinyin: *jí*, 驥) is a thoroughbred horse. They can run very fast and cover a lot of ground in a day.

I am angry that I do not know about administration;	277
I am angry that I do not know about military strategy.	
I am angry that I am far from my lord and king and waste a loyal heart;	278
I am angry that I have foster parents and cannot repay [parents with] filial piety.	
Seeing Đổng Trác rampaging in the Han dynasty,	281
I am angry that Hà Tấn was deficient in strategizing. ⁴⁷	
Seeing Khuyễn Nhung plunder the Châu dynasty,	282
I am moreover angry that the Marquis of Thân erred in his scheming. ⁴⁸	
Blood is boiling—bubbling down the waters of Vĩ; ⁴⁹	283
Bones are overflowing—they fill bowels of the city of Trường. ⁵⁰	
[I am] angry that Thương Quân was tyrannical and not gentle; ⁵¹	284
[I am] angry that Bạch Khởi was incompetent and very cruel. ⁵²	
Han was warding off peril, why did [Empress] Lữ plot and covet? ⁵³	285
Tang was recovering from weakness, how dare [Empress] Võ be saucy! ⁵⁴	
In this case: [Empress] Võ's crime against Tang equals a mountain.	286
[Empress] Lữ's guilt towards Han resounds like Mãng. ⁵⁵	

⁴⁷ Hà Tấn (*Pinyin*: He Jin, 何進), an ambitious military general at the end of the Eastern Han dynasty, was involved in a power struggle with the eunuch faction after the death of the emperor. He called in Đổng Trác (*Pinyin*: Dong Zhuo, 董卓), a frontier warlord, to help him take care of the eunuchs. Before Đổng Trác arrived, however, the eunuchs had had Hà Tấn beheaded. Đổng Trác came in, seized control of the court, and deposed the new emperor.

⁴⁸ The Marquis of Thân (*Pinyin*: Shen Hou, 申侯) allied with the Khuyễn Nhung (*Pinyin*: Quan Rong, 犬戎), an ethnic minority group from the west, against King You of Zhou at the end of the Western Zhou period. The Khuyễn Nhung killed King You and ran amok, plundering the country.

⁴⁹ It was on the banks of the Wei River (渭水) that Shang Yang (商鞅), a legalist reformer of the state of Qin, oversaw the beheading of more than seven hundred criminals in one day.

⁵⁰ The city of Trường (*Pinyin*: Chang, 長) refers to Trường Bình (*Pinyin*: Chang Ping, 長平), the site of a famous battle fought by Qin and Zhao forces. After the Qin victory over the Zhao, the Qin commander Bai Qi (白起) buried the captured soldiers alive. They allegedly amounted to more than four hundred thousand men.

⁵¹ Thương Quân (*Pinyin*: Shang Jun, 商均) is Shang Yang, the Qin statesman referred to in footnote 47. He is also known as Wei Yang (卫鞅).

⁵² Bạch Khởi (*Pinyin*: Bai Qi, 白起) is the Qin general referred to in footnote 48.

⁵³ Lữ is Empress Lü, wife of Liu Bang, the first emperor of the Han dynasty. After Liu Bang's death, Empress Lü engaged in many tactics to gain power for herself.

⁵⁴ Võ is the infamous Empress Wu of the Tang dynasty, who ruled the empire through her husband and sons, and then became the first female monarch in the Middle Kingdom when took the throne and founded her own short-lived Zhou dynasty in 690.

⁵⁵ Mãng is Wang Mang (王莽), an infamous usurper in the Han dynasty.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s discussion of “anger” is aimed in two directions: at himself and at historical figures. When directed at examples of historical figures such as Hà Tấn (*Pinyin*: He Jin) and the Marquis of Thân (*Pinyin*: Shen Hou), whose scheming caused the dynasties they served to come to harm, the bloody-thirsty cruelty of Shang Jun (Thương Quân) and Bai Qi (Bạch Khởi), and the treachery of Empresses Lü (Lữ) and Wu (Võ), Nguyễn Cư Trinh relied on his by-now-familiar method of using historical examples to illustrate his case to his audience. The monk’s discussion of anger is also largely directed at himself—for lacking skills in administration and military strategy that he could have used to serve his lord and country, and for being too far away to perform the roles of a loyal official and a filial son. The strength of these lines lies in the directionality of the expression. In having the monk point out his own failure to embody those ideals that deserve to be loved, the author directed the audience towards similar introspection, thus encouraging them to consider the presence or absence of those moral ideals in their own lives.

Summing Up the Moral Compass

The section of the *Sãi Vãi* expounding on the seven emotions shows clearly that Nguyễn Cư Trinh was interested in exhorting the frontier audience towards embracing Confucian moral ideals such as humane governance, filial piety, and loyalty. Nguyễn Cư Trinh channeled the audience’s “hatred” towards that which destroyed dynasties and went against the proper relationship between lords and officials and fathers and sons (lines 245-246); he similarly directed their “anger” towards Empresses Lü and Wu, who acted for their own profit at the expense of ailing dynasties (lines 285-286). On the other hand, he encouraged “love” for a son

who is devoted to his father and for an official who is upright with his lord (lines 267-268); he likewise preached “compassion” for the Duke of Zhou, a model of a loyal subject (line 235a), and Meng Zhong, who suffered the bitter cold for the sake of pleasing his ill mother (line 240a).

Through the various perspectives that each emotion offered, Nguyễn Cư Trinh demonstrated the full range of behaviors associated with upholding moral principles. The audience of the play was encouraged to love and have compassion for those who upheld those principles, and to hate and harbor anger towards those who flouted them. Moreover, the moral compass offered to the audience a web of behaviors to emulate and qualities to aspire towards, such as loyalty, disinterestedness, filial piety, peace-lovingness, and truthfulness. These qualities, not embedded in historical allusions but spelt out directly, represent Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s attempt to lay out clearly for his audience patterns of behavior that were considered either desirable or despicable. This section of the *Sãi Vãi* is a lesson in moral education for the Việt frontier population.

In his introduction to the section on “the illness of seven emotions,” Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s monk claimed that he would speak in a “round-about fashion” (line 216). The monk’s manner of speech in this section is in fact very straightforward, compared to the “straightforward” manner in which he claimed to speak in the previous section where he told “stories that cannot be told” (line 191). Whereas the circuitous route of telling stories that cannot be told in the previous section tells the story that Confucian precepts need not all be followed to the letter, the author’s fairly straightforward manner of presenting general statements and historical examples of people who were worthy of contemporary compassion, love, hate, and anger provides a clear and

unambiguous moral compass for the people, which directed their human emotional expressions towards Confucian morality and principles.

“Smite the Barbarians”

As might already be apparent, the monk and nun’s relationship has changed through the course of the performance of the play. In the beginning, the nun exhibits an aversion to the mischievous monk, admonishes him, and engages in verbal battles with him. Starting from the lines in which the nun declares that the monk must either be a man from Lu (Lô) or a Buddha amongst the ten thousand households, however, the nun appears to be in one accord with the monk (lines 208-210). In the section in which the monk discourses on the seven emotions, he ends his thoughts on each emotion by bringing it back to the nun. The lines are as follows:

Discussing happy matters for a splendid time; Nothing would be better than being happy together with you!	229
[I have] compassion for all the four quarters; And, moreover, [I have] compassion for you.	242
That is to hate everyone, And, moreover, to hate you—that [you] should have no feelings for me.	257
Like loving leisure, What can compare to loving you?	272
Seeing that I am old, you abandon me and go away; Don’t ask me why I should know anger.	288

The concluding lines of the monk’s discourse on each emotion work to ensure that the monk maintains an appearance of having a dialogue with the nun. In some lines, the monk appears to sulk at the nun; in others, he is flirtatious with her. Although we do not have performance notes

for this play, one sees in the mind's eye that the nun reacts to the monk in an increasingly conciliatory manner and begins to respond positively to his advances, which have in turn become less lewd. This change in tone ushers in the final section of the play. It begins with the nun marveling at the monk's erudition. She invites the monk, with his expansive knowledge, to show her the way out of the frontier lands and to the Pure Land paradise. She says:

At Lôi Âm Tụ,⁵⁶ [with] merit [one] becomes a Buddha; 293
On reaching Thiên Thai,⁵⁷ [with] fortune [one] becomes an immortal.
[If you] know of any road to penetrate the Western Heaven, 294
Please instruct and cultivate with me all night long.

The monk has so far been preaching that the Việt frontier inhabitants should focus on being Buddhists in *this* world. Instead of seeking transcendence from their human desires, the monk has attempted to persuade the audience to embrace their human emotions and to direct the expression of those emotions towards a system of Confucian morality. The nun's request provides the monk with the opener for him to bring his teachings to their logical conclusion: in embracing their humanity, the frontier inhabitants were not expected to direct that towards the goal of seeking religious enlightenment. Instead, they were to engage more deeply with human affairs by defending their newly annexed lands against invading uplanders. To the nun's invitation, the monk retorts thus:

Moderate the crazy talk; 295
Diminish this monster within!
The heavenly region is still so far beyond—it's very dim; 296
Buddhist monasteries and temples, alas, are far away—so very distant.

⁵⁶ Lôi Âm Tụ (*Lei An Si*, 雷庵寺) is a temple, sometimes referred to as Thunder Pagoda, where the Buddha supposedly lives. The characters of the *Journey to the West* were trying to reach this temple.

⁵⁷ Thiên Thai (*Pinyin: Tian Tai*, 天台) is the name of a mountain where devotees cultivate immortality.

[As for] the western direction, [there is] no road to reach it;	297
[As for] the northern direction, the way is very hard.	
[As for] the southern direction, it is not very far;	298
It's nothing but for the fear of the many bands of Đá Vách.	

The monk puts a stop to the nun's thoughts of religious escape and encourages her to drop the idea of journeying in search of paradise; he tells her in no uncertain terms that the heavenly region, with its monasteries and temples, is too far away to be considered reachable. It is interesting to note at this point that even though the chronicles record that this play was written for the purpose of the edification a particular group of Vietnamese frontier inhabitants, the people of Quảng Ngãi, the lines above represent the first time in the *Sãi Vãi* that Nguyễn Cư Trinh situated the play in the particularities of that geographical location. Taking the lead from the nun's request that the monk accompany her to the Western Heaven, the monk states that there is in fact no road to travel in the direction of the west. This line—a response to the nun's desire to journey towards the religiously significant west—serves as a point of departure in the monk's speech; from this line onwards, the monk diverges from a conversation about the impracticality of seeking religious escape in the direction of the west, and switches instead to a conversation about the possible routes of migration that the Vietnamese frontier inhabitants of Quảng Ngãi could follow.

Placed in the context of the realities of the Vietnamese geographical location, the western direction was indeed impossible to reach. This is because a long and lofty mountain range lies to the west of the Vietnamese territory, making it physically difficult, if not impossible, to travel far in that direction. Lands in the northern direction, on the other hand, were occupied by the northern Vietnamese kingdom, Đàng Ngoài; lying to the north of Đàng Ngoài was the vast and

imposing Chinese kingdom. When Nguyễn Cư Trinh's monk declares that the way in the northern direction was very hard, it is difficult to say definitively whether he was referring to the obstacles posed by the northern Vietnamese kingdom of Đàng Ngoài, or to the impossibility of conquering Chinese territory beyond. The memory of internecine fighting between the two Vietnamese kingdoms was probably still fresh in the minds of Nguyễn Cư Trinh and his southern Vietnamese audience; it would not be surprising if Nguyễn Cư Trinh referenced the fact that the land that lay to the north of Đàng Trong was occupied by a rival Vietnamese kingdom. In any case, the monk's point was that the lands to the north of Đàng Trong were already occupied and not conducive to Đàng Trong's further expansion. The monk does not even mention the eastern direction, because the South China Sea, rather than a landmass, lay in that direction. The monk brings the audience to the logical conclusion that the southern direction appears to be the only plausible direction towards which the Vietnamese should migrate.

The idea of the southern direction as a natural route for Vietnamese territorial expansion was one that gained tremendous force in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Vietnamese historiography. Particularly in the Republic of Vietnam (more commonly known as South Vietnam), the "southward expansion" (*Nam tiến*) became an important event symbolizing the inevitable defeat of other indigenous ethnic groups at the hands of the migrating Vietnamese people. The southern Vietnamese people, in particular, found much benefit in recounting Vietnamese history through a narrative of the southward expansion because it demonstrated their disproportionately larger contribution to the work of expanding Vietnamese territory as compared to their northern counterparts.⁵⁸ Nguyễn Cư Trinh must have been one of the earliest

⁵⁸ Claudine Ang, "Regionalism in Southern Narratives of Vietnamese History: The Case of the 'Southern Advance' (*Nam tiến*) of the Vietnamese People," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* (forthcoming).

Vietnamese on record to articulate this concept of a Vietnamese southward migration. A prophecy associated with Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, a sixteenth-century clairvoyant and poet, has been cited in the Nguyễn dynasty chronicles as the reason behind the decision that Nguyễn Hoàng, the first Nguyễn lord associated with the establishment of Đàng Trong, took to move southwards to Thuận Hoá in 1558. Almost definitely a legend concocted by the scribes of the Nguyễn dynasty to confer the dynasty an aura of divine legitimacy, the saying states that Nguyễn Bình Khiêm told Nguyễn Hoàng to consider the Hoành Sơn mountain area in Thuận Hoá as a base for a new home, since it had the capacity to nourish many generations.⁵⁹ Interestingly, nowhere in the prophecy does it mention migrating to the “south” or in the “southern direction.” Some twentieth-century scholars have referenced Nguyễn Hoàng’s dying words, spoken to his close associates on his deathbed in 1613, as the moment in which the Việt people of Đàng Trong articulated the conscious desire to migrate southwards.⁶⁰ The source of this speech is, once again, the same Nguyễn dynasty chronicle that has recorded the legend of Nguyễn Bình Khiêm as fact. Compiled in the nineteenth century, this chronicle represents the thoughts and sentiments of the victorious southern Vietnamese dynasty, the nineteenth-century Nguyễn dynasty. Before the further discovery of other sources and historical records, it seems plausible that the *Sãi Vãi*, composed in 1750 by an official sent to the frontier regions, presents the earliest recorded evidence of the Vietnamese idea of a natural southward migratory trajectory.

⁵⁹ The prophecy states that: “*Hoành Sơn nhất đái, vạn đại dung thân*” [The Hoành Sơn mountain area would be suitable to inhabitants for a thousand generations.] *Đại Nam Thực Lục (Tiền Biên)*, vol. 1, p. 27. This saying has been reproduced in Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, p. 1.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Nguyễn Đăng Thực, “Nam tiến Việt Nam: Hai trào lưu di dân Nam tiến” [Vietnam’s Southern Expansion: Two Waves of Migration in the Southern Expansion], *Tập San Sử Địa* 19-20 (1970), pp. 38-39. Nguyễn Hoàng’s deathbed speech is recorded in the *Đại Nam Thực Lục*. See Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn [Nguyễn Dynasty Historical Institute], *Đại Nam Thực Lục* [Veritable Records of the Great South], ed. Đào Duy Anh, trans. Nguyễn Ngọc Tinh, vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục Publishing House, 2002), entry for year 1613, p. 37.

The monk declares at the end of his speech the impracticality of expansion in any direction other than the south, and that the only thing standing in the way of Vietnamese migration southwards was the “many bands of Đá Vách.” “Mọi Đá Vách,” a vernacular Vietnamese expression, is sometimes also rendered as “Man Thạch Bích” in Sino-Vietnamese.⁶¹ Both expressions translate as “Stone-Wall tribes,” who were the local minority people that Nguyễn Cư Trinh had been asked to pacify when he was made governor of Quảng Ngãi. Mọi Đá Vách does not, in fact, refer to a single ethnic minority group; it is a name that has been given to the ethnic minority people who lived on a mountain in Quảng Ngãi called the Đá Vách Mountain.⁶² Possibly because the steep face of the mountain made it look like a wall, the mountain was called the Stone Wall Mountain and the people of various ethnic minority groups living on it were called the Stone Wall tribes. Mọi Đá Vách was therefore not an ethnic name; rather, the people were named for their place of residence. Later French scholars have listed the ethnic composition of these people as members of Hre, Tare, and Kare communities, who were of Cham and Jarai stock; Xa Giang and Ka Giong, of the Sedang family; Bonom, of the Bahnar family; and Tava and Talieng.⁶³ For the Vietnamese, the specificities of the ethnic other did not appear to be very important. What was important to the author of the *Sãi Vãi*, a text written to

⁶¹ Official documents in the Vietnamese kingdoms were recorded in Sino-Vietnamese rather than vernacular Vietnamese. The “Mọi Đá Vách” are referred to as the “Man Thạch Bích” in Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s official biography in the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*. See Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn [Nguyễn Dynasty Historical Institute], *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên* [Biographies of the Great South, Premier Section], ed. Hoa Bằng, trans. Đô Mộng Khương (Huế: Thuận Hoá Publishing House, 1993), p. 140.

⁶² See Figure 2: Map of Quảng Ngãi, located at the end of this dissertation.

⁶³ “Les Mois de la Cochinchine et du Sud-Annam,” *Revue Indochinoise Illustrée*, ser. 1, 2, no. 4 (Nov 1893), p. 44. For other works on the uplanders in the Quảng Ngãi region and its surroundings, see Bernard Bourotte, “Essai d’histoire des populations montagnardes du sud-indochinois jusqu’à 1945,” *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises*, n.s., XXX, no. 3 (1955), pp. 215-328; P. Lechesne, “Les Mois du Centre Indochinois,” *Revue Indochinoise*, n.s. 2, 2, nos. 9-10 (September-October 1924), pp. 165-181; 2, nos. 11-12 (November-December 1924), pp. 365-379; 1, nos. 1-2 (January-February, 1925), pp. 37-62; “Les Mois de Ta-mý (Région de la cannelle),” *Revue Indochinoise Illustrée*, ser. 1, 4, no. 11 (June 1894), pp. 82-113; H. Huguët, “Les Provinces d’Annam – Les Mois de la Région de Quang-Ngai,” *Revue Indochinoise*, n.s. 2, 2, no. 19 (15 October 1905), pp. 1419-1429.

encourage the Vietnamese frontier inhabitants to stay on their land and to fight off the uplanders, was to represent the Mọi Đá Vách as aggressive bands of lawless people of the locality who had to be subdued and disciplined.

In his descriptions of the Mọi Đá Vách, Nguyễn Cư Trinh found a means through which to echo the fears of the Vietnamese frontier inhabitants; for the reader today, Nguyễn Cư Trinh's lines offer a precious record of the Vietnamese frontier experience. Rather than an account of inevitable victory, made in a Social Darwinian tone, that one might find in twentieth-century accounts of Vietnamese annexation of lands belonging to other ethnic groups they had encountered on their way to the Mekong delta, the *Sãi Vãi* records a version of these encounters in which the Vietnamese were not only not confident of successfully defeating the ethnic other, but had in fact suffered losses at their hands and were plainly terrified at the thought of them:

[If I] speak of them [I] lose my soul;	299
When [I] think of them [my] spirit is terrified.	
They cut down people like cutting down bananas;	300
They moreover ambush us regularly.	
Everywhere they go they sweep through thoroughly;	301
They capture and kill instantly.	
They enter villages to loot things and harm people,	302
Then descend into fields to chase buffalos and capture horses.	
First [let us] cultivate here until the point of exhaustion;	303
Why should [we] cross over there?	
Do not go wandering off or [they will] capture and take you away,	304
Then [you will] abandon me and leave me like an orphan.	

The description above paints a vivid picture of an aggressive ethnic other encroaching on Vietnamese lands, looting their property, and harming their people. This passage positions the Vietnamese as the threatened victim and shows clearly their reluctance to engage in any form of

fighting against these violent local people. This passage expressing fear and cowardice, delivered in the monk’s frightened male voice, also issues an implicit challenge to the audience, daring them to take steps towards changing the current situation. This challenge is especially apparent when it is the nun’s feminine voice that calls out to the audience to take action against these ferocious tribesmen. The nun says:

In the classics there is a saying: “Smite the barbarians.” ⁶⁴	305
Whoever is able to bear the responsibility, That person is commissioned to go.	306
Please repress this ferocious band, Or else [we’ll be] abused!	307
Here is poetry.	308

These lines, cried out by the nun, mark the end of the performance of the *Sāi Vāi*. The nun relies on a line from the *Book of Songs* to issue this call for action; the classical reference lends historical weight to the contemporary task of fighting back the bands of *Đá Vách*.⁶⁵ Significantly,

⁶⁴ I translated “Smite the barbarians” from the phrase “*Nhung Địch thị ung*” (*Pinyin: rong di shi ying*, 戎狄是膺). *Nhung* are tribesmen from the west and *Địch* are from the north. *Matthews’ Chinese-English Dictionary*, entry 7478.a.2. The *locus classicus* of this phrase is the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*, 詩經); it is the last ode in the “Praise Odes of Lu” (*Lu Song*, 魯頌), classified under the section “Odes to the Temple and Altar” (*Song*, 頌). See the following note for more explanation of my choice of translation.

⁶⁵ Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s use of the historical reference could possibly have stemmed from linguistic constraints. Scholars have pointed out that the word barbarian has no equivalence in the Chinese language, and argued from this standpoint that the Chinese did not conceive of the ethnic other as a barbarian in the sense that the word “barbarian,” of Greek etymology, conveys. A whole host of Chinese words, many of them referring to specific tribes, have been rendered in English translation as “barbarian” where words such as “foreigner” or “captive” might have been more appropriate. Refer to Christopher Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 355-362. The line invoked in this call in the *Sāi Vāi* provides a good case for discussion: “*Nhung Địch thị ung*” (*Pinyin: rong di shi ying*, 戎狄是膺) literally translates as “As for the tribes of the *Nhung* (*Pinyin: Rong*, a tribe from the West of Chinese territory) and the *Địch* (*Pinyin: Di*, a tribe from the North of Chinese territory), [he] smote them.” I translated this simply as “Smite the barbarians.” Not having a word to mean barbarian, and instead having many words in need of specific historical context, I propose that authors such as Nguyễn Cư Trinh have had to rely on other literary techniques such as historical allusions to convey the message that a single word could have delivered. Beckwith argues that because the word barbarian, which “embodies a complex *European* cultural construct, a generic perjorative term for a ‘powerful foreigner with uncouth, uncivilized, nonurban culture who was militarily skilled and somewhat heroic, but inclined to violence and cruelty,” does not have an equivalent in the Chinese language, it renders the idea of the barbarian as

Nguyễn Cư Trinh invokes the nun's feminine voice as a call for action. I believe that the strength in such a call lies in its persuasive powers. There are several possible reasons for persuasion rather than coercion in the call for action: In the introduction to this dissertation, I noted that Đàng Trong's economy was undergoing monetization, and the Nguyễn lords were perhaps unable to requisition labor as freely as they had been able to in the past.⁶⁶ The conclusion of this play could be reflective of the changed relationship between the court and its people. Another important reason for persuasion rather than coercion is that the Nguyễn court had to be careful when dealing with a frontier population already in danger of abandoning the very lands they were asked to defend. If forced to take on the burden of battle against the Đá Vách, the Việt inhabitants of Quảng Ngãi could simply move away to other lands, thus acting against the very purpose of the call for action. Therefore, instead of a masculine call for war against the uplanders, issued from a position of authority, the author Nguyễn Cư Trinh first figuratively emasculates the Vietnamese male by highlighting his fearful and helpless state in the face of aggression from the ethnic other, and then urges him to take action against his aggressors by invoking the feminine voice of persuasion. In this way, Nguyễn Cư Trinh used his literary skills to rally the people to the cause of the central Vietnamese court.

"simply nonexistent in China." (See Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, p. 360) This is surely an exaggeration. The description of the Đá Vách in the *Sãi Vãi* falls neatly into the definition of the term barbarian that Beckwith provides, and Nguyễn Cư Trinh did not use the historical allusion to the *Nhung* and the *Địch* in order to convey historical details of Chinese interaction with those tribes. Instead, it was a call for action, made succinctly with that historical reference, which really conveys the message that the Việt frontier inhabitants should "smite the barbarians" just as was done to *Nhung* and the *Địch* in history. Beckwith, most concerned with the cultures of the Central Eurasians, points out that the cultures referred to as barbarians did not consider themselves as such. Surely few scholars today would think that the "barbarous tribes" thought of themselves as barbarians, which explains the quote marks that Beckwith considers an insufficient acknowledgement of the issue. (See *Ibid.*, p. 356).

⁶⁶ Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, pp. 94-95.

Another view of Vietnamese-Đá Vách relations

It so happens that there is another record of Vietnamese interactions with the ethnic other in Quảng Ngãi. In Nguyễn Cư Trinh's 1751 petition to the king, he stated the problem afflicting the people of Quảng Ngãi from a different perspective. Articles One and Two of the petition, which propose dealing with the problem of the prevalence of corrupt officials of Quảng Ngãi by regulating the process of tax collection and giving the officials proper salaries, have already been discussed in Chapter One of this dissertation. Here, we focus on the latter two articles of the same petition:

3) As for dodgers in the village, there are two types: there are those who are fleeing to dodge taxes and so become vagabonds, and there are those who are hungry and cold, and so disperse and scatter. As it stands, [we] do not divide the categories, displaying them altogether on the roll of taxpayers. Those who do not pay taxes are naturally afraid and disperse, living secretly in the mountains and forests, yet the people of the village have to shoulder the cost of the deficit—why would they stand for this! Now please examine the number of dodgers in the village: [as for] whoever still has a trade then tax [him] according to the regulation, [as for] whoever is hungry and cold, poor and needy, then exempt [him] from taxes as a manner of consolation so that [he can] categorize himself with the people and live again.

4) [Everything] should be done in order for the people to live peacefully and nothing should cause unrest; unrest leads easily to chaos, while peace is easy to govern. Now forbid the people from hunting in the mountains and forests, looking for chickens, and hunting horses; it cannot be the virtuous will (of the court) to harass the local people [*nhân dân địa phương*]. There are bands of fake [officials] who create anxiety wherever they go—the people all denounce them in lamentation! Please: From now on, whoever sends someone to go and do work must have stamped documentation, and must present it to the local official to examine. Whoever harasses the people [must be] arrested and punished. Perhaps then the hearts of the people will be quieted, and they will recover from their ambivalence.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ The petition can be found in both the *Đại Nam Thực Lục* and the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*. Refer to *Đại Nam Thực Lục*, vol. 1, entry for year 1751, p. 156 and *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên*, pp. 140-41.

Articles Three and Four of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s petition are particularly interesting for their references to various social classifications of people in Quảng Ngãi. Article Three, focusing on the issue of tax collection, is most concerned with Quảng Ngãi’s ethnic Việt inhabitants. Nguyễn Cư Trinh reported that there were two groups of Vietnamese who were dodging taxes: the poor and the dishonest. He was most concerned with the poor people, and urged the court to take steps towards rehabilitating them so that the poor would once again be able to enter into society. He was also concerned with the honest villagers, who were forced to pay more than their fair share of taxes because they were shouldering the burden of those who were unable or unwilling to pay. Article Four, on the other hand, was concerned with the “local people” (*nhân dân địa phương*). Since the “local people” were discussed in relation to the “people” (*dân*) who were “hunting in the mountains and forests, looking for chickens, and hunting horses,” the “local people” was a reference to the ethnic minority people in the region of Quảng Ngãi. The harassed people of the locality referred to in this petition were most probably the Đá Vách people—the same people who were vilified in the *Sãi Vãi*.

The picture of Vietnamese-Đá Vách relations that emerges from this petition is quite different from the image that was conveyed in the final lines of the *Sãi Vãi*. Instead of frightened Vietnamese enduring the ferocious Đá Vách uplanders, Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s petition seems to indicate that the Vietnamese inhabitants of Quảng Ngãi had been harassing the local ethnic minority groups by plundering the uplanders. More egregious were the “bands of fake [officials]” that caused anxiety amongst the uplanders because they exploited the minority groups in the name of the Nguyễn court. Nguyễn Cư Trinh asked the court to forbid the Việt people from mistreating the ethnic minority locals and pleaded with the king to mete out

punishment to the Vietnamese bullies, so that the local ethnic minority groups would be quieted and cease their animosity against the Vietnamese. Embedded in the petition is another issue that was very likely a source of concern for the Nguyễn court: In Article Three, there were some amongst the Việt frontier inhabitants who had chosen “[to live] secretly in the mountains and forests.” Instead of a stark line of demarcation between the ethnic minority uplanders and Việt lowlanders on the Quảng Ngãi frontier, some Việt people were opting to join the uplanders in order to move away from the control—through taxation or otherwise—of the Nguyễn court. The Nguyễn court was losing population at a time when it needed people to hold on to their frontier lands, and it was in the interest of the court to establish firm lines of division between the Việt lowlanders and the ethnic minority uplanders to ensure that the Việt people stayed lowlanders, under the control of the central court.

What do we make of the two different versions of Vietnamese-Đá Vách relations? The nature of the two historical records supplies the contexts through which to evaluate the two positions. In his petition, Nguyễn Cư Trinh was urging the king to regulate that which he could regulate—the Vietnamese villagers and officials—in order retain the Việt frontier inhabitants in the ranks of the lowlanders and to obtain the cooperation of the highland ethnic minority groups. The nature of this request required Nguyễn Cư Trinh to spell out the faults of the Vietnamese frontier inhabitants so that the king could institute stricter controls on the border. In the *Sãi Vãi*, on the other hand, Nguyễn Cư Trinh was persuading the Vietnamese villagers to align themselves with the lowlanders. It was in his interest to present the Đá Vách as pesky and ferocious barbarians in need of discipline and civilization. Both records were probably slightly exaggerated truths: On the one hand, if not for the reality of Đá Vách raids on the Vietnamese

lowland villages, Nguyễn Cư Trinh would not have been sent to Quảng Ngãi to manage the situation. On the other hand, there was surely reason for the Đá Vách to be aggressive towards the Vietnamese, and Nguyễn Cư Trinh's observations of the situation in Quảng Ngãi shed some light on the matter. The two historical records attest to Nguyễn Cư Trinh's ability to use his literary prowess to resolve a problem at a time when an open call for battle against the local ethnic minorities might not have been an appropriate course of action.

In staging the performance of the *Sãi Vãi*, Nguyễn Cư Trinh was reportedly successful in persuading the Việt inhabitants of Quảng Ngãi to rally together to fight the Đá Vách people. According to his official biography, he advanced an army on Đá Vách territory, upon which the Mọi Đá Vách scattered and fled. Afraid that the Mọi Đá Vách would return should he withdraw his troops, he orchestrated yet another performance, this time for the benefit of the Mọi Đá Vách. Nguyễn Cư Trinh occupied the Đá Vách's base and made a show of building walls and organizing his people into a military-plantation system, thus giving the impression that the Việt people intended to stay put in their newly conquered territory. Falling for this show, the Mọi Đá Vách came out of hiding to surrender to the Vietnamese. Nguyễn Cư Trinh then reassured them and allowed them to return, withdrawing his troops when he had secured guarantees of peace.⁶⁸ Just as Nguyễn Cư Trinh composed two different versions of Vietnamese-Đá Vách relations in the *Sãi Vãi* and in the petition he submitted to the king, he staged two different performances to gain the co-operation of two groups of people—the Việt inhabitants of Quảng Ngãi and the Mọi Đá Vách. For the moment, Nguyễn Cư Trinh scored a victory in Quảng Ngãi. History tells us, however, that the fight between the Việt people and the Đá Vách was far from concluded with

⁶⁸ *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên*, pp. 139-40.

this Vietnamese victory. Years later, other Vietnamese officials such as Lê Văn Duyệt were once again faced with the task of taking the feisty and challenging Mọi Đá Vách into hand. But Nguyễn Cư Trinh's success in dealing with this particular episode led him to greater responsibilities in the policing of Đàng Trong's porous borders and in establishing stability in its newly annexed territories.

Conclusion

Nguyễn Cư Trinh localized the *Sãi Vãi* to the Quảng Ngãi region only in the final section of his play. He embedded political and social messages with wider applicability throughout the *Sãi Vãi*, but brought the play to a strong finish with a message aimed directly at the Việt inhabitants of Quảng Ngãi. He urged the frontier inhabitants of Quảng Ngãi to stay firmly planted on their lands, in order to fight the uplanders who were threatening to chase them out of their territories. Interestingly, he urged the Việt people to fight the other groups of people they encountered on their frontier through encouraging them (the Việt people) to embrace their own humanity. Their humanity was presented to them as the expression of the full range of human emotions: happiness, anger, compassion, love, hate, fear, and desire. The Việt people were not to embrace these feelings merely as raw emotional responses, moreover; they were expected to express these emotions on a higher plane, which was informed by Confucian moral principles. In instructing the Việt inhabitants to behave in a manner considered to be of a higher civilizational level, Nguyễn Cư Trinh marked clearly the distinction between them and the ethnic minority uplanders in political as well as civilizational terms. The Đá Vách were to be treated as less civilized outsiders, so that the Việt lowlanders would have greater incentive to band together in

opposition against them. Although more often phrased in terms of keeping the Đá Vách outsiders out of the Vietnamese lowland villages, the elevated civilizational consciousness served to keep the Việt frontier inhabitants from leaving the pressures of the lowlands to join the peoples of the hills, thereby contributing further to the Nguyễn court's aim of securing their frontier territory.

Brook suggests, in his essay on *sanjiao* in China, that religious syncretism was more likely to be found in the popular, unsupervised practice of religious worship than within the formal religious traditions in which monastic or political elite exercised authority. He cites examples of “joint worship” in late-imperial China, where one can observe the combined worship of Buddha, Laozi, and Confucius, as the practice that most resembles the workings of religious syncretism, even though he shies away from labeling it as such.⁶⁹ Brook is far more willing to identify *sanjiao* in the haphazard nature of everyday religious practice than in well-articulated religious ideologies, in which he considers the systematic existence of syncretism to be very elusive. In the *Sãi Vãi*, Nguyễn Cư Trinh consciously presented to his frontier audience a synthesized moral and religious worldview. The Buddhist quest for transcendence from the range of human emotions provided him with a framework through which to synthesize Buddhist and Confucian thought. Nguyễn Cư Trinh encouraged his audience to practice a form of this-worldly Buddhism that necessitated their participation in this world by embracing Confucian moral principles in their expression of the seven emotions that made them fully human. I argued in this chapter that the resultant moral and religious worldview constitutes a historical example of religious syncretism, because the audience was encouraged to view it from the perspective of the altered religion, Buddhism. More significantly, Nguyễn Cư Trinh spelt out in fine detail the

⁶⁹ Timothy Brook, “Rethinking Syncretism,” pp. 27-34.

aspects of Buddhism and Confucianism that deserved to be preserved or discarded, which gives the reader today an example of how one form of syncretic religious thought functioned in eighteenth-century Vietnam.

I have provided my analysis of the *Sãi Vãi* in the course of the first three chapters of this dissertation by describing the progression of the play from start to finish. In the first chapter, “Humor on the Frontier,” I noted the strong elements of social critique that were present in the beginning of the *Sãi Vãi*. Buddhist monks and Confucian officials came under critique for their excesses and their failure to demonstrate model behavior. Buddhist monks were criticized for being worldly in an inappropriate fashion—by seeking the pleasures of the flesh—while Confucian officials were criticized for making a show of performing virtue for the sake of self-gain rather than for the good of the people. Nguyễn Cư Trinh did not, however, criticize these power holders for the sake of admonishing them to return to the orthodox practice of Buddhism and Confucianism. On the contrary, in the second chapter of this dissertation, “Skeptical Confucianism,” I showed how Nguyễn Cư Trinh upheld a modified form of Confucianism as the best governing philosophy for the frontier. He specifically addressed two issues that he considered important to frontier governing philosophy: first, that appropriate attention should be paid to women’s contribution to society, and second, that governing philosophy should be adaptable to changing circumstances, even at the expense of classical governing precepts. These ideas, particularly his thoughts about valuing women’s contributions to society, were also circulating in the Sino-Vietnamese literary world in the mid-eighteenth century, suggesting that

Nguyễn Cư Trinh was connected to the wider literary world outside of Đàng Trong. The third chapter of this dissertation, “The Illness of Human Emotions,” brings the focus of the *Sāi Vãi* to the realities of life on the southern Vietnamese frontier. Nguyễn Cư Trinh inverted Buddhist ideas of transcendence and escape from the affairs of daily life to create a form of syncretic Buddhism that emphasized this-worldly existence. He persuaded the Việt inhabitants of Quảng Ngãi to embrace their humanity through the full expression of their human emotions, but provided them with a moral compass—informed by Confucian moral principles—to guide the expression of their seven human emotions. In persuading the Việt frontier inhabitants to embrace civilized life on the frontier, Nguyễn Cư Trinh led them to the logical conclusion that they should group together against the less civilized uplanders, thus lowering the chances of them abandoning Vietnamese society in favor of the hills. Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s civilizing project was designed to better demarcate the cultural boundaries between Vietnamese lowlanders and local uplanders and in so doing protect the porous borders of Đàng Trong from attrition by its insiders.

In the second half of this dissertation, I will examine the literary life of another part of the southern Vietnamese frontier. After Nguyễn Cư Trinh completed his work in Quảng Ngãi, he moved on to other posts within Đàng Trong, and in 1754 became a controller of the southern regions of Đàng Trong territory. Here, he met Mạc Thiên Tứ, governor of an ethnic Chinese enclave on the Mekong delta, Hà Tiên. Mạc Thiên Tứ, son of the original founder of the settlement, was himself of mixed Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese heritage. In 1736, Mạc Thiên Tứ started an ambitious literary project in which he composed ten verses in praise of ten scenic sites in Hà Tiên; these poems were then sent to thirty-one other poets living scattered across the ports of the South China Sea, who wrote responses to Mạc Thiên Tứ’s ten initial poems. Chapter

Four of this dissertation examines Mạc Thiên Tứ's poetry and the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project in the context of Mạc Thiên Tứ political and cultural ambitions for Hà Tiên. Chapter Five, the final chapter of this work, studies the interaction between Nguyễn Cư Trinh and Mạc Thiên Tứ through an examination of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's belated contribution, almost twenty years later, to Mạc Thiên Tứ's *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project.

Chapter Four

Writing Landscapes into Civilization: Ming Loyalist Ambitions for the Southern Vietnamese Frontier

This present chapter marks the start of the second part of the dissertation, which focuses on Mạc Thiên Tứ's civilizing project in Hà Tiên. In contrast to the migration patterns that influenced Nguyễn Cư Trinh's relationship to the frontier lands of Đàng Trong, Mạc Thiên Tứ's family's arrival in Hà Tiên was marked by different migration patterns and circumstances. The southern Vietnamese kingdom's annexation of its frontier lands was in fact aided in large part by seventeenth and eighteenth-century Chinese settlers on key territories in the Mekong delta. These Chinese settlers and their descendants had their own political ambitions for the land on which they had settled. They found, however, that they were in a significantly weaker political position than the Vietnamese on the frontier because most of the Chinese settlers of this period were Ming loyalists who could not count on any political support from the Qing government. In this chapter, I undertake a study of a simultaneously bold and exquisite example of southern Vietnamese frontier literature: The *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* is a large-scale literary project that brought together three hundred and twenty parallel landscape poems composed in honor of a province on the frontier. Taking as its subject Hà Tiên, an ethnic Chinese enclave on the Mekong delta, this literary project reveals the social, cultural, and political connections that the Ming loyalists on the Vietnamese frontier maintained with other Chinese communities in Vietnam and on the Southern Chinese coastal provinces of Guangdong and Fujian in the mid-eighteenth century.

The Ten Songs of Hà Tiên Literary Project

It all began in the spring of 1736, when Mạc Thiên Tứ (*Pinyin*: Mo Tianci, 鄭天賜) received a guest from Guangdong in southern China.¹ Mạc Thiên Tứ himself tells the story of the project's inception in his preface to the literary work:

In the spring of the *bing chen* year [1736], Master Chen [*Vietnamese*: Trần] of Guangdong, bearing the courtesy name Huaishui [*Vietnamese*: Hoài Thủy], sailed the seas and arrived here. I treated him as an honored guest. Every flowered morning and moonlit night, we hummed and chanted without ceasing, taking the occasion to compose matching poems of Hà Tiên's ten sceneries. Master Chen set up a banner and started a friendly competition, initiating airs and odes.²

丙辰春，粵東陳子淮水航海至此。予待爲上賓。每花晨月夕，吟咏不輟，因將河僊十景相屬和。陳子樹幟鷄壇，首倡風雅。

Mạc Thiên Tứ described how he composed landscape poetry about ten of Hà Tiên's scenic sites, accompanied by his guest Master Chen, whose name is Zhikai (*Vietnamese*: Trần Trí Khải, 陳智楷).³ Possibly out of humility, he credited his companion with initiating the project.⁴ Certainly, the visitor played a vital role in enabling the project to take on the scope that it eventually did.

¹ Recall that Mạc Thiên Tứ was the son of Mạc Cửu, the ethnic Chinese founder of Hà Tiên. I have provided a short biography of Mạc Thiên Tứ in the introduction to this dissertation.

² Mạc Thiên Tứ, preface to *An Nam Hà Tiên Thập Vinh* [Ten Songs of Hà Tiên in An Nam, hereafter *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*] (École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) microfilm A.441, no. 661, n.d.), pp. 1-2. Held in the Echols Collection of Cornell University. All translations in this chapter are my own unless otherwise noted.

³ Chen Zhikai is only referred to by his penname, Huaishui, in the preface to the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*, but we know his courtesy name, Zhikai, because he signed off using it in the postface that he contributed to the volume. I rendered the names of all the poets residing on the Chinese mainland in Mandarin *pinyin* simply for the purpose of reminding readers that literary works produced in Vietnam could have had an audience wider than a Vietnamese-speaking audience. A *pinyin* pronunciation of the name need not be more accurate, as the poets were probably communicating in Cantonese. I use *pinyin* because it is a standardized romanization of Chinese characters.

⁴ In a postface written by Chen Zhikai, he credits Mạc Thiên Tứ in turn, noting that he (Chen Zhikai) "hummed (verses) to match his (Mạc Thiên Tứ's)." I believe that, regardless of who initiated the idea, Mạc Thiên Tứ was the one who composed the initial poems since he was the host and Chen Zhikai the guest.

Chen Zhikai stayed with Mạc Thiên Tứ for half a year, and when it came time for him to take his leave, he performed a function that Mạc Thiên Tứ could not have managed by himself:

Upon reaching the time when [Master Chen] had to return to the Pearl River, he disseminated the topics to the literary society. [I am] much obliged to these gentlemen for not dismissing the poems; following each title, [they] composed verses, collecting them together to make one set. From a distance, they sent [them] to show to me; I took the occasion to hand [the volume] over to the woodcarver's tool.

及其反棹珠江, 分題白社. 承諸公不棄, 如題咏就彙成一冊, 遙寄示予, 因付剞劂.

Chen Zhikai carried with him copies of Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten initial poems and distributed them to poets along the way as he journeyed home on board a ship. These poets were scattered across various coastal cities of Vietnam and southern China, and were possibly the members of a literary society called the *Chiêu Anh Các* (Summoning Worthies to the Pavilion), a society associated with Mạc Thiên Tứ. The gentlemen who received Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten poems were asked to compose responses to them and to send them back, one presumes along the same seafaring network, to Mạc Thiên Tứ in Hà Tiên. In all, three hundred and ten poems returned, ten from each of thirty-one poets. Mạc Thiên Tứ compiled those poems with his ten initial poems—making them three hundred and twenty poems in total—added a preface and two postfaces, and sponsored a woodblock print publication of this collection.⁵ The project was completed in the summer of 1737, a little more than a year after Chen Zhikai's visit to Hà Tiên.

⁵ Mạc Thiên Tứ wrote the preface to the collection. One postface was written by Mạc Thiên Tứ's companion in this project, Chen Zhikai; the other was written by an "Old Man from Lingnan (the Guangdong and Guangxi area)" named Yu Xichun (Vietnamese: Dư Tích Thuần, 余錫純).

Mạc Thiên Tứ's motivations behind this project were complex. He started the project within a year of taking over the administration of Hà Tiên from his late father, suggesting that this was an important project to him. His final thoughts in his preface to the collection of poems are as follows:

This [i.e. the project of writing scenic poetry about Hà Tiên] is to make known [the fact] that the mountains and rivers have received my late father's action of cultural transformation, which has greatly increased their strength and beauty; [the mountains and rivers] in receiving, in turn, the appraisal of these renowned lords, have been further enhanced in their enchantment. These poems not only contribute to the attractiveness of this sea country; they, for their part, can act as an official gazetteer of Hà Tiên.

是知山川得先君風化之行, 增其壯麗, 得復諸名公品題, 益滋其靈秀. 此詩不獨
爲海國生色, 亦可作河僊誌乘.

Mạc Thiên Tứ wrote and disseminated landscape poetry about Hà Tiên, soliciting responses in return, for two principle reasons. First, he wished to make known and propagate the fact that his father, Mạc Cửu (*Pinyin*: Mo Jiu, 鄭玖), founder of the Chinese community in Hà Tiên, had enacted the “cultural transformation” of the landscape. Second, Mạc Thiên Tứ's act of establishing the scenic sites of Hà Tiên as topics of poetic discourse for a literary community that was dispersed over southern China and other parts of Vietnam “further enhanced their enchantment.” The landscape of Hà Tiên would thus have undergone two levels of enhancement with the project's completion.

We find here two means through which cultural transformation takes place. The first, carried out by the father Mạc Cửu, was a physical form of transformation leading to cultural change. Mạc Cửu's arrival in Hà Tiên and the resulting expansion of Hà Tiên's economy was accompanied by physical changes. The building of markets, citadel walls, and guesthouses, for

example, are credited to Mạc Cửu in his official biography assembled by the Nguyễn dynasty.⁶ The second form of cultural transformation, which the son Mạc Thiên Tứ carried out, was a discursive form of transformation leading to cultural change. In composing verses about Hà Tiên's landscape, Mạc Thiên Tứ subordinated Hà Tiên to a specific cultural genre—classical Chinese landscape poetry. He used poetry as a means through which to render his domain culturally congruent with a civilization with which he wished to associate. Through his poems, Mạc Thiên Tứ civilized his peripheral domain by inscribing cultural values on its landscape. I use the loaded term *civilized* here with the sense that the Chinese phrase *wenhua* (Vietnamese: *văn hóa*, 文化) conveys. *Wen* (文) brings together two concepts integral to the Chinese civilizational discourse: “pattern,” the presence of recognizable designs inherent in the warp and woof of nature and, a concept derived from the earlier definition of *wen* as pattern, “literature” or “writing,” the manifestation of those natural patterns in script. By saying that Mạc Thiên Tứ *civilized* his domain, I mean that Mạc Thiên Tứ brought out the recognizable patterns in the landscape of Hà Tiên through a literary transformation of its scenic sites. This process brought the landscape of Hà Tiên into the realm of having *wen*, both in terms of patterns and literature, instead of being a realm of pattern-less chaos. The poems function as the poet's signature, engraved onto each of Hà Tiên's scenic sites. Moreover, Mạc Thiên Tứ disseminated his poems and solicited responses in the same genre so that the culturally inscribed landscape would then enter into the civilized (*wen*) discourse of intellectuals and thus be “further enhanced” through the thirty-one other acts of civilization (*wenhua*)—the number of times the patterns in the landscape were articulated in poetry by a poet within the literary circle. Mạc Thiên Tứ's

⁶ Mạc Cửu's biography can be found in Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn [Nguyễn Dynasty Historical Institute], *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên* [Biographies of the Great South, Premier Section], ed. Hoa Bằng, trans. Đô Mộng Khương, vol. 6 (Huế: Thuận Hóa Publishing House, 1993), pp. 173-175.

concluding flourish was to commit the collection of poetry to permanence through commissioning a woodblock print publication of it. The inscriptional character of the woodblock printing technique was particularly fitting for a project concerned with engraving cultural values onto the terrain. His project was, above all, a form of civilizing mission for the peripheral territory under his charge.

Of the three hundred and twenty poems in the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*, this chapter is limited to a consideration of Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten initial poems. Both Mạc Thiên Tứ's preface and Chen Zhikai's postface note that the poems were composed in an environment in which the poems of the one were matched by poems composed by the other. In such instances involving the composition of matching poetry, the two parties typically take turns writing verses: one person starts with a poem, and the other composes a response to it; the first person writes another, and the other matches it again, until they complete their intended number of verses. In such cases, it is important to study both sets of poetry in relation to each other since the initiating party's poems might in fact have been responding to the second party's preceding poems.⁷ It is a very curious fact, however, that Chen Zhikai's poetry was not recorded in the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*. Nowhere in the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* does it state the total number of poems in the collection; it is possible that Chen Zhikai's poems might have been lost in the process of copying and recopying over the years.⁸ However, a near-contemporary observer, Lê Quý Đôn, claimed in the 1770s to have seen a copy of the project and recorded in his *Frontier Chronicles* that there

⁷ See, for example, Ding Xiang Warner, "The Two Voices of *Wangchuan Ji*: Poetic Exchange Between Wang Wei and Pei Di," in *Early Medieval China* 10-11, no. 2 (2005), pp. 57-72.

⁸ Mạc Thiên Tứ official biography in the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên* notes that the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* had been lost because of the chaotic political situation in Hà Tiên in the latter half of the eighteenth century. It was only in the early nineteenth century that the governor of Gia Định, Trịnh Hoài Đức, managed to find a copy to republish it. Refer to *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên* vol. 6, p. 176.

were thirty-one other poets involved in the project besides Mạc Thiên Tứ: six residing in parts of Vietnam and twenty-five in Qing China. Chen Zhikai's name was not included in Lê Quý Đôn's list of thirty-one poets.⁹

I thus propose that studying Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten poems as a single unit, and not in relation to other poems that might have been composed together with them, would in fact be closer to the spirit of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project. The thirty-one other poets involved in the project were not presented with Mạc Thiên Tứ's and Chen Zhikai's poetry, if the latter's poems even exist. They were asked to respond only to Mạc Thiên Tứ's poems, and it is likely that those poems were not composed as a dialogue with Chen Zhikai but as an independent suite intended for the purposes of the larger project. Moreover, the thirty-one other poets did not receive one poem at a time but had all of Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten poems at the same time; this would have affected the ways in which they responded to recurring themes, motifs, and sentiments found in his poetry.

Woodblock prints of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* are no longer extant. My translation and analysis of Mạc Thiên Tứ's poetry are based on a version of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* that was microfilmed by the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) in 1955; this version was

⁹ Lê Quý Đôn, *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* [Frontier Chronicles], part 2, trans. Nguyễn Khắc Thuần (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục Publishing House, 2008), pp. 126-27. Lê Quý Đôn, an official of the Trịnh-controlled Lê dynasty, was sent to the previously Đàng Trong-held territory in south-central Vietnam for about six months in the 1770s, during the chaos of the Tây Sơn uprising. He originally composed the *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* in 1766. For more information about Lê Quý Đôn and his *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục*, see Alexander Woodside, "Central Vietnam's Trading World in the Eighteenth Century as seen in Lê Quý Đôn's 'Frontier Chronicles,'" in *Essays into Vietnamese Past*, eds. K. W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Press, 1995), pp. 157-72.

originally hand-copied and bears no date.¹⁰ Additionally, two of his poems (poems 9 and 10), as well as a small handful of poems by other contributors to the project, were recorded by Lê Quý Đôn in his *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* [Frontier Chronicles]. Lê Quý Đôn, of northern Vietnamese origin, traveled to the southern Vietnamese kingdom in the 1770s and recorded his observations of the southern frontier in this important work. Woodblock prints of the *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* survive. In the 1970s, a Vietnamese scholar, Đông Hồ (actual name Lâm Trác Chi), published a monograph in which he reproduced in print Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten poems.¹¹ Unfortunately, Đông Hồ did not note the source of the poems in his work. I sought help from Lê Quý Đôn's and Đông Hồ's works where there are missing characters or where I believe characters were wrongly copied in the EFEO microfilm version of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*. I note each case of change wherever I make it.

In the sections that follow, I discuss aspects of Mạc Thiên Tứ's poetry that concern his civilizing mission for Hà Tiên. I evaluate whether Mạc Thiên Tứ wrote poetry about his peripheral domain in order to draw Hà Tiên into the Vietnamese kingdom or into Chinese civilization, and I consider the ways in which he ascribed culturally recognizable patterns to nature in his poetry; I draw conclusions about his inner emotional state from his choice of landscapes, and I examine how a repeated motif in his poetry holds the key to understanding his motivations behind his civilizing project.

¹⁰ *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*. (EFEO microfilm A.441, no. 661, n.d.)

¹¹ I refer to the 1999 republished edition of this work. Đông Hồ, *Văn Học Hà Tiên* [The Literature of Hà Tiên] (Hà Chí Minh City: Văn Nghệ Publishing House, 1999).

Situating Hà Tiên in poetry: Dangerous frontier or distant sanctuary?

Hà Tiên is situated at the intersection of several overlapping political arenas. Located at the border between Cambodia and the southern Vietnamese kingdom, it was considered a southwest frontier by the Vietnamese, but the Khmer royalty regarded it as Cambodian territory. When Mạc Thiên Tứ's father, Mạc Cửu, first arrived in Hà Tiên, he had styled himself as an *okña* under Khmer royal patronage. In 1708, however, after he survived an attack by the Siamese in which his Khmer overlords had not come to his aid, he chose to submit to the southern Vietnamese instead of the Cambodians.¹² Mạc Thiên Tứ's regional political alliances were oriented towards the southern Vietnamese capital of Huế just as his father's had been. Upon his father's death, he made a trip to see the Nguyễn lord in Huế, whereupon he was given official status as the governor general (*đô đốc*) in charge of Hà Tiên, and bestowed with three ships bearing the imperial insignia.¹³ Ships bearing the imperial insignia were not taxed. He inherited from his father, moreover, a legacy that connected him with a different political group—a dispersed group of ethnic Chinese who had maintained loyalty to the fallen Ming dynasty. Hà Tiên housed a busy port that functioned as a node in a network of ports belonging to the South China Sea trading system. This trading system connected the ports from Fujian and Guangdong to the port in Hà Tiên.¹⁴ Mạc Thiên Tứ is said to have been a versatile political actor, styling

¹² Mạc Cửu's biography states that he enacted this change under the advice of one of his subordinates, Tô Quân, who argued that the Khmer were false and cunning whereas the lord of the "Southern dynasty" (*Nam triều*) was humane and reliable. See *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên*, vol. 6, p. 173.

¹³ Mạc Thiên Tứ's biography, *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên*, vol. 6, pp. 175-76.

¹⁴ For a list of the port cities on the South China Sea trading route and brief descriptions of them, refer to James Kong Chin, "Junk Trade between South China and Nguyen Vietnam" in *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, eds. Nola Cooke and Li Tana (Singapore: Singapore University Press and Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), pp. 53-66.

himself differently when dealing with the various regional powers.¹⁵ The *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project, however, demonstrates only one aspect of that supposed versatility: The *Ten Songs* project was founded on a culture in which educated Vietnamese and Chinese could participate, but which was quite distinct from that of the Khmer world.

“Hà Tiên” was not the same place in the Vietnamese and the Chinese worlds. From the perspective of the southern Vietnamese political center in Huế, Hà Tiên was a militarized frontier or a wild peripheral region. Almost fifty years after the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project was initiated, for example, one of the southern Vietnamese princes, Nguyễn Ánh, sought refuge in the wilderness of Vietnam’s southwestern terrain in his flight from rebels who had taken over control of his family’s kingdom.¹⁶ To the Chinese community moving from port to port on the trade route, however, Hà Tiên represented a familiar ethnic Chinese enclave, albeit situated at a distance from the Chinese mainland. There were, as such, two possible civilizing projects for Hà Tiên’s landscape in Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poetry. One possibility situated Hà Tiên as a frontier region to be inscribed into the expanding Vietnamese empire, while the other positioned Hà Tiên as a distant Chinese region already endowed with Chinese cultural civilization. The manner in which Mạc Thiên Tứ depicted Hà Tiên’s landscape in his poetry would be indicative of the nature of his civilizing project for Hà Tiên: Hà Tiên could either be an unknown frontier region to be made intelligible to an audience located at the Vietnamese capital, or it could be a distant Chinese

¹⁵ Yumio Sakurai, “Eighteenth-Century Chinese Pioneers on the Water Frontier of Indochina,” in *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, eds. Nola Cooke and Li Tana (Singapore: Singapore University Press and Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), pp. 44-45.

¹⁶ The rebels were the famous Tây Sơn brothers, who wrested control of southern Vietnam from the Nguyễn family in the early 1770s. For more information about the rebellion, see George Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006).

kingdom seeking to reinforce its position as a haven for the perpetuation of Chinese cultural tradition.

The *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* comprises ten heptasyllabic poems, written as octets of four couplets each. Mạc Thiên Tứ dedicates his ten poems to an island, a mountain, a temple, a fortress wall, a cave, a cliff, a lake, a bay, a cape, and finally, a fishing creek.¹⁷ These scenic sites serve to circumscribe the realm that was to be inscribed with civilizing patterns. I begin my consideration of this ten-poem suite with the first two poems: “Golden Islet Blocking Waves” (poem 1) and “Verdant Folds of Screen Mountain” (poem 2):

Golden Islet Blocking Waves

An island of rocky peaks settles the emerald waters;
Flowing waters by a wondrous beauty at mighty Hà Tiên.
Obstructing the power of waves and billows from the southeast seas;
Sun’s and moon’s radiance reflect from the sky and down below.
Arriving in its waters, fish to dragons accordingly transform;
Beside cliffs of trees and stones, they naturally splash a-flutter.
Sounds of winds and traces of waves, their echoes long endure;
A landscape of shadows and light, an unusual kingdom, distant.

金嶼攔濤
一島崔嵬奠碧漣
橫流奇勝壯河僊
波濤勢截東南海
日月光迴上下天
得水魚龍隨變化
傍崖樹石自聯翩
風聲浪跡應長據
濃淡山川異國懸
(Poem 1)¹⁸

Verdant Folds of Screen Mountain

Luxuriant vegetation grows naturally on this lofty peak;
Folded ridges, fanning open, in graceful purple and verdant.
A cloud-filled sky, encircling light, the mountain presses up-close;
Just after rain, crisp and pleasant, fauna and flora aplenty.

屏山疊翠
龍蔥草木自峇嶢
疊嶺屏開紫翠嬌
雲靄匝光山勢近
雨餘爽麗物華饒

¹⁷ For a list and description of the geographical features of Hà Tiên, which includes most of the scenic sites that form the topic of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poems, see Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí* [Gia Định Gazetteer], trans. and ed. Lý Việt Dũng and Huỳnh Văn Tới (Ho Chi Minh City: Tổng Hợp Đồng Nai Publishing House, 2006), pp. 95-105 and 170-195. (The latter set of page numbers refer to the *Hán* character manuscript appended to the back of the volume.) The *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí* was compiled in the 1820s.

¹⁸ Mạc Thiên Tứ’s ten poems can be found in the EFEO microfilm version of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*, pp. 93-97. I believe that the pages became confused in the microfilming process, and Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poems should have been in the first few pages of the work.

Ageing together with heaven and earth, an auspicious site for ages;
Like the splendor of mist and rosy clouds, extending as far as the eye
sees.

I dare say, that in Hà Tiên, the scenery is unusual;
Where vapors amass thickly and trees swish and rustle.

老同天地鍾¹⁹靈久
榮共烟霞屬望遙

敢道河僊風景異
嵐堆鬱鬱樹蕭蕭

(Poem 2)

The first two poems of Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten-poem suite celebrate Hà Tiên's natural beauty as well as its unusual geographical location. The first poem is composed in praise of Golden Islet, a small rocky island that protects Hà Tiên's shores from powerful waves, and the second poem adopts a reverential posture towards Screen Mountain, a mountain with layered ridges on Hà Tiên's western boundary. In "Golden Islet Blocking Waves," Hà Tiên is represented as a protected place by virtue of its wondrous natural beauty—a rocky island fortuitously positioned in front of Hà Tiên's coast that stills the waters of the violent seas. The force of waves and billows breaks on crashing against Golden Island's rocky peaks, and the rough seas turn into smoothly flowing waters. The poem celebrates more than Hà Tiên's natural beauty, moreover. In the third couplet of this poem, Mạc Thiên Tứ invokes the mythical power of the legend surrounding Dragon Gate (*Pinyin*: Longmen 龍門; Vietnamese: Long Môn) for Hà Tiên. Dragon Gate, the name of several actual locations on the Chinese mainland, represents the mythical place where carp swim against the stream, struggling to jump over the rocks at the top of the stream; the few that succeed would turn into dragons. Mạc Thiên Tứ describes, in the third couplet of this poem, fish swimming "a-flitter" like birds—creating splashes as they break through the water's surface beside the rocky cliffs of the island—in order to arrive at the place

¹⁹ The EFEO microfilm version of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* records this character as “鐘,” as in “bell.” I corrected it to “鍾” because of the compound word “鍾靈,” meaning “an auspicious site,” which proves a good fit for the poem.

beyond, where they would turn into dragons.²⁰ This poem represents a powerful starting point for Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten-poem suite. It is a celebration of Hà Tiên as a natural and mythical wonder, and ascribes to Hà Tiên the characteristics of a "distant" and "unusual kingdom," which was at the same time patterned upon significant Chinese mythical traditions. The poet concludes by drawing out the unceasing repetition in the echoes of winds and waves that "long endure" in Hà Tiên, evoking a sense of its longevity.

Mạc Thiên Tứ continues his representation of Hà Tiên as unusual and everlasting in his next poem, "Verdant Folds of Screen Mountain." Screen Mountain is depicted as an ornamental screen, fanning open with a beautiful pattern traced out by the graceful colors of its natural vegetation and the enlivening radiance from the light refracted through the cloud-filled sky. It is healthy and teeming with life, as evidenced by the rich flora and fauna living on the mountain. The poet sustains the sense of Hà Tiên's longevity that he had created in his first poem by proclaiming that it ages "together with heaven and earth"; in other words, it will be around as long as heaven and earth survive. Furthermore, the poet preserves the rich patterns of Hà Tiên's Screen Mountain by declaring it an "auspicious site," which will neither fade nor face decay, and will instead survive in its present form "for ages."

From the two poems, it is clear that the poet ascribed to Hà Tiên the character of an unchanging and everlasting domain. These characteristics are accompanied by the depiction of Hà Tiên as an unusual place, an observation that was repeated in both poems. In "Golden Islet Blocking Waves," Hà Tiên is inscribed an "unusual kingdom" and in "Verdant Folds of Screen

²⁰ "Fish-dragons" is a motif that appears in four of Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten poems. I believe it is a significant motif and will discuss it at the end of this chapter, after I have introduced all ten of the poems.

Mountain,” Hà Tiên’s “scenery is unusual.” The implication of the unusual patterns that the poet discerns out of Hà Tiên’s natural landscapes, coupled with his desire for it to remain unchanged from that state for all eternity, is instructive for the reader. The poet appears to embrace the fact that his kingdom is located in a distant place, which renders its scenery unusual. This distant and unusual place, moreover, neither appears to be dangerous nor evokes a sense of longing for the familiar, traits often captured in the landscape poetry written by officials down on their luck and sent to border areas, or by eremitic poets who have removed themselves from the capital in protest of political affairs.²¹ No lines in Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poetry look back directionally towards a more familiar location or temporally at a better historical time, which suggests that Mạc Thiên Tứ was celebrating the present as a moment of great promise for his kingdom, and the location of Hà Tiên as fortuitous to the civilizing project he had in mind for his domain.

Neither does Mạc Thiên Tứ’s project appear to be a frontier project. Examples abound from the Tang to late imperial Chinese period, where frontier poems written by officials exhibit characteristics of attempts to render the peripheral regions intelligible to an imagined audience at home in the capital. Typical of those projects are works in which the authors give directions from place to place on the periphery—which can perform the function of a tourist guidebook—as these works allow the audience in the capital to imagine the act of traveling in the peripheral regions.²² Those poems function only to excite the imagination of the audience in the capital far away; their poets did not imagine that the capital-resident would ever step foot in those regions.

²¹ For examples of eremitic poetry, see Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of the Early T’ang* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 63 and 101; see also Frederick Mote, “Confucian Eremitism in the Yüan Period,” in *The Confucian Persuasion*, ed. Arthur Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), pp. 202-40. For examples of border poetry, see *ibid.*, pp. 21-24.

²² Stephen Owen, “Reading landscapes,” in *The End of the Chinese ‘Middle Ages’: Essays in Mid-Tang Literary Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 48-49.

Mạc Thiên Tứ did not attempt, either in his poems or his preface to the collection, to give the reader any directions to the scenic sites that he described in his poetry. He does not appear to feel the need to explain any of the unusual geographical features of his kingdom to the reader. In fact, as will be clear in his other poems in this collection, his poems set a welcoming tone to his far-away Chinese kingdom, inviting travelers and sojourners to actually visit Hà Tiên. Hà Tiên was located at a distance from the Chinese mainland and therefore a kingdom of unusual scenery, but it had readily recognizable patterns that did not need to be made intelligible to the cultured traveler from afar.

Mạc Thiên Tứ's first two poems signify a celebration of Hà Tiên's unusual scenery and far-flung location. He did not represent Hà Tiên as a frontier to be tamed, or a peripheral land to be made intelligible to an audience far away. Mạc Thiên Tứ's first two poems capture, in fact, a sense of Hà Tiên as a distant sanctuary. Hà Tiên was not a place that had to be changed to suit the demands and expectations of those further away; it was suitable precisely because it was different and unusual. The characterization of Hà Tiên as a distant sanctuary locates Mạc Thiên Tứ's own political, social, and cultural orientation: Mạc Thiên Tứ was not trying to alter Hà Tiên's patterned landscape into one that could be easily integrated into the territorially expanding Vietnamese kingdom. Instead, he was invested in maintaining Hà Tiên as an "unusual," "distant," and by extension, separate domain. Mạc Thiên Tứ's first two poems reinforced Hà Tiên's position as a kingdom already endowed with Chinese cultural civilization, in spite of its remote location from the Chinese mainland. Hà Tiên as a Chinese kingdom was, however, distinct from the Chinese mainland, and Mạc Thiên Tứ betrayed no interest in changing his faraway domain to suit mainland tastes. I will return to this issue of the particular circumstances

of Chinese civilization in Hà Tiên at the end of this chapter, after I have introduced all ten of Mạc Thiên Tứ's poems.

Patterning Nature

In “Golden Islet Blocking Waves” and “Verdant Folds of Screen Mountain,” Mạc Thiên Tứ emphasized the splendor of the natural environment in Hà Tiên. The reader would be mistaken, however, in assuming that the poet's main objective was to celebrate the natural environment of Hà Tiên through his landscape poetry. Mạc Thiên Tứ's poetry does not appear concerned with the division between “pristine” and “manmade”; in fact, his landscapes encompass both without a sense of contradiction. “Rustic Dwellings at Deer Cape” (poem 9), for example, focuses on the village as well as its location, Deer Cape. In another poem, “Clear Waves on South Bay” (poem 8), the poet's description of the natural beauty of South Bay is not contrary to his interest in the fishing and travelers' boats cruising on the waters of the bay. Rather than a division between “pristine” and “manmade,” I suggest that Mạc Thiên Tứ's landscape poetry was concerned with establishing a division between the realms of “chaos” and the “civilized,” the distinguishing feature being that nature was “un-patterned” in the former and “patterned” in the latter. The beginning of his preface gives an indication of this concern:

Hà Tiên trading center, of Annam, formerly belonged with the wild and secluded. From the time my late father started it until now, it has been thirty years; the population began to be stably settled with some knowledge of planting trees [i.e. to demarcate territory].

安南河僊鎮，古屬荒陬。自先君開創以來，三十餘年，而民始獲安居，稍知栽植。

Mạc Thiên Tứ noted, as his first remarks in his preface, that Hà Tiên was no longer “wild and secluded” because of his late father’s influence; he also listed, as one of the reasons for the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project, his goal of making known his father’s cultural transformation of the mountains and rivers of Hà Tiên. To demonstrate that Hà Tiên was now a civilized domain, Mạc Thiên Tứ infused his landscape poetry with patterns that he associated with Chinese civilization. In his first poem, “Golden Islet Blocking Waves,” for example, Mạc Thiên Tứ patterned Hà Tiên as Dragon Gate, elevating Hà Tiên’s status in the process to that of an important place in Chinese mythology. In poetically recognizing a patterned landscape in Hà Tiên, Mạc Thiên Tứ engaged in a project that was larger than a simple exhibition of his domain’s civility. Inscribing poetry onto the landscapes of Hà Tiên was in itself an act of rendering his domain civilized because those landscapes were now considered worthy of the poetic genre. Inviting other poets to compose parallel poetry further increased the degree of civility inscribed onto the landscape of Hà Tiên. In this section, I detail some other ways through which Mạc Thiên Tứ poetically represented the unchaotic landscape and through this very act of representation, thereby civilized it.

Regulating darkness through night watches

In Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poetry, the potentially dangerous and chaotic expanse of darkness in Hà Tiên was patterned through recognizing the regulating effect of night watches. The darkness is rendered orderly through five watches in the night of two hours each, ending with the fifth watch at dawn. The night watches are present in two of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poems: “Night Drum at River Wall” (poem 4), which describes the moment of the third watch, and “Dawn Bell at Tiêu Temple” (poem 3), which captures the fifth watch.

Night Drum at River Wall

Heavenly winds swirling round and round, icy clouds on high;
Fettered and locked on the long river, the general's valor so brave.
A vast stretch of armored ships, on wintry waters under the moon;
Drum and horn at night's third watch, waves and billows rest.
[A sojourner], still alert at night, when metal armors are melting;
With upright posture on the fortress wall, wrapped in brocade robes.
Military strategy received from old: a brilliant ruler pays attention;
The whole realm of Rinan²⁴, thankfully, is stable and secure.

江城夜鼓
天風迴繞凍雲高
鎖鑰長江將氣豪
一片樓船寒水月
三更鼓角定波濤
客²³仍警夜銷金甲
人正干城擁錦袍
武略深承英主眷
日南境宇賴安牢
(Poem 4)

“Night Drum at River Wall” is about a fortress wall located to the northwest of the city center, on the border with Cambodia. A river encircles River Wall and it is difficult to say whether the river gave this land-based site its name or vice-versa, since the river is named River Wall River (*Pinyin*: Jiangcheng Jiang, Vietnamese: Giang Thành Giang, 江城江). There is a minor military station at the site of River Wall (*Pinyin*: Jiangcheng Bao, Vietnamese: Giang Thành Bảo, 江城堡), and the sound of “drum and horn” at night's third watch indicates the presence of a watch post. This poem represents Hà Tiên as a realm in which the population was watched over while they slept. It employs the imagery of the Han dynasty Battle of Red Cliffs, in which Cao Cao's massive navy stood together in a vast stretch of warships to fight Liu Bei's smaller fleet.²⁵ Allegorically, this imagery represents strong defenses and brave leadership.²⁶ The

²³ Missing character in the EFEO microfilm version of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*. I adopt the character that Đông Hồ recorded, 客.

²⁴ See Li Tana, “Jiaochi (Giao Chi) in the Han Period Tongking Gulf,” in *The Tongking Gulf through History*, eds. Nola Cooke, Li Tana, and James A. Anderson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), pp. 48-49, for a discussion of the nomenclature “Rinan.”

²⁵ To minimize the effects of seasickness on his inexperienced navy, Cao Cao fettered the boats together so that they would be more stable on the surface of the water. Unfortunately, this also gave them minimal maneuverability; Liu Bei sent a small decoy team of “defectors” whose boats, equipped with dried wood, oil, and combustibles, were set on fire once they were near enough to Cao Cao's immobile fleet to set them ablaze.

poet likens the defenses provided by River Wall to Cao Cao's impressive naval fleet, evoking a sense of calm confidence. The mention of "the general" in the opening couplet and the "sojourner" in the third couplet suggests that the poet was drawing parallels between the two. Just as Cao Cao's attention was focused on defending his territory, so was the sojourner's in keeping Hà Tiên secure. I believe that the "sojourner" in this poem is the poet's self-reference. Mạc Thiên Tứ, a "sojourner" by virtue of that fact that he was the son of an ethnic Chinese adventurer now residing far from the Chinese mainland, is awake in the cold night; he guards Hà Tiên with the military strategy he has "received from old."

It is interesting to note that River Wall military station was located to the northwest of Hà Tiên's city center, which was oriented towards the sea in the southeasterly direction. This poem provides a stark contrast to "Golden Islet Blocking Waves," the first poem of this ten-poem suite. In "Golden Islet Blocking Waves," Hà Tiên's coastal frontage was rendered secure merely because of the presence of an island, which blocked the waves from the southeast seas; strong waves posed the only danger to Hà Tiên. That poem set a welcoming tone, and the seaward orientation of the poem suggests that the welcome was extended to visitors who arrived via the southeast seas—travelers and merchants connected with the South China Sea trading network. In "Night Drum at River Wall," a poem about the strong defenses of Hà Tiên, the military station was located at the rear of the city center, on the border with Cambodia. Mạc Thiên Tứ's defensive concerns for his realm further demonstrate his political orientation away from Cambodia and towards the Chinese and Vietnamese traders on Hà Tiên's coast.

²⁶ This historical episode has also been used to refer to regret that such an impressive naval fleet was wiped out in one battle. In this case, the allegory does not extend to Cao Cao's defeat, but only to his bravery and the impressive defenses he managed to build up.

Whereas the drum and horn indicating the third watch in “Night Drum at River Wall” reassures the reader that Hà Tiên is protected from harm, a different sound marks the fifth watch, the break of dawn in “Dawn Bell at Tiêu Temple.” A temple bell rings out, “resounding far from the temple,” indicating that time in Hà Tiên was regulated according to the chronological logic of civilized society:

Dawn Bell at Tiêu Temple

Remnant stars, the residual few, towards the heavens are cast;
 It is the fifth watch, a bell sounds, resounding far from the temple.
 Purified region and human destiny awoken to the world;
 A lone sound, clear and distinct, goes out to the river and beyond.
 Suddenly startled, a crane calls out, soaring on wind around the trees;
 Also urged, a rook cries out, towards the fading moon.
 At once conscious, the thousand households push their pillows back;
 Chickens spread dawn news, calling out cock-a-doodle-doo.

蕭寺曉鍾
 殘星寥落向天拋
 戌夜鯨音遠寺敲
 淨境人緣醒世界
 孤聲清越出江郊
 忽驚鶴唳繞風樹
 又促烏啼倚月稍
 頓覺千家欹枕後
 雞傳曉信亦嘒嘒
 (Poem 3)

The reader is practically accosted with sound in “Dawn Bell at Tiêu Temple”—the temple’s bell, the crane’s call, the crow’s cry, and the chicken’s cock-a-doodle-doo. These sounds, which infuse the moment of dawn in Hà Tiên, describe a landscape that is at once natural and domesticated. The temple bell and the chickens are part of a human-made environment, whereas the crane and the crow are part of the natural. The sound of the morning bell in “Dawn Bell at Tiêu Temple” is particularly indicative of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s isolationist desire to circumscribe his realm as a domain apart from its neighbors in a region that is not known to be a part of a classical civilized realm. The temple bell strikes a “lone sound” because the bell sounds but once at the fifth watch; it is also a single sound because there are no other temples in the vicinity sounding the fifth watch. The area around Hà Tiên has yet to become patterned in the

way that Hà Tiên was. The sound of Tiêu Temple’s bell “goes out to the river and beyond,” indicating a gradual diminishing of a regulated world beyond Hà Tiên’s circumscribed borders. Mạc Thiên Tứ accepts that he is ensconced in a wider region that is not yet regulated and patterned; his domain, however, is civilized.

Regularity of days and seasons

In Hà Tiên, just as the night is divided into five watches, time progresses along the regulated turns of day to night and season following season. “Stone Grotto Swallows Clouds,” a poem capturing the carefree existence of nature in Hà Tiên, nevertheless presents this uninhibited nature in the context of regulated time:

Stone Grotto Swallows Clouds

A mountain peak, its verdant crest rising, interrupts the river of stars;²⁷
A grotto, as on Linglong,²⁸ lies hidden in the emerald mount.
Without inhibition, mists and clouds, come and go as they please;
A boundless expanse of grasses and trees, dance carelessly together.
Wind and Frost, since ages recurring, patterns are unusual;
Crow and Rabbit, repeatedly inter-changing, sights are aplenty.
At the utmost, the quintessence, heights where few men reach;
I breathe according to the wind, from the lofty peak.

石洞吞雲
有峰聳翠砥星河
洞室玲瓏蘊碧岢
不意烟雲由去住
無垠²⁹草木共娑娑³⁰
風霜久歷文章異
烏兔頻移氣色多
最是精華高絕處
隨風呼吸自嵯峨
(Poem 5)

The topic of “Stone Grotto Swallows Clouds” is a hidden grotto on a stony mountain. As he did with Golden Islet in poem one, Mạc Thiên Tứ brought out the cultured patterns of Hà Tiên’s

²⁷ “River of stars” refers to the Milky Way

²⁸ “Linglong” is the name of a stone mountain in Zhejiang, China.

²⁹ Missing character in the EFEO microfilm version of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*. I am adopting the character that Đông Hồ recorded, 垠.

³⁰ In the EFEO microfilm version of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*, the two characters appear as 娑娑, literally “grandmother.” I suspect it was scribal error and that the poet intended for those character to be 娑娑.

cloud-swallowing grotto through referencing a similar grotto in Linglong Mountain in Zhejiang, China.³¹ In this poem, Mạc Thiên Tứ practically gives personalities to the elements of the natural environment. The verdant mountain peak interrupts the Milky Way, mist and clouds move without inhibition, and grasses and trees dance together carelessly. By the poem's end, the poet himself is affected by the carefree existence of nature. The final couplet positions him on the lofty heights of the mountain, inhaling and exhaling together with the wind

In the midst of this apparently unregulated carefree existence, however, the sense of the regularity of the passage of time is in fact accentuated. “Wind and Frost” refers to time and seasons, years and months.³² Through the playful use of literary allusions the poet draws attention to the recurring nature of seasonal time. “Crow and Rabbit” in line six refer to the sun and moon respectively, since it was believed that there was a crow in the middle of the sun and a rabbit in the center of the moon.³³ They too, are repeatedly inter-changing, a reference to the constantly alternating pattern of day and night. The poet demonstrates how time in Hà Tiên's has for ages been occurring in repeated patterns, so that the past is not an indistinguishable and chaotic realm. Instead, he regulates Hà Tiên's past into days, months, years, and seasons, effectively rendering the chaos of an unknown past into a regulated passage of time. Even though the “patterns”—or the landscape—that time created were considered “unusual,” this deviance has in fact been celebrated as Hà Tiên's strength in “Golden Islet Blocking Waves” and “Verdant Folds of Screen Mountain.”

³¹ See the entry for Linglong Mountain in *Ci Yuan* (辭源): 2243.1.

³² See the entry for “wind and frost” in *Ci Yuan* (辭源): 3719.3.

³³ See the entry for “crow and rabbit” in *Ci Yuan* (辭源): 1922.1.

Taming nature's forces

The poems above demonstrate the author's regulating attempts on time and the nights of Hà Tiên. Another aspect of nature that Mạc Thiên Tứ tamed through his poetry was the wild craziness associated with bold natural phenomena such as waterfalls and strong waves. In poem one, "Golden Islet Blocking Waves," Mạc Thiên Tứ calmed the billows of the Southeast Seas with the quieting influence of Golden Islet, which broke the force of the waves. The poem below, "An Egret Descends from Pearl Cliff," shows Mạc Thiên Tứ taming the chaotic power of a waterfall on Pearl Cliff:

An Egret Descends from Pearl Cliff

Green foliage and dusky clouds mix with the rosy sunset;
Flying out of the enchanted cliff, a white bird emerges, aslant.
At night, following in heaven's sequence, a thin gauze covers the fragrant trees;
At day, falling off the level cliff, forming splashes of *yu* flowers.³⁴
A waterfall and its shadow, together tumbling, under moonlight on the peak;
Clouds and lights, encircling evenly, dusk's glow thrown on the sand.
Wild sentiments about the course of events, ready to act on plans;
In the midst of rushing, I pause, on this shore of water and stone.

珠巖落鷺
綠蔭幽雲綴暮霞
靈巖飛出白禽斜
晚排天陣羅芳樹

晴落平崖瀉玉花
瀑影共翻明月岫

雲光齊匝夕陽沙
狂情世路將施計
碌碌棲遲水石涯
(Poem 6)

Although a waterfall is prominently featured in this poem, it was only directly referred to in the second half of the poem. In the first half, the poet tames the boldness of the waterfall by directing the reader's focus to its mist and splashes of water droplets instead of the tumbling water itself. Mist takes on the form of delicate gauze covering the trees at night, while water droplets are disguised as tiny white *yu* flowers. Even though the reader would expect a poem

³⁴ *Yu* flowers are small and white in color.

about a waterfall to be loud, this poem evokes little sense of sound. Mist and water droplets, substitute descriptors for the crashing waters of the waterfall, create minimal sound. The third couplet of the poem draws the reader's focus to the tumbling water, but the water's boldness is muted because the waterfall is described together with its shadow, which in fact carries a negative sound value. The descent of the water has been replaced by the descent of the egret; the rough tumbling of the water is displaced by the egret's smooth passage from the top of the cliff to the bottom.

The poet acknowledges in his closing couplet, however, that he has been affected by the chaotic nature of the waterfall. The wild sentiments evoked in him by the untamed waterfall causes him to poise for action, in aid of the "course of events." In taming the boldness of this natural phenomenon, however, the poet calms himself in the midst of his busyness, and pauses on the shore of water and stone. Like "heaven's sequence"—the change from day to night, from season to season—that he introduced in line three, the "course of events" would take place regardless of his actions.

The above examples of Mạc Thiên Tứ's civilizing hand on Hà Tiên's landscape show how the poet was interested in portraying his domain as a cultured and patterned realm. In expressing how time in Hà Tiên was regulated through man-made devices such as night watches and natural mechanisms such as heaven's sequence, and in poetically taming the wilder aspects of natural phenomena, Mạc Thiên Tứ infused Hà Tiên's landscape with aspects of civilization, separating his kingdom away from the chaotic wilderness. The landscape that Mạc Thiên Tứ portrayed was occasionally pristine and sometimes man-made; his notion of landscape did not

seem to draw a line between the two. What appears to have concerned him more was the division between unregulated chaos and regulated civilization. Mạc Thiên Tứ worked repeatedly in his poetry to portray his realm as belonging to the latter category.

Vistas, movement, and the poet

Landscapes contained within poetry are thought to be indicative of a poet's inner sentiments: his choice of poetic landscapes, from a variety of options made available to him by the real environment, bears close parallels with his own emotional state. Steven Owen points out, for example, that Wang Po's selection of dangerous precipices and steep cliffs "mirrored the perils of his experience."³⁵ One observable trait in Mạc Thiên Tứ's choice of poetic landscapes is that he fills his poetry with scenes of vast wonders and wide stretches of vistas, rather than the minutia of the environment around him. Take, for example, a poem we have already considered in the preceding pages, "Dawn Bell at Tiêu Temple." The poet directs the reader's attention to the "river-margin and beyond," the stretch of treetops around which a crane soars, and the "fading moon" up in the sky. The poem is, in fact, absent of any description of Tiêu temple; we know only from the topic of the poem, and a line in the poem drawing attention to the dawn bell "resounding far from the temple," that Tiêu temple is present. Taking into consideration the relationship between the poet's experience and his choice of landscape, Mạc Thiên Tứ's attention to vastness in his surrounding environment, instead of minutia, is unsurprising for a poet who has experienced the breadth of the seafaring trade networks that has brought different peoples to his port in Hà Tiên.

³⁵ Owen, *The Poetry of the Early Tang*, p. 132.

This aspect of Mạc Thiên Tứ's experience is best exemplified by his focus on large bodies of water in his poetry; often the poet even erases details of the scenery around these water bodies by using mists to mask the fact that they exist. Vastness, however, can evoke different emotional responses: it can accentuate the isolation of a person lost in the immense sea, or bring delight at possibilities yet unseen in the horizon. Mạc Thiên Tứ's two poems on East Lake and South Bay are best considered together to show the ways in which vistas in his poetry provide us with a window into his inner emotional state.

Moon's Reflection on East Lake

The rain has cleared, mist envelopes, all is indistinct;
 Along the bend, the scenery, become primeval chaos.
 Clear sky and clean waves suspend a pair of reflections;
 Blue skies and clear clouds, all directions purified.
 Deep and ample, responding by holding, like a sky of water ripples;
 Adrift, alone, I do not resent, the sea so vast and cold.
 Fish-dragons, conscious of dreams, rush, but find it hard to break
 through;
 Now as always, loyal of heart, just as light reflects above and below.

東湖印月
 雨霽烟鎖共渺茫
 一灣風景接鴻荒
 晴空浪淨懸雙影
 碧落雲澄洗萬方
 湛潤應³⁶涵天蕩滌
 漂零不恨海滄涼
 魚龍夢覺衝難破
 依舊冰心上下光
 (Poem 7)

In "Moon's Reflection on East Lake," Mạc Thiên Tứ describes a scene in which there are two moons. One is the moon in the clear sky, and the other is its reflection in the "deep and ample waters" of East Lake. East Lake is transformed into a sky, and its rippling waters make it appear as if the heavens were in a constant quivering motion. The two moons, and the two skies, hold nothing in between. The surrounding scenery, which might have held plants and trees, has melted away in the mists and has been transformed into an indistinct state of "primeval chaos."

³⁶ The character is probably wrongly recorded as 府 with a 心 below in the EFEO microfilm version of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*. I decided to change it to the character that Đông Hồ used, 應.

The first five lines of the poem exhibit a controlled focus on the two skies, one in the void and the other in the water; all around is calm. It is in line six that the reader gets the first sense of the poet's emotional state. Mạc Thiên Tứ refers to the waters as a “sea so vast and cold,” emphasizing the harshness of the watery environment. The sea is cold because it is desolate and the poet finds himself “adrift” and “alone.” The final couplet explains why the waters bear no signs of life. Fish-dragons, a motif that was first seen in “Golden Islet Blocking Waves” (poem 1), are absent from the waters of Hà Tiên even though they have tried to “break through” the rocky limits of the stream. In spite of their absence, the poet remains loyal of heart, just as the moon has always been accompanied by its reflection on the rippling lake.³⁷

The vastness in “Moon's Reflection on East Lake” hints at a sense of isolation, even though Mạc Thiên Tứ claims not to resent his position as a solitary drifter in the vast and cold seas. The poet appears to find comfort in the hope that his isolation, magnified by the stillness that infuses this poem, is but a temporary situation as he awaits the arrival of fish-dragons. In the next poem, “Clear Waves on South Bay,” the stillness of the previous poem is broken. This poem is, in fact, filled with motion.

Clear Waves on South Bay

A stretch of vastness, a stretch so pure;
 Clarity extending to the mooring bay; familiar autumn feeling!
 The Heavenly River³⁸ concludes its rain, radiant mists form;
 A watery region without any winds, where wave-froth is calm.
 Approaching dawn, fishing boats part waters hurriedly;
 Travelers' boats follow the tide, carrying clouds so light.
 I, too, know that in the eight seas, fish-dragons hide;

南浦澄波
 一片蒼茫一片清
 澄連夾浦老秋情
 天河畢雨烟光結
 澤國無風浪沫平
 向曉漁帆分水急
 趁潮客舫載雲輕
 也知八海魚龍匿

³⁷ This sentence calls for further explanation, which I will offer at the end of the chapter.

³⁸ “Heavenly River” refers to the Milky Way.

[Radiant] moon and glittering waves, at ease, I understand.

月朗³⁹波光自在明
(Poem 8)

Mạc Thiên Tứ rejoices in the vastness of the waters of South Bay, with its clarity extending to the shoreline where boats are moored. In meditating on the scene, he experiences the “familiar autumn feeling,” a feeling of contentment because the crops would have been harvested and the year’s work complete.⁴⁰ This poem describes a scene on South Bay just after rain. The rain has stopped and mist forms, scattering the light in a colorful radiance. This scene is in fact reminiscent of the one that Mạc Thiên Tứ painted in “Moon’s Reflection on East Lake,” where the rain had just ceased and mist had enveloped the surrounding scenery. The surface of South Bay’s waters, however, could not be more different from that of East Lake’s. Whereas East Lake’s surface experienced only the calmness of gentle ripples, South Bay’s surface is alive with movement. Several types of boats are cruising along on the water, bringing fishermen out to sea and travelers in to land. The waters are in constant motion, on the one hand parted by the moving boats and on the other obeying the logic of tidal movements. In both poems, fish-dragons are conspicuously present in their absence from the scene.

“Clear Waves on South Bay” is a poem that speaks about knowledge and contentment. The poet experiences a feeling of contentment in the knowledge that fish-dragons exist in the “eight seas,” even though they remain hidden. The two poems about East Lake and South Bay show the poet erasing details of the surrounding scenery in preference for the sense of vastness

³⁹ Missing character in the EFEO microfilm version of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*. I decided to adopt the character that Đông Hồ recorded, 朗.

⁴⁰ Autumn could also be a time for dissolution and despair, because with autumn comes the destruction and death of nature. Refer to Owen, *The Poetry of the Early T’ang*, p. 193. I believe it refers to contentment in this case because this feeling of contentment finds a corresponding sentiment at the conclusion of the poem, being “at ease.”

that the water bodies convey. The two vast water bodies, however, convey different feelings. In the former, the poet hints at isolation coupled with a sense of hopefulness; in the latter, the poet appears less isolated even though he is still apart from fish-dragons. This difference can best be attributed to the sense of stillness in the former and movement in the latter.

In the last poem of his ten-poem suite, “Mooring to Fish at Sea-Perch Creek,” the poet moves between a creek and the open sea and, through changing visual perspectives, brings the reader between two opposing sensations—stillness and motion.

Mooring to Fish at Sea-Perch Creek

At a distance, vast waves suspend the dusky glow;
 At Sea-Perch Creek, from within the mist, emerges a fishing lamp.
 Rippling waves, a receding light, a small moored skiff;
 Moon descends, floating baskets and nets, bobbing up and down.
 Draped merely in a rain cape, the frosty air breaks through;
 A few sounds of the bamboo oar, the water’s glitter frozen still.
 Adrift, alone—I laugh—at the open sea beyond;
 I wish to be near to fish-dragons but still cannot.

鱸溪漁泊
 遠遠滄浪脚夕照
 鱸溪烟裡出漁燈
 橫波掩掩⁴¹泊船艇
 落月參差浮罩罾
 一領蓑衣霜氣迫
 幾聲竹棹水光凝
 飄零自笑汪洋外
 欲附魚龍却未能
 (Poem 10)

“Mooring to Fish at Sea-Perch Creek” begins with a description of the vast waves in a distance at sunset, capturing the way that the “dusky glow” is suspended by the great waves rising up to meet the setting sun. The word that I rendered as “suspend” has suffered much in translation; it literally means to hold in the mouth, where the wave’s froth act as lips formed around the glowing sun. The second part of this introductory couplet then moves the reader’s perspective to

⁴¹ Missing character in the EFEO microfilm version of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*. In Lê Quý Đôn’s *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục*, it appears as 掩映. 映/映 means “the sun beginning to set” (*Matthew’s Chinese-English Dictionary*, entry no. 7488). Đông Hồ records it is 掩映, which means “to screen from the glare” (*Matthew’s*, entry no. 7380(12)). Both 掩掩 (“receding light”) and 掩映 work better than Đông Hồ’s choice.

the foreground, where the mists of Sea-Perch Creek also suspend a light, this time a fishing lamp. The poet fleshes out the details of the scene with an image of a small fishing boat and the paraphernalia associated with fishing—baskets and nets “bobbing up and down” on the water. He includes a fisherman, wearing only a light raincoat, feeling the chill as the sun sets and night falls. The poem captures the stillness of the activity of fishing in a creek—a few sounds from the laps of the oar can be heard, but the light on the water seems “frozen still” on its surface. The fisherman is draped but lightly, and the reader can even sense him shivering slightly, similar to the small motions made by the water ripples in “Moon’s Reflection on East Lake.” The concluding couplet brings the perspective of the reader out into the distance again—to the wide vista that is the open sea—through the eyes of someone “adrift” and “alone.” A very similar line can be found in line 6 of “Moon’s Reflection on East Lake.” In “Moon’s Reflection on East Lake,” that solitary character did not resent the “sea so vast and cold”; here, the drifter laughs to himself, one imagines in a bittersweet manner, and gazes at the “open sea beyond.” Fish-dragons are dispersed in the open sea, and the poet longs to be nearer to them.

“Mooring to Fish at Sea-Perch Creek” brings together the instincts that could be detected in “Moon’s Reflection on East Lake” and “Clear Waves on South Bay.” Through the play on distance and the corresponding two visual perspectives, the poet displays his interest in the world beyond his creek. Mạc Thiên Tứ probably drew inspiration for the topic of “Mooring to Fish at Sea-Perch Creek” from a Tang dynasty poem “Night-Mooring at Maple Bridge” (楓橋夜泊) by Zhang Ji (張繼):

Night-Mooring at Maple Bridge

Moondown: crows caw. Frost, a skyful.
River maples, fishing lamps, sad drowsiness.
Beyond Su-chou City, the Cold Mountain Temple
Rings its midnight bell, reaching this visitor's boat.

楓橋夜泊
月落烏啼霜滿天
江楓漁火對愁眠
姑蘇城外寒山寺
夜半鐘聲到客船⁴²

Zhang Ji's poem contains a similar insular scene of a lone fisherman on a chilly night; the reader's perspective is drawn to an imagined distance when the poet describes the sound of a far-away temple's bell reaching his boat. Mạc Thiên Tứ's "Mooring to Fish at Sea-Perch Creek," however, turns the reader's full focus to the distance in a way that Zhang Ji's does not by changing the directionality of the action. Whereas Zhang Ji's bell sound *comes in* to the poet from the distance, Mạc Thiên Tứ draws the reader's gaze *out to* the "open sea beyond." Contrasting these two poems brings out even more clearly Mạc Thiên Tứ's interest in large open vistas.

Mạc Thiên Tứ's preference for vistas over minutia in his poetry was in keeping with the far-ranging concept behind the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project. This project was not a private labor or merely the exchange of poetry amongst friends during the course of an afternoon excursion. It was a large-scale project that involved great distances, where poets residing as far as Guangdong and Fujian were invited to participate in establishing Hà Tiên as a topic of conversation amongst civilized company. The vistas in Mạc Thiên Tứ's poetry, depicted from the perspective of the poet situated within Hà Tiên, give an indication of Mạc Thiên Tứ's vision for Hà Tiên's position in the wider world; he intended for Hà Tiên to be greater than the physical terrain in which those

⁴² Translation by Yip Wai Lim. Refer to Yip Wai Lim, *Chinese Poetry: An Anthology of Major Modes and Genres*, second ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 241.

landscapes occupied. Mạc Thiên Tứ's poetic gaze outward towards the vistas can also be indicative of his own personal desire to be a more integral part of an extended community, instead of his isolation in Hà Tiên, looking out at the great beyond.

The drifter and the dragons

I have so far resisted the temptation to read the repeated motif of fish-dragons in Mạc Thiên Tứ's poetry as an allegorical allusion to something greater. The phrase "fish-dragon" (魚龍) could simply refer to dragons, since dragons in Chinese mythology inhabit the oceans. It could also be understood as a composite of its two components: fish and dragons. From "fish and dragons," one could simply infer a reference to sea-creatures—a general term to indicate creatures that live in the water. The term could, moreover, refer also to "rulers and their entourages."⁴³ A reader could interpret the repeated imagery in Mạc Thiên Tứ's poems as a self-reference, with Mạc Thiên Tứ himself as the dragon leader and the fishes his entourage. Certainly, a case can be made that Mạc Thiên Tứ gives to "fish-dragons" more agency than to any other animals in his poems. The crane, crow, and chicken in "Dawn Bell at Tiêu Temple," for example, call out because they are part of the natural and domestic scenery. In another poem, "Rustic Dwellings at Deer Cape" (poem 9), the raven, ape, deer, and buffalo are similarly merely a part of the peaceful and rustic landscape:

⁴³ Keith Taylor, for example, understands "fish and dragons" in this manner in his analysis of Mạc Thiên Tứ's seventh poem "Moon's Reflection on East Lake." See Keith Taylor, "Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region," *Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 4 (November 1998), p. 968.

Rustic Dwellings at Deer Cape

In bamboo huts, winds passing through, from dreams begin to waken;
Yet ravens' cries outside the eaves cannot be perceived.
Inverted images of remnant rose clouds drift by, turning shutters purple;
Dense trees, bending low, touch the garden greens.
My untamed disposition is partial towards, the tranquility of ape and deer;
Pure of heart, I long for the luxuriant smell of paddy and millet.
Passers-by, if they should ask where to stop and dwell;
From the buffalo's back, just one more note, and the flute playing ceases.

鹿峙村居
竹屋風過夢始醒
雅啼簷外却難聽
殘霞倒影⁴⁴沿窓紫
密樹低垂接圃青
野性偏同猿鹿靜

清心每羨稻粱馨
行人若問住何處
牛背一聲吹笛停
(Poem 9)

This poem is set at daybreak, and depicts a rustic tranquility in the countryside at Deer Cape. In the beginning of the poem, people are starting to awaken, and yet their morning peace is not broken by the ugly cries of ravens. The slow movement of “remnant rose clouds” drifting by and trees “bending low” is matched by the unhurried nature of the boy sitting on the buffalo's back, who when asked a question, lingers on the flute with “just one more note” before responding. The animal imageries in this poem, both wild and domestic, are not imbued with the same sense of consciousness as the fish-dragons of the other poems. The ape and deer represent the tranquility of untamed nature, the ravens serve only to indicate the change from night to day, and the buffalo is a stand-in as a descriptor for human activity on Deer Cape.

It is clear that “fish-dragons” deserves more consideration than these other animals mentioned in Mạc Thiên Tứ's poems. They appear in four of his ten poems. In “Golden Islet Blocking Waves” (poem 1), they struggle to breach the rocky limits of the stream to find waters where they would turn into dragons: “Arriving in its waters, fish to dragons, accordingly

⁴⁴ Missing character in the EFEO microfilm version of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*. In Lê Quý Đôn's *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục*, it appears as 影. Đông Hồ's recorded it as 掛 (to hang). I have chosen to use the as character recorded by Lê Quý Đôn.

transform; / Beside the cliffs of trees and stones, they naturally splash a-flitter.” (得水魚龍隨變化 / 傍崖樹石自聯翩). In “Moon’s Reflection on East Lake” (poem 7), they are frustrated in their unsuccessful attempts to breach the rocky limits: “Fish-dragons, conscious of dreams, rush, but find it hard to break through; / Now as always, loyal of heart, just as light reflects above and below.” (魚龍夢覺衝難破 / 依舊冰心上下光). In “Clear Waves on South Bay” (poem 8), they chose to remain hidden: “I, too, know that in the eight seas, fish-dragons hide; / Radiant moon and glittering waves, at ease, I understand.” (也知八海魚龍匿 / 月朗波光自在明). Finally, in “Mooring to Fish at Sea-Perch Creek,” they are dispersed in the open sea: “Adrift, alone—I laugh—at the open sea beyond; / I wish to be near to fish-dragons but still cannot.” (飄零自笑汪洋外 / 欲附魚龍却未能).

If “fish-dragons” referred to a leader and his entourage, and Mạc Thiên Tứ were the dragon, then he could not possibly be the subject of the final couplet in “Mooring to Fish at Sea-Perch Creek.” The final couplet of a three-part poem is usually the place where the reader finds an “I-comment” in the poem. A reader expects the first couplet to set the scene or provide a general opening comment, the second and third couplets to elaborate on the opening scene or comment, and the final couplet to contain the poet’s emotional concluding thoughts. As such, the final couplet is often personalized, and interpreted as the poet’s “I-comment.”⁴⁵ In the case of the final couplet of “Mooring to Fish at Sea-Perch Creek,” the “I-comment” would indicate that Mạc Thiên Tứ was the person “adrift, alone,” and “fish-dragons” would necessarily refer to someone or something else that he longs to be near to. I believe that “fish-dragons” refers in fact

⁴⁵ Owen, *The Poetry of the Early T’ang*, p. 426.

to the members of a larger network of dispersed Ming loyalists, of which Mạc Thiên Tứ considered himself an integral part. The composition of the group of poets involved in this project certainly reflects the political orientation of the group. Of the poets who contributed to the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project, a few of them declared their Ming Loyalist sentiments outwardly through pennames identifying themselves as Minh Hương (*Pinyin*: Ming Xiang, 明香), literally the “Fragrance of the Ming.” This society of poets lived dispersed on the Vietnamese coast and in the southern Chinese coastal provinces of Fujian and Guangdong. Their communication with one another was dependent upon the South China Sea trading network. Some members might have taken the coastal journey to come to Hà Tiên. Chen Zhikai, for example, accompanied Mạc Thiên Tứ on his tour of his domain’s scenic sites and facilitated the distribution of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poetry to other poets in the network. It is not clear if all members of this literary circle would have personally made their way to Hà Tiên; it is certainly possible that they communicated only when the ships sailed, and it is unlikely that all of them ever gathered together at Hà Tiên at the same time. The *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project brought together the poetry of thirty-two like-minded literati who lived far apart from one another. There was at least one other literary project that was carried out in this same manner. This project took, for its subject, the four seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Although the poetic contributions of this project have been lost to posterity, Lê Quý Đôn recorded the names of a different group of thirty-three involved in this project. Incidentally, Chen Zhikai’s name appears on the list of contributors to this project.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Lê Quý Đôn. *Kiến Văn Tiểu Lục* [A Small Record of Things Seen and Heard], trans. Nguyễn Khắc Thuần (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục Publishing House, 2009); Đông Hồ, *Văn Học Hà Tiên*, pp. 108-09.

For a dispersed community that continued to harbor loyalties to the defunct Ming dynasty rather than the ruling Qing dynasty, Hà Tiên could have been imagined as one of the new centers where ethnic Chinese of a different political leaning from those ruling the mainland could inhabit. In the first postface to the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*, the author Yu Xichun, who also called himself the “old man from Lingnan,” described an excursion to a garden where he imagined the poems about Hà Tiên were composed.⁴⁷ He used imperial imageries (“flying canopy,” 飛蓋) to describe the palanquin that carried the party on this excursion and waxed lyrical about the “gateway and rooflines of the palace” (宮闕嵯峨).⁴⁸ His exaggerated descriptions, together with the fact that his physical presence was never noted by Mạc Thiên Tứ and Chen Zhikai in their preface and postface respectively, leads me to believe that Yu Xichun was not in Hà Tiên at the time of the poetry-writing excursion. His descriptions of the “palace” and the royal excursion constitute an imagined view of what Hà Tiên as an overseas Chinese political center looked like.

The idea that “fish-dragons” in Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poetry was a reference to Ming loyalists finds support in historical evidence. Forces loyal to the Ming dynasty grouped together in a few locations in the period of Ming to Qing dynastic transition. The story of Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga) is well known. Zheng’s impressive naval forces fought the Qing for many years until his final defeat in 1661, when he retreated across the Eastern Straits to Taiwan.⁴⁹ Zheng’s resistance represented the most famous strand of anti-Qing resistance; there were, however, other

⁴⁷ Lingnan (嶺南), literally “south of the pass,” is a reference to Guangdong and Guangxi. See *Matthews’ Chinese-English Dictionary*, entry 4059(1).

⁴⁸ EFEO microfilm version of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*, p. 97.

⁴⁹ For an overview of Zheng Chenggong’s anti-Qing activities, see Lynn A. Struve, “The Southern Ming, 1644-1662,” in *The Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644*, part 1, vol. 7 of *The Cambridge History of China*, eds. Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 710-25.

resistance forces that deserve attention. Outside of Zheng's Fujian base, the largest base for Ming loyalists activity was Longmen Island (Dragon Gate Island), situated on the northern rim of the Tongking Gulf and to the west of the Leizhou Peninsula. In 1651, Ming loyalist forces belonging to Deng Yao, an officer of the southern Ming regime, occupied Longmen Island and maintained it as their base for eleven years. The Qing army finally defeated Deng Yao's forces at Longmen in 1661; Deng Yao fled but was captured and killed in that same year. In 1662, Yang Yandi (Vietnamese: Dương Ngạn Địch), another Ming loyalist, took control of Longmen Island. His forces held the strategic island only one year, and left in 1663. Yang and his forces spent the next 16 years hiding on the northern Vietnamese coast in the Tongking gulf, appearing occasionally in the historical records as when they engaged in skirmishes with Qing forces.⁵⁰ The *Đại Nam Thực Lục* records that in the spring of 1679,

... an old official of the Ming dynasty, the Commander of the Longmen [by the name of] Dương Ngạn Địch and his deputies Hoàng Tiến and Cao Lô Liêm, together with Commander Trần Thượng Xuyên and his deputy Trần An Bình, brought more than 3,000 men and over 50 ships to the Tư Dung and Đà Nẵng ports, calling themselves the subjects of the Ming. [They] indicated that they did not want to be subjects of the Qing, and therefore came to request that they be accepted as our [i.e. the southern Vietnamese] subjects.⁵¹

Whereas Zheng Chenggong's forces took over Taiwan as their base, the Longmen arm of resistance against the Qing appears to have sought a home with the southern Vietnamese regime after they were routed by the Qing. Unlike the Lê-Trịnh regime in the northern Vietnamese polity, which shared a border with the Middle Kingdom, the Nguyễn lords in southern Vietnam

⁵⁰ For more information about Deng Yao and his piracy in the Tongking Gulf, see Niu Junkai and Li Qingxin, "Chinese 'Political Pirates' in the Seventeenth-Century Tongking Gulf," in *The Tongking Gulf through History*, eds. Nola Cooke, Li Tana, and James A. Anderson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), pp. 138-40.

⁵¹ Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn [Nguyễn Dynasty Historical Institute], *Đại Nam Thực Lục* [Veritable Records of the Great South], ed. Đào Duy Anh, trans. Nguyễn Ngọc Tinh, vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục Publishing House, 2002), entry for year 1679, p. 91.

were less embroiled in the politics of the Chinese mainland. It was probably for this reason that Yang Yandi's forces sought help from the southern Vietnamese regime instead of the northern regime. The Vietnamese chronicles record a discussion in their court over the sudden influx of Ming loyalists in their kingdom:

At this point, there was a discussion [in the Vietnamese court]: Their customs and language are all different, it is difficult for us to employ them; but, they have suffered to the extent of being forced to come here, and [we] do not have the heart to refuse them. Now, in the land of Đông Phố [the old name of Gia Định] belonging to the Cambodian kingdom, there are thousands of miles of fertile fields and lands; our dynasty has yet to be able to manage them freely. Nothing would be better than to use their labor to break the ground in order to live there. Doing this one thing would benefit us in three aspects. The lord, having listened to the discussion, immediately gave the order to set up a feast to encourage and reward [the Ming officials], giving them the order to go and live in the land of Đông Phố. Moreover, he announced an edict to the kingdom of Cambodia that this indicated that their kingdom no longer extended there.⁵²

The dynastic chronicles detail the considerations that the Vietnamese court underwent in order to decide what to do with the large influx of politicized Chinese troops at their capital. They decided on a plan that would benefit them in three aspects: by relocating the Ming loyalists to lands located in the far south that were still not Vietnamese lands, the Nguyễn court succeeded in moving the Ming loyalists out of their capital, using them to secure the Cambodian lands for the Vietnamese kingdom, and bringing those southern lands into productive use.⁵³ The two groups of Ming loyalists were sent to Gia Định and Biên Hòa. There,

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Trouble brews in the southern lands in 1688, when Yang Yandi's deputy, Hoàng Tiển, assassinates Yang Yandi in order to promote himself. See *ibid.*, record for years 1688 and 1689, pp. 98-102.

... they cleared the wild lands, built roads, and dug furrows; merchant ships belonging to Qing people and the kingdoms of Europe, Japan, and Java came and went in great numbers. Because of this, Han culture saturated the land of Đông Phố.⁵⁴

The Cambodian provinces came to be under the control of the southern Vietnamese kingdom though the labor of a particular faction of Ming loyalists: the Longmen faction. Vietnamese chronicles explicitly refer to Yang Yandi as the “Commander of Longmen,” or the “Commander of Dragon Gate,” although he had merely held Longmen Island for a year and had not had control of it for a decade and a half prior to his arrival in southern Vietnam. It was the “Longmen strand” of Ming resistance against the Qing that came to be settled in the southern Vietnamese regions.

Mạc Cửu, Mạc Thiên Tứ’s father, did not arrive in Vietnam together with these Dragon Gate troops. He had arrived from Guangdong almost a decade earlier, in 1671, and set up his own kingdom first through Khmer then Vietnamese patronage. His biography in the Nguyễn official biographies states that he had sought a home in Hà Tiên because he did not want to shave his head and wanted to “continue keeping his hair long,” a reference to anti-Qing and pro-Ming political loyalties.⁵⁵ Mạc Cửu and his family undoubtedly had contact with other Ming loyalists in the region. Hà Tiên in the late-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries housed a busy port that maintained connections with other ports of the South China Sea; the busy port at Gia Định, established by the Dragon Gate faction, could be considered their closest neighbor. It is therefore unsurprising that Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poetry was filled with references to Dragon Gate and the myth

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 91.

⁵⁵ Mạc Cửu’s biography, *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên* vol. 6, p. 173.

of fish-dragons. In the southern Vietnamese regions, “fish-dragons” had come to be the symbol for Ming loyalists.

Through the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project, Mạc Thiên Tứ was able to bring together this specific Chinese diasporic group—a group of Ming loyalists—and express his thoughts to them. His opening poem, in which he described fish splashing a-flitter by the rocky cliffs in order to reach the waters where they would transform into dragons, positions Hà Tiên as *the* new Dragon Gate, the new strategic stronghold for the Ming loyalists that remain. Re-reading the poem with this message in mind is revealing of the significance encoded within its lines:

Golden Islet Blocking Waves

An island of rocky peaks settles the emerald waters;
Flowing waters by a wondrous beauty at mighty Hà Tiên.
Obstructing the power of waves and billows from the southeast seas;
Sun’s and moon’s radiance reflect from the sky and down below.
Arriving in its waters, fish to dragons accordingly transform;
Beside cliffs of trees and stones, they naturally splash a-flitter.
Sounds of winds and traces of waves, their echoes long endure;
A landscape of shadows and light, an unusual kingdom, distant.

金嶼攔濤
一島崔嵬奠碧漣
橫流奇勝壯河僊
波濤勢截東南海
日月光迴上下天
得水魚龍隨變化
傍崖樹石自聯翩
風聲浪跡應長據
濃淡山川異國懸
(Poem 1)

The fourth line, “Sun’s and moon’s radiance reflect from the sky and down below” (日月光迴上下天), is visually significant because placing 日 and 月 together represents the character “Ming,” 明. The two characters embellish the already forceful opening poem with a coded line that reads: “The radiance of the Ming reflect form the sky and down below.” Additionally, the last three characters of the poem that I translated as “an unusual kingdom, distant” (異國懸) can also understood as “distant from that heterodox kingdom,” a reference to the Qing dynasty, the heterodox Manchu kingdom. The final couplet would then read: “Sounds of winds and traces of

waves, their echoes long endure; / A landscape of shadows and light, distant from that heterodox kingdom.” In “Golden Islet Blocking Waves,” Mạc Thiên Tứ not only positioned Hà Tiên as the new Dragon Gate, he also turned on the radiance of the Ming on the land, and located it at an arms-length from the heterodox Qing.

Unlike their previous Dragon Gate, this new strategic stronghold of the Ming loyalists was an “auspicious site,” which would last as long as heaven and earth. Hà Tiên was a civilized place where defense strategy was modeled on those of brave generals of old; nature did not exist in a state of chaos, but was instead regulated and patterned. As the ruler of the new Dragon Gate, Mạc Thiên Tứ set a welcoming tone for his fellow Ming loyalists. He identified with the frustrations that the Ming loyalists felt in not being able to create the change they desired, and affirmed that he remained loyal of heart in spite of it. Through another reference encoded in the character “Ming” 明, Mạc Thiên Tứ declared in the closing couplet of “Clear Waves on South Bay” (poem 8) that “I, too, know that in the eight seas, fish-dragons hide; / Radiant moon and glittering waves, at ease, I am Ming.” (也知八海魚龍匿 / 月朗波光自在明).⁵⁶ In the final couplet of his tenth poem, and also his final words to his fellow poets, Mạc Thiên Tứ identified them as scattered in the open sea; he felt keenly his physical distance from them, and could only gaze upon the waters where he knew they resided while wishing to be nearer to them.

⁵⁶ My original translation of the line reads: “I, too, know that in the eight seas, fish-dragons hide; / Radiant moon and glittering waves, at ease, I understand.” (也知八海魚龍匿 / 月朗波光自在明).

Conclusion: A different kind of frontier poetry

Mạc Thiên Tứ's poetry represents a different kind of poetry composed by poets residing in far-flung peripheral regions. His poems contrasts sharply against the poetry written by Han Chinese officials sent to their northwestern frontier region of Xinjiang during the Qing dynasty. "Frontier" or "periphery" poetry written from Xinjiang delivered messages back to the center that the Western region was home to large and affluent Chinese communities; they conveyed the image that the frontier region "was not only a part of China, it was also becoming Chinese."⁵⁷ Far from conveying to the mainland Chinese capital that Hà Tiên was becoming a part of Qing-controlled China, Mạc Thiên Tứ's poetry sent the message to other dispersed Ming loyalists that Hà Tiên was a haven situated far away from the Qing Chinese mainland, and therefore a suitable home for Chinese peoples with alternative political loyalties. His poems evoke the sense of sojourning and wandering without a clear sense of home. Home was where other fish-dragons were, and Mạc Thiên Tứ made a strong case in his poetry that they should make their home in his domain. His civilizing mission for his peripheral domain was different from other frontier civilizing missions. Mạc Thiên Tứ's project inscribed Hà Tiên as the new Ming loyalist center; his intention was not to make Hà Tiên an acceptable peripheral region for a distant center.

In the next chapter, I discuss a different ten-suite poem composed in praise of the same ten scenic sites of Hà Tiên. This set was composed by Nguyễn Cư Trinh, about twenty years after Mạc Thiên Tứ's original project was completed. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poems represent a different political vision for Hà Tiên; as an important member of the southern Vietnamese

⁵⁷ L. J. Newby, "The Chinese Literary Conquest of Xinjiang," *Modern China* 25, no. 4 (October 1999), p. 467.

bureaucracy, Nguyễn Cư Trinh envisaged Hà Tiên as a frontier region within the Vietnamese political realm rather than as a capital for the diasporic Chinese community. His poems represent a Vietnamese frontier response to Mạc Thiên Tứ's Ming loyalist vision for Hà Tiên.

Chapter Five

Responding to the Dream: A Different Vision for the Chinese Frontier Province in Đàng Trong

Mạc Thiên Tứ's inaugural poems inscribed culturally and politically specific patterns onto ten scenic sites in Hà Tiên. These sites collectively circumscribed the entirety of the domain he sought to civilize; at the same time, each individual site metonymically represented all of Hà Tiên, so that Mạc Thiên Tứ's inscription on each site bore the weight of his ambitions for the whole of the realm under his charge. One of the ways in which Mạc Thiên Tứ inscribed Hà Tiên as a civilized realm was through writing into his landscape poetry the natural and man-made regulating mechanisms of nature. In this way, he distinguished Hà Tiên from its surrounding region, which continued to exist in a state of nebulous chaos. Moreover, through recurring motifs and politically significant imageries, Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten poems in praise of Hà Tiên positioned it as the new Ming loyalist capital in the eighteenth century. Mạc Thiên Tứ's poems recognized Chinese cultural patterns in the far-flung and unusual landscape of Hà Tiên and etched those patterns firmly onto its scenic sites. In so doing, he enacted a civilizing mission on his peripheral domain through a discursive transformation of its landscape. Furthermore, his *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project solicited response poetry from thirty-one other poets living along the coast of the South China Sea, thereby elevating Hà Tiên's cultural status yet further by establishing Hà Tiên as a topic of civilized discourse. Mạc Thiên Tứ's *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project laid bare the cultural and political vision that he cherished for his ethnic Chinese domain of Hà Tiên at the time when he took over control of the polity from his late father in 1735.

This present chapter examines a set of responses to Mạc Thiên Tứ's inaugural inscriptions of Hà Tiên. This ten-poem suite was composed by Nguyễn Cư Trinh, the same Vietnamese official who authored the vernacular Vietnamese play, the *Sãi Vãi*, that was the focus of the first three chapters of this dissertation. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poems about Hà Tiên constitute a unique set of responses, because they were not composed as part of the initial *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project. Nguyễn Cư Trinh did not number amongst the thirty-one poets from whom responses were sought in 1736. Instead, his response poems were composed sometime between 1754 and 1765, about twenty to thirty years after the woodblocks of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project had been carved. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's ten responses present a very interesting case for study because Nguyễn Cư Trinh was a representative of a political realm that was different from that towards which Mạc Thiên Tứ had oriented his poems. The audience of Mạc Thiên Tứ's inaugural poems was the Ming loyalists living along the coast of the South China Sea; Mạc Thiên Tứ had embedded in the poems he sent to them messages and imageries of significance to them as a group of ethnic Chinese with alternative political leanings. Nguyễn Cư Trinh, on the other hand, was a high-ranking official of the southern Vietnamese court, sent to the frontier to ensure that those lands would be joined more firmly to the Vietnamese kingdom. Not only was it not in his political interest to sympathize with Mạc Thiên Tứ's Ming loyalist political ambitions for Hà Tiên, his illustrious family background predisposed him towards identifying the southern Vietnamese court's political interests as his own. Nguyễn Cư Trinh hailed from a prominent Đàng Trong family that had been firmly entrenched in the southern Vietnamese political system for eight generations, having first moved south to Thuận Hoá in the sixteenth century.¹ His was one of the first lineages to establish itself in Đàng Trong, and the

¹ Refer to the biography of Nguyễn Đăng Đệ, Nguyễn Cư Trinh's father, in the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, pp. 136-37. The family traced their ancestry to a person named Trịnh Cam, an official of the Lê dynasty, who had who moved to

roles of his ancestors and his family members in the Đàng Trong political system is recorded in several biographies in the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện* (Biographies of the Great South).² For such an official of the Đàng Trong court, Hà Tiên was an inseparable part of the southern Vietnamese frontier, which should be linked contiguously to Đàng Trong's capital in Huế, rather than an isolated domain with political links to the Chinese Ming loyalists.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh's political career was one of the most distinguished of his entire family. In the winter of 1754, four years after he had written the *Sài Vãi* in his capacity as governor of Quảng Ngãi, Nguyễn Cư Trinh was appointed to be the supervisor of Đàng Trong's newly annexed southern provinces in the Mekong delta. Nguyễn Cư Trinh stayed on the frontier for eleven years, from 1754 to 1765. It was during this time that Mạc Thiên Tứ's domain came to be subsumed under Nguyễn Cư Trinh's political sphere of influence. Just as their political lives became intertwined, so did their literary worlds. Sometime in the course of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's lengthy career in the administration of Đàng Trong's southern frontier, Nguyễn Cư Trinh contributed ten response poems in praise of the ten scenic sites of Hà Tiên.

Fortuitously, Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poems about Hà Tiên were deemed important enough for Lê Quý Đôn, the northern Vietnamese traveler from Đàng Ngoài who came to the southern Vietnamese kingdom in the tumultuous years of the 1770s, to record them in their entirety in his *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* (Frontier Chronicles). Woodblock prints of excellent quality remain extant,

Thuận Hóa in the sixteenth century to organize a resistance movement against the Mạc who had usurped the Lê throne.

² Besides the entries for Nguyễn Đăng Đệ and Nguyễn Cư Trinh, entries of other family members include Nguyễn Đăng Thịnh (Nguyễn Cư Trinh's cousin), Nguyễn Đăng Tiến (Nguyễn Đăng Thịnh younger brother) and Nguyễn Đăng Cẩn (Nguyễn Cư Trinh's elder brother).

and they form the basis of my translations of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s ten poems.³ Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s responses to Mạc Thiên Tứ have come to be considered as an example of the charming practice of literary exchange between two educated men living on the southern Vietnamese frontier. His biography, for example, highlights the fact that he was “good at reciting poetry, and often, together with the governor of Hà Tiên Mạc Thiên Tứ, used literature and words to gift each other.”⁴ Indeed, both men shared the same cultural ideals for the frontier domains under their charge. In Chapter Two of this dissertation, I raised the point that Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s *Sãi Vãi* showed clearly that he did not differentiate between what we might term today as “Chinese” and “Vietnamese” culture. Instead, the *Sãi Vãi* demonstrated the extent to which classical “Chinese” allusions were an integral part of both elite and non-elite Vietnamese cultural consciousness. Particularly strong amongst the members of the educated Vietnamese elite was the idea that the Vietnamese and the Chinese were participating in the same process of ensuring that their domains had sufficient literary and institutional records, so as to be able to be a “domain of manifest civility.”⁵ This is not to say, however, that the Vietnamese did not recognize the political differences between them and the ethnic Chinese who had ties to the Middle Kingdom. There clearly existed political differences between Nguyễn Cư Trinh and Mạc Thiên Tứ. Moreover, in the context of the southern Vietnamese frontier, Nguyễn Cư Trinh was Mạc Thiên Tứ’s political superior, even though he was about sixteen years younger than Mạc Thiên Tứ. A

³ Woodblock prints of Lê Quý Đôn’s *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục*, in which Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s poems can be found, have been reprinted in the Giáo Dục Publishing House’s translations of Lê Quý Đôn’s collected works. See Lê Quý Đôn, *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* [Frontier Chronicles], part 2 (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục Publishing House, 2008), pp. 144a-146b.

⁴ *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, p. 143.

⁵ Liam Kelley, “Vietnam as a ‘Domain of Manifest Civility’ (*Văn Hiến chi Bang*)” in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 34,1 (Feb 2003), pp. 63-76.

close reading of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poetry will make manifest the political inequalities between the two men.

This chapter analyzes Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poetry as the response of a Vietnamese frontier official to Mạc Thiên Tứ's attempts to situate Hà Tiên as a Chinese cultural and political place. The nature of the "response" is such that Nguyễn Cư Trinh played no role in selecting the scenic sites that Mạc Thiên Tứ chose to represent the landscape of Hà Tiên. Neither was he free to craft his inscriptions on the chosen sites as if etching patterns onto a blank slate; he was expected to respond to themes initiated by Mạc Thiên Tứ and constrained to the scenes already depicted twenty to thirty years before. Nguyễn Cư Trinh inscribed poems onto previously inscribed landscapes, which provided him the opportunity either to write over Mạc Thiên Tứ's inscriptions or to elaborate on themes that Mạc Thiên Tứ had earlier worked into the landscape. Naturally, he chose to do one or the other depending on the inscription to which he had to respond. These elaborations and re-inscriptions capture important aspects of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's relationship with Mạc Thiên Tứ, and are revealing records of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's political vision for the Chinese frontier province in southern Vietnam.

As I noted in Chapter Four, the literary sport of composing parallel poetry typically takes the form of a host and his guest composing poems alternately. In the process, themes from one poet's preceding poem are usually incorporated into the response poem of the other, whether they be host or guest. Parallel poems are thus best studied in an alternating series, examining each poem in the context of themes raised in the preceding poem. In the case of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's response poetry, the rules were modified: Nguyễn Cư Trinh had access to all of Mạc

Thiên Tứ's ten poems at the same time, and was thus able to respond to Mạc Thiên Tứ's themes and motifs in any of his own ten poems without regard for the position of the poem in which those themes and motifs were first raised. Nguyễn Cư Trinh used this advantage to great effect, inserting responses to contentious themes into inconspicuous places, thereby blunting the force of his reply when necessary. Nguyễn Cư Trinh could thus maintain an educated civility in his literary and political dealings with Mạc Thiên Tứ.

Although the two men wrote an equal number of poems containing the same number of couplets, the scale of each endeavor was vastly different. Mạc Thiên Tứ wrote not only to communicate with thirty-one other poets living along the coastline of the South China Sea, but also to leave a lasting imprint for an imagined audience of the future. He acknowledged, in the preface to his work, that he hoped the poems would serve both as a testament to his late father's work of cultural transformation and as a gazetteer for Hà Tiên. Nguyễn Cư Trinh, on the other hand, had only a one-person audience, Mạc Thiên Tứ, in mind when he composed his responses to the ten inaugural poems of Hà Tiên. As such, his poetic compositions regularly included personal messages for Mạc Thiên Tứ, which would typically be found in the poem's final couplet. The final couplet of a poem is significant because it is where the poet's "I-comment" is found; it is in those two concluding lines that the poet inserts himself into the scene, and asserts an emotional personal response to the landscape he has depicted. In the case of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poems, these "I-comments" become "you-comments," indicative of the circumscribed nature of his project. Nguyễn Cư Trinh gave up his privilege as composer to express his own emotional conclusions to the inscriptions he has created, choosing instead to direct his subjectivity towards making "you-comments" about Mạc Thiên Tứ, often addressing him

directly in those two final lines. Needless to say, these final couplets are invaluable as social and political commentaries that lie between the lines of the literary exchanges between the two men. Moreover, at the same time that Nguyễn Cư Trinh exerted his subjectivity to address Mạc Thiên Tứ through these “you-comments,” he obscured that very subjective position and omitted including his own emotional response to the scene that he has created. It is therefore necessary to look for Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s thoughts in other lines of his rejoinders, where they might lie hidden in some or all of the parts in which they are not expected. In the sections that follow, I examine the ways in which Nguyễn Cư Trinh responded to Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poems by substituting important myths for other legends, and providing meaningful elaborations to themes with which he was in agreement. I conclude with an examination of the methods Nguyễn Cư Trinh employed in responding to the ever-present and enormously significant motif of fish-dragons that inhabited Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poetry.

Substituting Myths

In Chapter Four, I argued that Mạc Thiên Tứ’s opening poem, “Golden Islet Blocking Waves,” inscribed onto Hà Tiên the pattern of the mythical Dragon Gate. In so doing, Mạc Thiên Tứ positioned Hà Tiên as a new Ming loyalist capital modeled after their previous stronghold in Longmen Island, situated on the part of Guangdong’s coast that formed the northern rim of the Tonkin Gulf, on the western side of the Leizhou Peninsula.⁶ His poem depicted a rocky island situated at Hà Tiên’s entrance that blunted the force of the waters arriving at Hà Tiên’s

⁶ Refer to Figure 1: Map of the South China Sea, located at the end of this dissertation.

riverfront; he recognized in those rocky peaks the pattern of the mythical gate through which fish had to jump in order to transform into dragons:

Golden Islet Blocking Waves

An island of rocky peaks settles the emerald waters;
Flowing waters by a wondrous beauty at mighty Hà Tiên.
Obstructing the power of waves and billows from the southeast seas;
Sun's and moon's radiance reflect from the sky and down below.
Arriving in its waters, fish to dragons accordingly transform;
Beside cliffs of trees and stones, they naturally splash a-flitter.
Sounds of winds and traces of waves, their echoes long endure;
A landscape of shadows and light, an unusual kingdom, distant.

金嶼攔濤
一島崔嵬奠碧漣
橫流奇勝壯河僊
波濤勢截東南海
日月光迴上下天
得水魚龍隨變化
傍崖樹石自聯翩
風聲浪跡應長據
濃淡山川異國懸
(Mạc Thiên Tứ, Poem 1)

In patterning Hà Tiên after Dragon Gate, Mạc Thiên Tứ set the tone for the rest of his ten-poem suite. It defined the political and cultural orientation of his *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project, which was clearly directed towards the Chinese Ming loyalists who lived scattered along the coastal cities of the South China Sea. Tellingly, in Nguyễn Cư Trinh's response to Mạc Thiên Tứ, the weighty significance of Hà Tiên as Dragon Gate was thoroughly diminished. Nguyễn Cư Trinh kept his poetic focus squarely on the rocky islet as a powerful natural wonder that calmed the seas of Hà Tiên, and failed to recognize in it the highly symbolic pattern of the mythical gate:

Golden Islet Blocking Waves

Supreme Being⁷ was angry with Wave Spirit⁸ for frequently intruding the shores;
Gave orders to move this mountain peak to the city's riverfront.
Waves are now unable to drench and swipe at the face of the long walls;
Violent waters from all directions know of this unmovable rock's power.

金嶼攔濤
帝怒陽侯數犯邊
勅移山岳鎮前川
波濤不拭長城面
水猛方知砥柱權

⁷ I translate "Supreme Being" from *Di* (帝).

⁸ I translate "Wave Spirit" from Yanghou (陽侯). See 辭源 (*Ci Yuan*): 3587.3.

A *jingwei* bird,⁹ half swallowing, carries stones in despair;
The *li* dragon,¹⁰ wholly securely, holds a pearl while fast asleep.
I know that you,¹¹ indeed, are one who esteems things of nature;
Now as before, in the rolling waves, it stands apart, dignified.

精衛半消啣石恨
驪龍全穩抱珠眠
知君亦是擎天物
今古滔滔獨儼然
(Nguyễn Cư Trinh, Poem 1)

In his response, Nguyễn Cư Trinh expanded on the subject of Mạc Thiên Tứ's poem by creating a mesmerizing origin-myth that told the story of how the rocky peaks came to be situated at Hà Tiên's coastal entrance. Nguyễn Cư Trinh unfolds his tale with a description of how the Wave Spirit had incurred the wrath of the Supreme Being for frequently trespassing on the sandy shores of Hà Tiên. As a corrective to Wave Spirit's misdeeds, the Supreme Being ordered that a very large and powerful mountain peak, none other than Golden Islet, be placed in Hà Tiên's riverfront as a protection for its shores. From that time on until the present, the steadfast and sturdy rock has performed its duty admirably, standing firm in the face of strong waves and billows. The allusions to the *jingwei* bird and the *li* dragon found in the third couplet of this poem further embellish the origin-myth of Golden Islet. The *jingwei* bird is a pheasant-like bird that is said to have carried stones in its beak, "half-swallowing" them, in order to drop them one by one into the sea; it is typically a symbolism for despair over labor spent in vain as it is never able to fill the sea. In this poem, however, it amplifies the mythical dimensions of the labor involved in moving the rocky peaks of Golden Islet to the riverfront of Hà Tiên. Golden Islet's constant and unwavering guardianship of Hà Tiên, moreover, is compared to the *li* dragon

⁹ *Jingwei* (精衛) is a pheasant-like bird. See *Matthews' Chinese-English Dictionary*, entries no. 1149.g.1 and 1149.g.2.

¹⁰ The *li* dragon, or *lilong* (驪龍), is a dragon that is black in color. It is said to guard a precious pearl in its jaw. See entry for "*li pearl*" (*lizhu*, 驪珠) in the 辭源 (*Ci Yuan*): 3787.2.

¹¹ I translate "you" here from the term *quân* (*jun*, 君), which means "gentleman." Nguyễn Cư Trinh used this respectful term to address Mạc Thiên Tứ.

guarding a precious pearl, holding it “wholly securely” between its jaws even while it is fast asleep.

This myth that Nguyễn Cư Trinh created about the origins of Golden Islet stands in as a substitute for Mạc Thiên Tứ’s legend of Hà Tiên as the mythical Dragon Gate. The image of fish “splash[ing] a-flitter,” the harbinger of the fish-dragons that inhabit many of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poems, is significantly absent from this poem. In fact, Nguyễn Cư Trinh did not make use of the motif of fish-dragons in any of his ten poems, except to address it inconspicuously in a brief reference in poem five, “An Egret Descends from Pearl Cliff,” which I will discuss later in this chapter. The absence of a motif that was so important to Mạc Thiên Tứ’s ten initial poems, to which Nguyễn Cư Trinh was responding, would mean either that Nguyễn Cư Trinh had missed the original symbolism, which is doubtful given its prominence, or that he consciously avoided it in order to make a point with its absence. In support of the latter assertion is Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s remark in the final couplet of his poem, in which he wrote away the possibility of any patterning of Hà Tiên after the politically significant Dragon Gate. As a testament to his sensitive and stylish literary manner, Nguyễn Cư Trinh gently wrote over Mạc Thiên Tứ’s baptismal inscription on Hà Tiên’s Golden Islet through a sincere compliment for Mạc Thiên Tứ. He noted in praise that Mạc Thiên Tứ was indeed “a gentleman” (*jun*, 君) who greatly “esteems things of nature.”¹² With these words, Nguyễn Cư Trinh reduced Golden Islet to the natural phenomenon of a “dignified” mound of rocks that “stands apart” from the waters, strategically positioned to break the strength of the “rolling waves” that would otherwise come crashing down on Hà Tiên’s

¹² In my translation, I glossed the word “gentleman” (*jun*, 君) as “you” since Nguyễn Cư Trinh was making a direct reference to his audience, Mạc Thiên Tứ. See line 7 of poem 1.

shores. Golden Islet is a natural wonder, and not a symbol for a political center oriented towards the Chinese Ming loyalists.

Even though Nguyễn Cư Trinh limited Golden Islet's significance to that of a natural wonder, he did not restrict himself to depicting the landscapes of Hà Tiên merely as natural phenomena. The next poem in the series is an ode to another scenic site in Hà Tiên, in which a mountain is named Screen Mountain for its resemblance to a dramatic ornamental screen, gracefully fanning open. In “Verdant Folds of Screen Mountain,” Mạc Thiên Tứ emphasized the natural beauty of Screen Mountain, found in its vibrant colors and rich flora and fauna, as physical manifestations of the inherently auspicious nature of the site.

Verdant Folds of Screen Mountain

Luxuriant vegetation grows naturally on this lofty peak;
Folded ridges, fanning open, in graceful purple and verdant.
A cloud-filled sky, encircling light, the mountain presses up-close;
Just after rain, crisp and pleasant, fauna and flora aplenty.
Ageing together with heaven and earth, an auspicious site for ages;
Like the splendor of mist and rosy clouds, extending as far as the eye sees.
I dare say, that in Hà Tiên, the scenery is unusual;
Where vapors amass thickly and trees swish and rustle.

屏山疊翠
龍蔥草木自峇嶠
疊嶺屏開紫翠嬌
雲靄匝光山勢近
雨餘爽麗物華饒
老同天地鍾¹³靈久
榮共烟霞屬望遙

敢道河僊風景異
嵐堆鬱鬱樹蕭蕭
(Mạc Thiên Tứ, Poem 2)

Because Mạc Thiên Tứ's intention was to position Hà Tiên as a natural haven in which his fellow Ming loyalist poets could find a long-lasting political and cultural home, his poem focused on Hà Tiên's “unusual” landscape that would only “[age] together with heaven and earth” as a means of representing the innate suitability of his far-flung domain as a site for

¹³ As noted in the previous chapter, the EFEO microfilm records this character as “鐘,” as in “bell.” I corrected it to “鍾” because of the compound word “鍾靈,” meaning “an auspicious site,” which proves a good fit for the poem.

alternative Chinese political activities. The strength of his claim lay in Hà Tiên’s naturally bestowed attributes, testaments to its inherently auspicious foundations, rather than to any of its man-made and thus impermanent adornments. Consequently, Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poem about Screen Mountain lacked any reference to the inhabitants of his domain or to the built-up environment of Hà Tiên. In contrast, Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s response to Mạc Thiên Tứ, even though concerned with the same Screen Mountain, evoked a starkly different impression of the land:

Verdant Folds of Screen Mountain

Taking center-stage amidst the rustic villages, stands a lofty peak;
Light and dark, vibrant and pastel: this masterpiece’s design lies depicted.

To know if the earth’s pulse is weak or auspicious, observe its trees and stones;

Whether people’s moods are anxious or happy, just ask the grass- and reed-cutters.

Come springtime, brocade curtains are thrown open, to welcome guardsmen and prefects;

In autumn, rising metal walls, and pillars of the Sage’s temple.¹⁵

These are the flavors of Guangzhou, how lucky is the man!

Grasses and flowers, never become, parched or withered.

屏山疊翠
中分村落立峇嶢
淡墨農青作意描

地脉衰靈觀樹石

民情愁樂問葛藟¹⁴

春開錦幕邀戎府

秋起金城拱聖廟¹⁶

此味廣州人樂得
草花不爲陸沉澗

(Nguyễn Cư Trinh, Poem 2)

Nguyễn Cư Trinh planted Screen Mountain squarely in its geographical surroundings, “amidst the rustic villages” of Hà Tiên’s countryside. He matched Mạc Thiên Tứ’s description of Screen Mountain’s graceful colors with a portrayal of the mountain as a “masterpiece” in which well-planned contrasting color schemes lay boldly exhibited. Responding swiftly to Mạc Thiên Tứ’s

¹⁴ The character is originally carved as 藟; I modified it to 葛 as I believe the radical was dropped in the process of either copying the poems or carving the woodblocks.

¹⁵ The Sage’s temple refers to Confucius’s temple. As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, the Temple to Confucius was a significant cultural marker.

¹⁶ The character is originally rendered as 朝; I modified it to 廟 for the same reasons as those given previously. This character occurs three times in all of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s poems. I consistently modify it in the same way in every case.

claim that the natural beauty of the mountain marked it as an intrinsically “auspicious site,” Nguyễn Cư Trinh offered instead two ways through which “auspiciousness” could be attested—that the “trees and stones” of the land would reveal the health of the “earth’s pulse,” and the “grass- and reed-cutters” would divulge the state of “people’s moods.” In sharp contrast to Mạc Thiên Tứ’s nature-filled poem, Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s response lingered on the built environment of Hà Tiên. He described “brocade curtains” drawn open to welcome visitors in springtime, a reference to Mạc Thiên Tứ’s strong relationship with both his superiors and inferiors, “rising metal walls” that were a testament to Hà Tiên’s impregnable defensive ramparts, and “pillars of the Sage’s temple” that drew attention to a temple dedicated to Confucius in Hà Tiên. In focusing on the man-made environment of Hà Tiên, Nguyễn Cư Trinh demystified Mạc Thiên Tứ’s portrayal of Hà Tiên as a natural auspicious site. The distinctiveness that Hà Tiên exhibited was a result of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s cultivating efforts on the land, rather than the manifestation of a mystically occurring influence deep within its earth. As was the case with Golden Islet, Nguyễn Cư Trinh masterfully undermined Mạc Thiên Tứ’s inscription on Screen Mountain with praise for the poet. He drew attention to Mạc Thiên Tứ’s excellent and extensive man-made patterns on the landscape, and thereby exposed its common natural design.

Significantly, Nguyễn Cư Trinh concluded his poem with an observation that Hà Tiên was filled with “the flavors of Guangzhou,” the capital city of Guangdong province in southern China, from which Mạc Thiên Tứ’s recent ancestors hailed. His envy of Mạc Thiên Tứ, found in the comment “how lucky is the man,” reveals the ease with which Nguyễn Cư Trinh attributed to Hà Tiên strong cultural connections with the Chinese. Studying “Verdant Folds of Screen Mountain” alongside his first response poem, “Golden Islet Blocking Waves,” in which he

worked to break down the symbolism of Hà Tiên as a political center for the Chinese Ming loyalists, it becomes clear that Nguyễn Cư Trinh's comfort with Hà Tiên's culturally Chinese patterns did not extend to its political associations with the Chinese Ming loyalists.

In substituting Mạc Thiên Tứ's symbolic Dragon Gate myth with an origin myth concocted especially for Golden Islet, and in demystifying Mạc Thiên Tứ's portrayal of Hà Tiên as a naturally auspicious domain with praise for Mạc Thiên Tứ's man-made patterns, Nguyễn Cư Trinh wrought significant damage on Mạc Thiên Tứ's inaugural inscriptions on two of Hà Tiên's landscapes. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's responses did not complement the patterns that Mạc Thiên Tứ recognized in Hà Tiên's landscape, they re-inscribed the sites with alternative odes. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's first two poems set the tone for his remaining responses, in which he continued to carefully empty Mạc Thiên Tứ's poems of their political significance and emphasized instead the benefits of Mạc Thiên Tứ's leadership and cultural influence on Hà Tiên's landscape.

Meaningful elaborations

Even though Nguyễn Cư Trinh commenced his ten-poem response to Mạc Thiên Tứ by substituting a myth of his own creation for the politically significant one that Mạc Thiên Tứ had patterned onto Hà Tiên, his responses to Mạc Thiên Tứ were more often than not elaborations of themes begun by Mạc Thiên Tứ himself. These elaborations can be considered symbols of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's acquiescence, and represent places in which Nguyễn Cư Trinh found Mạc Thiên Tứ's ideas congruous enough with his own for him to enlarge upon and etch deeper into Hà Tiên's landscape Mạc Thiên Tứ's original inscriptions. These elaborations, moreover, represent Nguyễn Cư Trinh's own interpretation of Mạc Thiên Tứ's inaugural inscriptions.

Captured in the aspects of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poems on which Nguyễn Cư Trinh chose to elaborate, the manner in which he expanded upon them, and the additional details he colored into Mạc Thiên Tứ’s inscriptions are Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s thoughts concerning Mạc Thiên Tứ’s governorship of Hà Tiên, and his own cultural and political vision for Hà Tiên as a Vietnamese frontier province. This section will examine four of Nguyễn Cư Trinh poems in which he provided meaningful elaborations to Mạc Thiên Tứ’s original themes.

Poem 3, “Dawn Bell at Tiêu Temple,” captures the way in which Mạc Thiên Tứ positioned Hà Tiên as a distinctive and civilized realm located amidst wilderness. I noted in the previous chapter that Mạc Thiên Tứ infused his poem, set at the moment of dawn, with the sounds that accompanied daybreak, such as the cries of the crane and rook and the chickens’ cock-a-doodle-does. Of greatest significance was the “lone sound” of the morning bell emanating from Tiêu temple in Hà Tiên, which traveled to “the river and beyond” and thus marked Hà Tiên as the lone civilized realm standing in the midst of surrounding marshlands.

Dawn Bell at Tiêu Temple

Remnant stars, the residual few, towards the heavens are cast;
 It is the fifth watch, a bell sounds, resounding far from the temple.
 Purified region and human destiny awaken to the world;
 A lone sound, clear and distinct, goes out to the river and beyond.
 Suddenly startled, a crane calls out, soaring on wind around the trees;
 Also urged, a rook cries out, towards the fading moon.
 At once conscious, the thousand households push their pillows back;
 Chickens spread dawn news, calling out cock-a-doodle-doo.

蕭寺曉鍾
 殘星寥落向天拋
 戌夜鯨音遠寺敲
 淨境人緣醒世界
 孤聲清越出江郊
 忽驚鶴唳繞風樹
 又促烏啼倚月稍
 頓覺千家欹枕後
 雞傳曉信亦嚶嚶
 (Mạc Thiên Tứ, Poem 3)

Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poem alternately directs the reader’s attention out into the horizon, where remnant stars are cast towards the heavens and a crane soars on winds above the treetops, and in

towards the realm of Hà Tiên, where its inhabitants awaken to the sound of the morning bell and their chickens' cock-a-doodle-doos. The alternating foci situate the “purified region” of Hà Tiên in the midst of the marshlands. It moreover distinguishes Hà Tiên as a distinctive and civilized realm from its surrounding wilderness. Between these alternating landscapes, Tiêu temple is rendered practically invisible. To mirror Mạc Thiên Tứ's sound-filled poem, Nguyễn Cư Trinh infused his response poem accordingly with the myriad sounds of morning. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's dawn, however, was empty of the cries of wild birds and domestic fowl; instead, they were the rhythms of man-made sounds that accompanied the religious life of the temple:

Dawn Bell at Tiêu Temple

Dawn breezes shake and scatter, dew from the flowers are flung;
 Traveling afar, one lone sound passes high above the treetops.
 Metal Beast¹⁷ roars at the remnants of stars over the sea's bank;
 Wooden Whale¹⁸ beats to the descent of the moon into the countryside crater.¹⁹
 Ten thousand households awaken from dreams, a Buddhist temple's entrance;
 The Eight Rivers²² all rejoice, as a monk descends from his haunt.
 Awaiting awakening, enduring in compassion, Zen, indeed, you possess;
 Not sounding, yet resounding—join now with the sun!

蕭寺曉鍾
 晨風搖落露花拋
 迢遰孤聲過樹梢
 金獸哮殘星海渚
 木鯨打落月村坳

萬家醒夢佛²⁰廟²¹闕

八水開顏僧下巢
 待扣堪憐禪亦有
 不鳴鳴得太陽交

(Nguyễn Cư Trinh, Poem 3)

¹⁷ The Metal Beast refers to a tiger-shaped motif commonly found on bronze doorknockers.

¹⁸ The Wooden Whale is a name given to a wooden instrument that religious persons knocked in time with their chanting.

¹⁹ A cavity in the ground

²⁰ The character is rendered in the woodblock print as a variant version of 佛.

²¹ As noted previously, this character 廟 is modified from 朝.

²² The Eight Rivers (八水) refers to eight large rivers in India. See *Từ Điển Phật Học Hán Việt* (Hà Nội: Nông Nghiệp Publishing House, 1992) vol. 1, p. 127.

Whereas Mạc Thiên Tứ's poem alternates between directing the reader's gaze out into the horizon and in towards Hà Tiên, Nguyễn Cư Trinh's response keeps the reader focused on Tiêu temple. The imagined vistas that accompanied the flinging of Mạc Thiên Tứ's stars towards the heavens are replaced by the detailed depiction of minute dewdrops being shaken off flowers by soft morning breezes. Strange animals inhabit the landscape in the second couplet of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poem. The Metal Beast, a mythical animal resembling a tiger, is a typical motif to be found on a doorknocker. The Wooden Whale is a bell made out of wood that is shaped like a whale; it is typically used in the temple as an instrument for beating out a constant rhythm to accompany the chanting of sutras. These two objects—the doorknocker and the wooden bell—function metonymically, standing in for the whole of Tiêu temple, of which they constitute a part. In this way, the reader's focus is kept on the temple even as the poet describes the remnant stars over the sea's bank and the moon's descent into a crater in the ground. Moreover, the zoomorphism of the two temple objects serves to parallel the animals of Mạc Thiên Tứ's poem; in both poems, the animals—animate and inanimate—create sounds that accompany the moment of the break of dawn.

Whereas the diverse sources of sound in Mạc Thiên Tứ's poem render Tiêu temple practically invisible, the sounds in Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poem originate from the temple and serve to amplify it. The amplification facilitates Nguyễn Cư Trinh's sharpened and zoomed-in focus on the “Buddhist temple's entrance,” from which a monk “descends from his haunt.” At the moment of dawn, when “ten thousand households awaken from dreams,” Nguyễn Cư Trinh inscribed onto Hà Tiên's landscape yet another form of awakening—a religious awakening. Nguyễn Cư Trinh ascribed this awakening, moreover, to the leader of the land, Mạc Thiên Tứ. Nguyễn Cư

Trinh declared in his final couplet that Mạc Thiên Tứ, hitherto awaiting the moment of enlightenment and enduring in this world only because of his compassion, has indeed arrived at the moment of Zen. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's response to Mạc Thiên Tứ effectively inscribed Mạc Thiên Tứ *onto* the landscape of Hà Tiên. Nguyễn Cư Trinh praised Mạc Thiên Tứ's cultivated Buddhist leadership, which he recognized has led to the establishment of the civilized and purified domain that Mạc Thiên Tứ described in his own poem. Curiously, Nguyễn Cư Trinh ascribed to Mạc Thiên Tứ the beatific state of enlightenment fulfilled, which presumably would lead to Mạc Thiên Tứ's withdrawal from the affairs of this world, including his governorship of Hà Tiên.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh's hearty approval of Zen Buddhist enlightenment for Mạc Thiên Tứ, in his elaboration of the moment of awakening in Mạc Thiên Tứ's poem, is incongruous with his strong disapproval of the practice of seeking religious escape from this physical world, a view that can be found in his *Sãi Vãi*. Particularly towards the end of the *Sãi Vãi*, Nguyễn Cư Trinh's objection to the Buddhist quest for paradise reached vehement heights, where his monk insisted that the nun abandon such "crazy talk" and banish the "monster within."²³ Nguyễn Cư Trinh's attribution of enlightenment to Mạc Thiên Tứ appears highly inconsistent with his mode of thought articulated in the play, which sought to retain the Việt frontier inhabitants of Đàng Trong on its frontier lands, so as to ensure that the lands could be securely annexed for the expanding southern Vietnamese empire. His contrary vision for Mạc Thiên Tứ is revealing of the way in which he positioned Mạc Thiên Tứ in the Vietnamese political hierarchy. Although Mạc Thiên Tứ had officially been conferred the title of governor by the Nguyễn court in Đàng Trong,

²³ *Sãi Vãi*, line 295.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh continued to view him as a temporary political actor on the southern Vietnamese frontier. His view of Mạc Thiên Tứ's governorship of Hà Tiên, likely reflective of the wider views of the political leadership of Đàng Trong, was more in keeping with the concept of stewardship, where Mạc Thiên Tứ was expected to be a good, albeit temporary, steward of this southern Vietnamese province.

The topic of Mạc Thiên Tứ's governorship of Hà Tiên was one upon which Nguyễn Cư Trinh spent a significant portion of his time elaborating. This attention is reflective of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's social and political relationship with Mạc Thiên Tứ, where he acted as Mạc Thiên Tứ's political superior in an official capacity, being commissioned by the Vietnamese court in Huế to supervise the administration of the various provinces in the Mekong delta that Đàng Trong claimed as theirs. Elaborations upon other aspects of Mạc Thiên Tứ's governorship of Hà Tiên can be found in several of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's other responses. Poem four, "Night Drum at River Wall," explicitly draws out Mạc Thiên Tứ's defensive strategy in Hà Tiên. The subject of the poem is the sound of the night drum emanating from a fortress wall on a river near to Hà Tiên's Cambodian border. In his poem, Mạc Thiên Tứ patterned his defensive strategy after an incident of Cao Cao's military genius:

Night Drum at River Wall

Heavenly winds swirling round and round, icy clouds on high;
Fettered and locked on the long river, the general's valor so brave.
A vast stretch of armored ships, on wintry waters under the moon;
Drum and horn at night's third watch, waves and billows rest.
[A sojourner], still alert at night, when metal armors are melting;
With upright posture on the fortress wall, wrapped in brocade robes.
Military strategy received from old: a brilliant ruler pays attention;
The whole realm of Rinan, thankfully, is stable and secure.

江城夜鼓
天風迴繞凍雲高
鎖鑰長江將氣豪
一片樓船寒水月
三更鼓角定波濤
[客]仍警夜銷金甲
人正干城擁錦袍
武略深承英主眷
日南境宇賴安牢
(Mạc Thiên Tứ, Poem 4)

Mạc Thiên Tứ inscribed significant Chinese cultural and historical patterns onto his fortress wall in Hà Tiên through recognizing, in the position of the wall alongside the river, its similarity with the geographical patterns of Red Cliffs, the site at which Cao Cao staged an infamous battle. Moreover, Mạc Thiên Tứ inscribed himself onto the landscape of the fortress wall as the “sojourner,” “with upright posture,” who remains “alert at night” to ensure Hà Tiên’s protection. In this way, Mạc Thiên Tứ not only patterned River Wall as a significant Chinese defensive wall, he also patterned himself after a military genius in Chinese history, Cao Cao. In this poem, Mạc Thiên Tứ ascribed to himself the character of a wanderer or a guest, a Chinese man who did not quite belong to the wilderness of the Mekong delta region. Even so, he staked his claim to his domain of Hà Tiên firmly and lastingly by inscribing himself onto Hà Tiên’s River Wall. In Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s response to this poem, he appears to concur with Mạc Thiên Tứ and elaborates on the historical allusion after which Mạc Thiên Tứ has patterned River Wall:

Night Drum at River Wall

Metal walls, standing vertically, on an emerald riverbank;	江城夜鼓 金城峙立碧江皋
From a drum tower on the stretch of the wall, a call goes out to the moon.	僵臥譙樓對月號
In fine rain, a sound of authority is about to be obeyed;	細雨有權聲欲遜
In wild waves that lack harmony, it resounds equally bravely.	狂波無韻響偏豪
Far away, a magpie yawns in a tree, luxuriant leaves are difficult to steady;	遙呵鵲樹依難定
Nearby, a <i>jiao</i> dragon agitates the lake, its dreams have surely dissipated.	近蕩蛟潭夢亦消
Anyone in the vast horizon will recall, the sound of military strategy;	誰念天涯鳴武略
In the capital of Hoa people, from that time on, pillows are filled high.	京華從此枕彌高

(Nguyễn Cư Trinh, Poem 4)

Nguyễn Cư Trinh recognized, in the pattern of the fortress wall, the warp and woof of Hà Tiên’s landscape. Its “metal walls,” which metaphorically represent strong and impregnable walls, stand tall against the woof of the landscape’s fabric while the drum tower stands on the length of those

walls, which run along the warp of the land. Building on Mạc Thiên Tứ's allusion to Cao Cao's Battle of Red Cliffs, a call is issued from the drum tower in Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poem. In historical time, the call was easily obeyed when made in "fine rain," as Cao Cao's inexperienced navy did not suffer the ill effects of seasickness then. In "wild waves," moreover, the call "resounds just as bravely" because Cao Cao fettered his warships together to reduce the effects of the waves' rocking motion on each individual ship. In the poet's contemporary moment, the call of the drum causes a sleepy magpie to yawn, rustling the luxuriant leaves in the tree, and also awakens a *jiao* dragon, whose movements on waking agitate the waters on the surface of the lake. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's reflection on the drum stirring the magpie and the *jiao* dragon from their peaceful slumber, which in turn caused their environment to lose their calm, contrasts with the steadying effect of Mạc Thiên Tứ's "drum and horn at night's third watch," which caused "waves and billows" to "rest." His chain of events functions to mimic, however, the gentle movement of the waves and billows that Mạc Thiên Tứ's drum call has set at rest. Nguyễn Cư Trinh was content to leave Mạc Thiên Tứ's baptismal inscription on River Wall in peace, using his poetic inscription only to add to the patterns that Mạc Thiên Tứ had created. Although he did not elaborate on Mạc Thiên Tứ's presence in his own inscription, he took no pains to write over it either.

Contrasting Nguyễn Cư Trinh's positive treatment of Mạc Thiên Tứ's allusion in "Night Drum at River Wall" with his undermining of Mạc Thiên Tứ's Dragon Gate pattern in "Golden Islet Blocking Waves," it appears that Nguyễn Cư Trinh bore an antipathy towards the politically significant implications found in the Dragon Gate pattern, but harbored no ill will towards the historically and culturally significant pattern found in the Red Cliffs. Nguyễn Cư Trinh was

content for his poem to etch deeper the inscription that Mạc Thiên Tứ had first created, in which he described himself as a sound leader who paid attention to Chinese military strategy. Once again, Nguyễn Cư Trinh demonstrated willingness for the southern Vietnamese province under his charge to be associated with recognizably Chinese “flavors,” but not with the political ambitions that Mạc Thiên Tứ inscribed onto its landscape twenty or thirty years before.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh continued the theme of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s fine military abilities in the poem that followed, “Stone Grotto Swallows Clouds,” although Mạc Thiên Tứ himself did not treat the theme of his own military prowess in that poem. Mạc Thiên Tứ recognized in the Stone Grotto in Hà Tiên the pattern of a similar grotto found on the emerald Linglong Mountain in Zhejiang province in China, where white clouds are said to have bored a hole through the mountain.

Stone Grotto Swallows Clouds

A mountain peak, its verdant crest rising, interrupts the river of stars;²⁴
 A grotto, as on Linglong,²⁵ lies hidden in the emerald mount.
 Without inhibition, mists and clouds, come and go as they please;
 A boundless expanse of grasses and trees, dance carelessly together.
 Wind and Frost, since ages recurring, patterns are unusual;
 Crow and Rabbit, repeatedly inter-changing, sights are aplenty.
 At the utmost, the quintessence, heights where few men reach;
 I breathe according to the wind, from the lofty peak.

石洞吞雲
 有峰聳翠砥星河
 洞室玲瓏蘊碧岿
 不意烟雲由去住
 無垠²⁶草木共娑娑²⁷
 風霜久歷文章異
 烏兔頻移氣色多
 最是精華高絕處
 隨風呼吸自嵯峨
 (Mạc Thiên Tứ, Poem 5)

²⁴ “River of stars” refers to the Milky Way

²⁵ “Linglong” is the name of a stone mountain in Zhejiang, China.

²⁶ As noted in the previous chapter, this character is missing in the EFEO microfilm version. I am adopting the character that Đông Hồ recorded, 垠.

²⁷ In the EFEO microfilm version, the two characters appear as 娑娑, literally “grandmother.” I suspect it was scribal error and that the poet intended for those character to be 娑娑.

This poem is perhaps Mạc Thiên Tứ's most playful, demonstrating the degree to which he consciously used words, or *literature*, to represent the *patterns* in Hà Tiên's landscape. I presented in the previous chapter only one possible translation of Mạc Thiên Tứ's "Stone Grotto Swallows Clouds." What I had translated in the third couplet as "*patterns* are unusual," privileging one reading of "*wenzhang*" (文章) over another, can also be glossed as "*literature* is unusual." Taking *wenzhang* to mean literature leads to a different understanding of the third couplet of Mạc Thiên Tứ's poem, which can thus be rendered as: "Wind and Frost, means years gone by, literature is unusual! / Crow and Rabbit, repeatedly inter-changing, luster aplenty!" The conflation of *literature* and *patterns* in the phrase *wenzhang* gave Mạc Thiên Tứ the opportunity to demonstrate the extent to which he consciously used language to inscribe cultural patterns onto Hà Tiên's landscape. He commented directly on this peculiarity of literature by pointing out that Wind and Frost, two elements of nature, constitute a metaphor for the seasonal pattern of the passage of time; moreover, two small animals, Crow and Rabbit, represent the sun and moon respectively. Mạc Thiên Tứ ascribed to the two animals "luster" (*qise*, 氣色), which depicted them as healthful animals moving about constantly; at the same time, they represent the sun and moon repeatedly inter-changing their positions, and in so doing casting onto the landscape of Hà Tiên beautiful "sights," another meaning of *qi se*. These metaphors highlight, moreover, the regular *pattern* of seasons and days in Hà Tiên; I argued in the previous chapter that Mạc Thiên Tứ actively depicted these patterns in his poetry to differentiate his well-regulated domain from the surrounding realm of chaos. Nguyễn Cư Trinh seized on the wordplay in Mạc Thiên Tứ's poem to craft an appropriate response to him:

Stone Grotto Swallows Clouds

One mountain breaks open into caves on two sides;
It swallows the floating clouds without letting any slip away.
Draw in the looper means to extend the dragon: withdraw to taste
success!
Luan soar and phoenix fly into your encompassing net!
Like being in a bottle gourd, where fire is wet, and mist freezes heavily;
In this stone chamber, a man is cold, firewood he amasses aplenty.
Emerging from the cavern, he waits to be taught, yet has the ability for
five brilliant colors;
Luminescence to help the God of War, to steady mountains and rivers.

石洞吞雲
一山開破兩岩阿
吞下浮雲不放過
螻屈龍伸歸嗽納

鸞翔鳳翥入包羅
葫蘆火濕烟凝重
石室人寒柴²⁸積多
出岫待教能五彩

光扶神武定山河
(Nguyễn Cư Trinh, Poem 5)

Nguyễn Cư Trinh set the scene with a description of a stone grotto that featured two openings, which allowed clouds to pass right through the mountain. He then complemented Mạc Thiên Tứ's wordplay with some of his own. Seizing upon the meaning of *wenzhang* in Mạc Thiên Tứ's poem as literature instead of patterns, Nguyễn Cư Trinh placed the phrase "Draw in the looper" (*huo qu*, 螻屈), beside another, "Extending the dragon" (*long shen*, 龍伸). The two seemingly contradictory phrases in fact mean the same thing, since to draw back like a caterpillar, a phrase used to describe the act of humbling oneself temporarily in order to attain a higher position later, involves the same strategy as extending into a dragon, bringing attention to oneself only at the moment when one is in the strongest possible position.²⁹ The couplet also finds Nguyễn Cư Trinh using "*luan* soar and phoenix fly," a phrase referring to fine penmanship and beautiful flourishes in writing, to particularly good effect when he complimented Mạc Thiên Tứ for having captured both these birds in flight in his fine writing.³⁰

²⁸ The character is originally recorded as 紫; I modified it to 柴.

²⁹ *Matthews' Chinese English Dictionary*, entry 2208.2.

³⁰ See entry for "*luan* soar and phoenix fly" (*luan xiang feng zhu*, 鸞翔鳳翥) in 辭源 (*Ci Yuan*): 3874.3.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh concluded this poem with yet another religiously inspired elaboration of Mạc Thiên Tứ's governorship of Hà Tiên. The third couplet describes the cold and damp environment in the grotto; a person wishing to spend some time in the grotto, presumably in meditation, would require a lot of firewood to keep warm. The description of the internal environment in the grotto leads to Nguyễn Cư Trinh's last couplet, which is best understood against Mạc Thiên Tứ's closing lines: "At the utmost, the quintessence, heights where few men reach; / I breathe according to the wind, from the lofty peak." Mạc Thiên Tứ positioned himself at the top of the mountain within which Stone Grotto sits, exhaling with the wind. Nguyễn Cư Trinh likewise positions Mạc Thiên Tứ as the man "emerging from the cavern," after spending some time within it in meditation. Even though Mạc Thiên Tứ awaits further religious instruction, he is already able to exhale with the breath of "five brilliant colors," a reference to the luminescence of breath that serves to identify an outstanding man.³¹ This luminescence marks a man anointed by heaven with abilities to help the God of War bring stability to all under heaven, yet another ode in praise of Mạc Thiên Tứ's military abilities. Nguyễn Cư Trinh expanded upon Mạc Thiên Tứ's inscription of himself "exhaling with the wind" on the top of the mountain by coloring his breath in brilliant colors and therefore ascribing to him great military prowess. Nguyễn Cư Trinh believed that Mạc Thiên Tứ's military capabilities derived from more than his application of time-honored military strategy, as he humbly depicted in "Night Drum on River Wall"; his success was due to his own innate qualities. Through "Stone Grotto Swallows Clouds," Nguyễn Cư Trinh drew together in one poetic inscription Mạc Thiên Tứ's significant literary and military abilities, thereby ascribing to him the balance of the two qualities respected

³¹ From the biographic sketch of Xiangyu the Conqueror (232-202B.C.), in the Records of the Grand Historian 《史记·项羽本纪》：“吾令人望其气，皆为龙虎，成五采，此天子气也。” [He ordered people to look at his breath, for in every case of an outstanding man, it forms in 5 colors; that is the breath of the son of heaven.]

in a leader. Nguyễn Cư Trinh may have considered Mạc Thiên Tứ a temporary political actor on the southern Vietnamese frontier, as seen from the way he ascribed religious enlightenment onto Mạc Thiên Tứ in “Dawn Bell at Tiên Temple,” but he certainly admired Mạc Thiên Tứ for his formidable skills.

The final poem I will introduce in this section is poem 9, taken out of its order in the ten-poem series because it is best discussed for its portrayal of the result of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s governorship of Hà Tiên. In Mạc Thiên Tứ’s “Rustic Dwellings on Deer Cape,” he showcases the peaceful tranquility of Hà Tiên’s countryside:

Rustic Dwellings at Deer Cape

In bamboo huts, winds passing through, from dreams begin to waken;
 Yet ravens’ cries outside the eaves cannot be perceived.
 Inverted images of remnant rose clouds drift by, turning shutters purple;
 Dense trees, bending low, touch the garden greens.
 My untamed disposition is partial towards the tranquility of ape and deer;
 Pure of heart, I long for the luxuriant smell of paddy and millet.
 Passers-by, if they should ask where to stop and dwell;
 From the buffalo’s back, just one more note, the flute playing ceases.

鹿峙村居
 竹屋風過夢始醒
 雅啼簷外却難聽
 殘霞倒影³²沿窓紫
 密樹低垂接圃青
 野性偏同猿鹿靜
 清心每羨稻粱馨
 行人若問住何處
 牛背一聲吹笛停

(Mạc Thiên Tứ, Poem 9)

The result of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s defensive strategies and enlightened leadership is an idyllic countryside village, where its inhabitants lived in harmony with nature and longed only for the simple pleasures of life, such as the smell of “paddy and millet,” parts of the countryside standing in for the whole, and the luxury of playing a flute on a buffalo’s back. In Nguyễn Cư

³² As noted in the previous chapter, this character is missing in the EFEO microfilm version. In Lê Quý Đôn’s *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục*, it appears as 影. Đông Hồ’s recorded it as 掛 (to hang). I have chosen to use the as character recorded by Lê Quý Đôn.

Trinh's response, he mirrors the tranquility found in Mạc Thiên Tứ's poem, but elaborates upon it by adding an element of its political isolation.

Rustic Dwellings at Deer Cape

A rustic region of austere dwellings, where silence can be heard;
There is no worry that children and grandchildren are snatched from pavilions of reeds.
Dried deer jerky to entertain a guest, and dark wild tea;
Suckling pig's trotter to welcome a wife, and garden fruit green.
Satisfied and warm, they do not know the power of the Son of Heaven;
Raising up a sacrificial vessel, they only believe in the efficacy of the God of the Seas.
Moreover without rents and taxes, they furthermore are leisurely in their affairs;
The greater half of the people here can boast of living close to a hundred years.

鹿峙村居
僻讓窮居可寂聽
子孫無患奪茅亭

鹿脩留客野茶黑
豚足迎妻園果青
飽煖不知天子力
豐登惟信海神靈

更無租稅又閒事

太半人稱近百齡

(Nguyễn Cư Trinh, Poem 9)

At Deer Cape, its peacefulness is such that “silence can be heard” and there exists no fear that children and grandchildren would be kidnapped from their “austere dwellings.” Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poem expands upon Mạc Thiên Tứ's descriptions of rusticity by tempting the reader with the delicacies of country life, such as dried deer jerky, suckling pig's trotter, dark tea, and fruit fresh from gardens. An element that Nguyễn Cư Trinh included in his poem, which was absent in Mạc Thiên Tứ's, is that of Hà Tiên's administrative ties to wider political worlds. Nguyễn Cư Trinh noted that the people of Hà Tiên were neither taxed nor did they have to pay rents to any higher authority, and consequently knew not of the “power of the Son of Heaven.” Reflecting Hà Tiên's seaward orientation, its inhabitants only believed in the “efficacy of the God of the Seas.” As a result of their tranquil lifestyles, people in Hà Tiên lived long and stress-free lives, and most were able to boast of living close to a hundred years! It appears that Nguyễn Cư Trinh wholly embraced Hà Tiên's political isolation, which seems unusual since he was, after all, an official sent to oversee the frontier provinces claimed by the Vietnamese political center. In the context

of the ten-poem suite, however, the politics from which he urged Mạc Thiên Tứ to keep Hà Tiên's inhabitants away from were the politics associated with the Ming loyalists scattered across the seas.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh's meaningful elaborations on themes found in Mạc Thiên Tứ's original poems reveal to the reader his thoughts about Mạc Thiên Tứ's governorship of Hà Tiên. Nguyễn Cư Trinh clearly admired Mạc Thiên Tứ's governorship: he valued his learned and innate military abilities, appreciated his literary prowess, and respected his enlightened and cultured governance of his domain. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poetry inscribed Mạc Thiên Tứ as governor onto Hà Tiên's landscape, although these inscriptions occasionally etched Mạc Thiên Tứ in but lightly, as a temporary steward of a realm in which he remained a guest. Moreover, Nguyễn Cư Trinh demonstrated repeatedly the ease with which he accepted a culturally Chinese realm on the southern Vietnamese frontier, but found the need to re-inscribe Hà Tiên as a realm politically free of Chinese Ming loyalist associations whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Responding to fish-dragons

The most prominently recurring motif in the ten poems of Hà Tiên produced by Mạc Thiên Tứ in 1736 was that of the fish-dragons, which I argue was a politically charged motif representing his network of fellow Ming loyalists scattered along the coastline of the South China Sea. Mạc Thiên Tứ repeatedly inscribed his political ambitions for Hà Tiên onto its landscape, etching the absent Ming loyalists deeply into its scenery through his ruminations about fish-dragons in his poetry. Given the opportunity to re-inscribe Hà Tiên's landscape twenty

to thirty years after its initial inscription, the manner in which Nguyễn Cư Trinh treated Mạc Thiên Tứ's most significant motif requires careful investigation. In "Golden Islet Blocking Waves," Nguyễn Cư Trinh replaced the myth of Hà Tiên as Dragon Gate with an origin-myth that he crafted especially for the island's rocky peaks. Although he did not engage directly with the Dragon Gate pattern that Mạc Thiên Tứ had earlier inscribed onto Hà Tiên, he masterfully undermined it with his substitution of myths. In this section, I examine other ways in which Nguyễn Cư Trinh responded to the fish-dragons in Mạc Thiên Tứ's poetry.

In all of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's ten poetic responses, he alluded to the myth of Dragon Gate and its associated fish-dragons but once. Remarkably, this single reference appears in a response to a poem in which Mạc Thiên Tứ had not, in fact, inscribed the motif onto the landscape. Poem 9, "An Egret Descends from Pearl Cliff," features a cliff that was home to a tumbling waterfall. In it, Mạc Thiên Tứ positioned himself at a defining moment, poised on the edge of taking action; yet, in the midst of his hurry, something caused him to pause on the stony shore of Hà Tiên.

An Egret Descends from Pearl Cliff

Green foliage and dusky clouds mix with the rosy sunset;
 Flying out of the enchanted cliff, a white bird emerges, aslant.
 At night, following in heaven's sequence, a thin gauze covers the fragrant trees;
 At day, falling off the level cliff, forming splashes of *yu* flowers.
 A waterfall and its shadow, together tumbling, under moonlight on the peak;
 Clouds and lights, encircling evenly, dusk's glow thrown on the sand.
 Wild sentiments about the course of events, ready to act on plans;
 In the midst of rushing, I pause, on this shore of water and stone.

珠巖落鷺
 綠蔭幽雲綴暮霞
 靈巖飛出白禽斜
 晚排天陣羅芳樹
 晴落平崖瀉玉花
 瀑影共翻明月岫
 雲光齊匝夕陽沙
 狂情世路將施計
 碌碌棲遲水石涯

(Mạc Thiên Tứ, Poem 6)

Mạc Thiên Tứ captured a beautiful moment at dusk, when day was poised to transition into night. Nature is tamed in this fleeting moment, as the crashing sounds of the cascading waterfall are dampened by the silence of its own tumbling shadow. Mạc Thiên Tứ inscribed himself into this ephemeral moment, patterning himself after Hà Tiên’s nature. Like that teetering moment of day, Mạc Thiên Tứ is poised on the edge, “ready to act on plans.” Yet, the brash “wild[ness]” of his “sentiments” are halted in this hallowed moment, just as the raucous waterfall of Pearl Cliff is muted by its dance with its own shadow. Mạc Thiên Tứ revealed a brief moment of his own raw sentiment in this poem, in which the reader could perceive a fleeting glimpse of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s indecision and doubt. Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s response to this sentiment infused almost every line of his poem. Seizing the opportunity that the tentativeness of this poem presented, Nguyễn Cư Trinh addressed the issue of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s political associations with the Chinese Ming loyalists gently and with grace.

An Egret Descends from Pearl Cliff

The mountain is soaked in the color of the sea, like a piece of flawless jade;

Who gifted these tiny blossoms to this flowery masterpiece?

Flowers at its sides, waves at its top, fish neglect their plans;

Pines standing as densely as the hairs on one’s head, wild geese forget their way home.

Dusk and dawn tides, prosperity and decline, arise from loftiness and evil;

Wild ducks and cranes gossip away, enjoin in empty noise.

Why think about the swallow, you sojourner-magistrate?

Still ready to rush on, just smile at the horizon.

珠巖落鷺

山涵海色碧無暇

誰送霜兒到作花

花傍浪頭魚失計

立當松髮鵠忘家

汐潮興替自巍業

鳧鶴短長空囁啞

爲想烏衣堂上客

還將碌碌笑天涯

(Nguyễn Cư Trinh, Poem 6)

Nguyễn Cư Trinh matched Mạc Thiên Tứ’s description of Pearl Cliff with a beautiful opening couplet describing the splendor of the mountain. He compared it with a piece of flawless jade, capturing the smooth and gleaming surface of a mountain drenched with the waters from the falls. The flowing water coursing along the natural lines of the mountain traces them out as the veins

on a precious piece of jade. Tiny blossoms, which are in reality the small splashes of water from the waterfalls, adorn the scene. The pine trees on Pearl Cliff stand so closely together that they appear as dense as “the hairs on one’s head.” With water at its top, and accompanied by flowers on its side, the scene at Pearl Cliff is reminiscent of the pattern of Dragon Gate that Mạc Thiên Tứ had recognized in the first poem of his series, “Golden Islet Blocking Waves.” Unlike the fish in Mạc Thiên Tứ’s “Golden Islet Blocking Waves,” however, the fish in Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s “An Egret Descends from Pearl Cliff” are so mesmerized by the force of the beauty of the landscape that they “neglect their plans.” Moreover, wild geese, captivated by the dense pines on the mountain, “forget their way home.” Just as the landscape had an effect on Mạc Thiên Tứ in his poem, fish and geese are similarly affected by the wondrous scene at Pearl Cliff in Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s response.

The plans that Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s fish have neglected are none other than their intentions of overcoming the rocky cliffs in order to turn into fish-dragons. The patterns in Hà Tiên’s breathtaking landscape have, in fact, caused the fish to deviate from turning into fish-dragons, instead of inspiring them towards that goal. This significant and singular parry to Mạc Thiên Tứ’s ever-present politically charged motif was tucked away inconspicuously in the second couplet of a poem in which the theme was not initially raised. The unexpected location of this rejoinder greatly diminished the potential prickliness of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s comment. In fact, Nguyễn Cư Trinh minced no words in telling Mạc Thiên Tứ to give up on his Ming loyalist ambitions, considering the ebb and flow of political events to be as pre-determined as the pattern of the “dusk and dawn tides.” Similarly, the “prosperity and decline” of ruling dynasties derived from their own “loftiness and evil.” He entreated Mạc Thiên Tứ, the “sojourner-magistrate” of

Hà Tiên, to forget about his unimportant Ming loyalist dreams, comparing his political ambitions to the insignificant “swallow” and “wild ducks and cranes” that gossip together making “empty noise.” Instead of rushing on with those plans, Nguyễn Cư Trinh encouraged Mạc Thiên Tứ to pause, and to “smile at the horizon.” In a poem in which such a response was least expected, Nguyễn Cư Trinh was inspired by the patterns of Pearl Cliff to inscribe his disapproval of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s political ambitions into the lines of the beautifully veined mountain.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh indulged in only one direct rejoinder to the Ming loyalist patterns that Mạc Thiên Tứ inscribed onto Hà Tiên’s landscape. As a testament to his scholarly respect for a fellow literary gentleman, Nguyễn Cư Trinh slipped his blunt reproach of Mạc Thiên Tứ into an insignificant, and therefore less prickly, position. Besides “Golden Islet Blocking Waves,” there are three other poems in which Mạc Thiên Tứ threaded the motif of fish-dragons. Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s response to those three poems demonstrates the way in which he skirted around the issue when a direct response was expected, and in so doing undermined the significance of the motif. Poem 7, “Moon’s Reflection on East Lake,” is one of the most important poems of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s ten-poem series. In it, Mạc Thiên Tứ affirmed his loyalty to his fellow Ming loyalists, even though they were absent from Hà Tiên.

Moon’s Reflection on East Lake

The rain has cleared, mist envelopes, all is indistinct;
 Along the bend, the scenery, become primeval chaos.
 Clear sky and clean waves suspend a pair of reflections;
 Blue skies and clear clouds, all directions purified.
 Deep and ample, responding by holding, like a sky of water ripples;
 Adrift, alone, I do not resent, the sea so vast and cold.

東湖印月
 雨霽烟鎖共渺茫
 一灣風景接鴻荒
 晴空浪淨懸雙影
 碧落雲澄洗萬方
 湛濶應³³涵天蕩滌
 漂零不恨海滄涼

³³ The character is probably wrongly recorded as 府 with a 心 below in the EFEO microfilm version. I decided to change it to the character that Đông Hồ used, 應.

Fish-dragons, conscious of dreams, rush, but find it hard to break through;
Now as always, loyal of heart, just as light reflects above and below.

魚龍夢覺衝難破
依舊冰心上下光
(Mạc Thiên Tứ, Poem 7)

Mạc Thiên Tứ bestowed onto the landscape at East Lake an unconventional approach to a conventional poetic theme: the moon and its reflection. Instead of reflecting on which was true and which false, Mạc Thiên Tứ turned the presence of the moon's reflection on the undisturbed waters of East Lake into an opportunity to inscribe the absent fish-dragons *beneath* the surface of the landscape, unseen in the depths of the waters of the still lake. East Lake is calm because fish-dragons are just awakening from their dreamy slumber and have not yet the energy to break through the surface of the water; this imagery stands in for the real reason behind the stillness of the waters of East Lake, which lie in the fact that fish-dragons—the Ming loyalists—have not yet breached the rocky thresholds to break through into their new Dragon Gate, Hà Tiên, despite being “conscious of dreams.” Mạc Thiên Tứ remained “loyal of heart,” as surely as the moon reflects its image onto East Lake, as he awaited the arrival of the fish-dragons. In spite of their absence in the observable landscape at East Lake, Mạc Thiên Tứ inscribed fish-dragons beneath his surface inscription, etching the absent Ming loyalists deep within the landscape of Hà Tiên, and in so doing laid out his own political ambitions for his domain. In sharp contrast to Mạc Thiên Tứ's unconventional approach, Nguyễn Cư Trinh responded purposefully to Mạc Thiên Tứ's poem using the clichéd theme of the reality of the moon and its reflection:

Moon's Reflection on East Lake

Night has come, who has polished these two circles of light?
One in tribute to its heavenly abode, the other its watery home.
The water calls it a silver plate, which the sky has mimicked to cast.
The sky is doubtful of that jade mirror, which the water considers its true adornment.

東湖印月
夜來誰琢兩圓光
一貢天家一水鄉
水謂銀盤天學鑄
天疑玉鏡水真壯

Should *jiao* and *chi* dragons disclose hidden forms with all their power;
If gulls and cranes should add, extended wings in all directions?
As noble-minded as Tao Zhu³⁴ would be, after affairs pass;
Heaven and earth will sing and pour wine, right in the center.

蛟螭若漏遁形勢
鷗鶴如添博翼方
慨想陶朱成事後
乾坤歌酌最中央

(Nguyễn Cư Trinh, Poem 7)

Nguyễn Cư Trinh began with a description of the two moons—one in the sky and one on East Lake. The water boasts that its orb of light constitutes the genuine version, and the one in the sky a mere imitation of it. The sky, highly skeptical of the water’s claim, offers no argument and merely waits in silence. Truth would be revealed if the *jiao* and *chi* dragons of the lake, hitherto unseen, reveal their powerful forms in disruption of the water’s smooth surface, or if the birds of the air add their outspread wings in all directions, covering the moon and preventing it from casting its reflection on the water. When that happens, the magnanimous sky would forget about the water’s boast, and would continue to “sing and pour wine” with the water as if the disagreement had never happened.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s poem is purposefully simplistic in its design. He does not respond directly to the theme of fish-dragons and Mạc Thiên Tứ’s expression of enduring loyalty to them. Instead, Nguyễn Cư Trinh replaced the politically significant fish-dragons of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poem with *jiao* and *chi* dragons, other forms of dragons that inhabit lakes and seas. When the *jiao* and *chi* dragons in Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s poem break through the surface of the water to reveal their powerful hidden forms, they merely cause the disruption of the smooth surface of the lake, breaking apart the moon’s perfect reflection on its waters. Contrary to Mạc Thiên Tứ’s expectations, the long-awaited arrival of the dragons in Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s poem simply reveals

³⁴ Tao Zhu Gong (陶朱公), also known as Fan Li (范蠡), was active during the Spring and Autumn Period of Chinese history. He is known for his perceptiveness and his generosity of spirit.

to Hà Tiên’s waters the falsity of its moon, and does not further precipitate any significant political change. In inscribing politically insignificant dragons beneath the surface of the waters of East Lake, Nguyễn Cư Trinh adulterated the importance of the fish-dragons in Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poem. Moreover, Nguyễn Cư Trinh inscribed himself onto the scene as Tao Zhu, who would magnanimously forgive the mistaken Mạc Thiên Tứ for believing in the power of his fellow Ming loyalists. In responding to an important and unconventional poem in a purposefully conventional manner, Nguyễn Cư Trinh re-inscribed East Lake at Hà Tiên with a clichéd and unimportant inscription. In so doing, Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s imitation of a stereotypical poet’s reflection on the topic of the moon and its image on the water dismantled one of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s most powerful inscriptions on Hà Tiên’s landscape.

Given Mạc Thiên Tứ’s reliance on the motif of fish-dragons to metaphorically represent his fellow Ming loyalists, it is unsurprising that those of his landscape poems in which he depicted watery scenes were the most heavily laden with political significance. Poem eight, “Clear Waves on South Bay,” is another of his poems in which he directly referenced the fish-dragons:

Clear Waves on South Bay

A stretch of vastness, a stretch so pure;
 Clarity extending to the mooring bay; familiar autumn feeling!
 The Heavenly River³⁵ concludes its rain, radiant mists form;
 A watery region without any winds, where wave-froth is calm.
 Approaching dawn, fishing boats part waters hurriedly;
 Travelers’ boats follow the tide, carrying clouds so light.

南浦澄波
 一片蒼茫一片清
 澄連夾浦老秋情
 天河畢雨烟光結
 澤國無風浪沫平
 向曉漁帆分水急
 趁潮客舫載雲輕

³⁵ “Heavenly River” refers to the Milky Way.

I, too, know that in the eight seas, fish-dragons hide;
Radiant moon and glittering waves, at ease, I understand.

也知八海魚龍匿
月朗³⁶波光自在明
(Mạc Thiên Tứ, Poem 8)

Like the scene at East Lake, fish-dragons are absent from the observable surface of the landscape of South Bay. Undeterred, Mạc Thiên Tứ inscribed Ming loyalists *into* the waters of South Bay by expressing confidence that out “in the eight seas, fish-dragons hide.” He understood that, because of their alternative political orientations, fish-dragons could not openly reveal themselves and thus had to remain hidden. Nguyễn Cư Trinh responded to this poem in a different manner from that in which he treated the “Moon’s Reflection on East Lake.” Whereas in “Moon’s Reflection on East Lake” Nguyễn Cư Trinh etched a clichéd inscription over Mạc Thiên Tứ’s unconventional one that was pregnant with significance, in “Clear Waves on South Bay” Nguyễn Cư Trinh carefully matched each of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s couplets with appropriate responses, which led him eventually to a vastly different conclusion from Mạc Thiên Tứ’s.

Clear Waves on South Bay

Waves surge into the marshlands, pouring out when it’s almost dawn;
On returning, glassy handles are arranged on the ground so bright.
With *ji* and *bi* stars sharing in defense, there is little trouble under heaven;
Jing and *Ni* whales lose their strength, the heart of the sea becomes calm.
The sojourner on the fortress wall possesses thoughts of floating on a raft;
No one on inspection tours asks questions about sword sounds.
Ageing together with wild seagulls, sharing the bare earth to the end;
Towards Chang An, he smiles and points, a sagely man is born.

南浦澄波
盈窪波浪幾辰傾
還把玻璃列地明
箕畢分閑天事少

鯨鯢權失海心平
干城客有乘桴思

行部³⁷人無問劍聲
野老與鷗分席罷
長安笑指聖人生

(Nguyễn Cư Trinh, Poem 8)

³⁶ As noted in the previous chapter, this character is missing in the EFEO microfilm version. I decided to adopt the character that Đông Hồ recorded, 朗.

³⁷ 辭源(*Ci Yuan*): 3057.2. 刺史常於八月巡視部屬, 考察刑政, 稱為行部. [A provincial governor, typically in the eighth month, goes on an inspection tour of the troops under his command, to inspect, punish and govern; this is called 行部]

Mirroring Mạc Thiên Tứ's poem, Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poem opens with a depiction of the radiant scene at the calm cove. The radiant mists in Mạc Thiên Tứ's poem are replaced by "glassy handles," which are the watery inlets on the marshlands at the bay. The inlets reflect the glitter of light so that they appear as a grand display of luminescence on the ground. Mạc Thiên Tứ's contentment upon gazing at the clear waters of South Bay is reproduced in Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poem, where there "is little trouble under heaven" because of the *ji* and *bi* stars' guardianship over the bay. Effortlessly, Nguyễn Cư Trinh replaced Mạc Thiên Tứ's fish-dragons with other similarly large and imposing sea-creatures, the *Jing* and *Ni* whales, which moreover are powerless and "lose their strength." Nguyễn Cư Trinh addressed Mạc Thiên Tứ's reflections on boats moving on the waters of South Bay with a simple statement that the "sojourner on the fortress wall," a reference to Mạc Thiên Tứ from a previous poem (poem 4), has "thoughts of floating on a raft." In this poem, Nguyễn Cư Trinh inscribed himself directly onto the landscape of Hà Tiên for the first and only time, through a reference to a person on "inspection tours"; he comments on how the realm is so safe and without ill affairs that he has no questions about sounds of daggers. Tellingly, Nguyễn Cư Trinh's self-reference was made in terms of his political assignment, and therefore his political position as Mạc Thiên Tứ's superior in the context of the expanding Đàng Trong kingdom. In Mạc Thiên Tứ's final couplet, he attributed his sense of contentment to his knowledge that other Ming loyalists exist. Having exchanged the fish-dragons for *jing* and *ni* whales, which are devoid of the political significance of fish-dragons, Nguyễn Cư Trinh is free to invert the source of Mạc Thiên Tứ's contentment into an ease arising from solitude. In Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poem, Mạc Thiên Tứ is ensconced in the natural environment of Hà Tiên, contentedly "ageing together with wild seagulls," with whom he shares "the bare earth to the end." With the final line of his poem, he inscribed his desire for Mạc Thiên

Từ to age into a sage who would finally find himself free to “smile and point” at Chang An, the metaphoric Chinese capital, which has hitherto held him bound to this earth.

The final poem in the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* is a poem musing about the experience of a man fishing alone on a creek at night. As the last poem of the ten-poem series, it was Mạc Thiên Tứ’s final opportunity to inscribe the fish-dragons onto Hà Tiên’s landscape and thereby communicate with his fellow Ming loyalists. Poem ten, “Mooring to Fish at Sea-Perch Creek,” shows Mạc Thiên Tứ alone, gazing at the horizon, wishing he could be nearer to the Ming loyalists who lived far away, along the coastline of the South China Sea.

Mooring to Fish at Sea-Perch Creek

At a distance, vast waves suspend the dusky glow;
At Sea-Perch Creek, from within the mist, emerges a fishing lamp.
Rippling waves, a receding light, a small moored skiff;
Moon descends, floating baskets and nets, bobbing up and down.
Draped merely in a rain cape, the frosty air breaks through;
A few sounds of the bamboo oar, the water’s glitter frozen still.
Adrift, alone—I laugh—at the open sea beyond;
I wish to be near to fish-dragons but still cannot.

鱸溪漁泊
遠遠滄浪啣夕照
鱸溪烟裡出漁燈
橫波掩掩³⁸泊船艇
落月參差浮罩罽
一領蓑衣霜氣迫
幾聲竹棹水光凝
飄零自笑汪洋外
欲附魚龍却未能

(Mạc Thiên Tứ, Poem 10)

In this, the last poem of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s ten-poem suite, its greatest significance lies in its final couplet. In his previous poems, Mạc Thiên Tứ had inscribed absent fish-dragons onto Hà Tiên’s landscape through etching them deep beneath the waters of Hà Tiên, in this poem, Mạc Thiên Tứ engraved instead their absence from Hà Tiên. Through his poetic gaze at the “open sea beyond,” Mạc Thiên Tứ etched fish-dragons faintly in the distance from Hà Tiên. Their absence is present

³⁸ As noted in the previous chapter, this character is missing in the EFEO microfilm version. In Lê Quý Đôn’s *Phi Biên Tạp Lục*, it appears as 掩映. 映/曠 means “the sun beginning to set” (*Matthew’s Chinese-English Dictionary*, entry no. 7488). Đông Hồ records it as 掩映, which means “to screen from the glare” (*Matthew’s*, entry no. 7380(12)). Both 掩掩 (“receding light”) and 掩曠 work better than Đông Hồ’s choice.

in the landscape of Sea-Perch Creek because the poet's gaze draws the reader into the realm beyond Hà Tiên, where the fish-dragons reside. With his inscription of the fish-dragons' absence into his final poem of Hà Tiên, Mạc Thiên Tứ conveyed to his fellow Ming loyalists his desire to be nearer to them. Even though he has tried to make them present by inscribing them into Hà Tiên's landscape, his final poem shows that he still feels keenly their absence. In his response, Nguyễn Cư Trinh again repeated his strategy of replacing the significant fish-dragons with other forms of dragons:

Mooring to Fish at Sea-Perch Creek

A fisherman and, laterally sinking, the moon, degree by degree;
 Escaping from amongst the dense reeds, a few small spots of light.
 Fathers and elders have time for leisure in temples of Han style;
 Wives and children are accustomed to guests of excellent fame.
 Punting along the edge of River Han, with two wooden oars;
 Gathering and collecting of heaven and earth, with a casting net.
 The *jiao* dragon hears the moon in its path, the night is yet long;
 Sleep accompanies the pre-determined movements, a test of
 great endurance.

鱸溪漁泊
 漁家營³⁹隊月層層
 漏出蘆葦幾點燈
 父老空閒⁴⁰廟⁴¹號漢
 妻兒偏慣客名陵
 撐扶江漢雙枝棹
 收拾乾坤一把罾
 聞道白蛟今又長
 睡來行擬試餘能

(Nguyễn Cư Trinh, Poem 10)

Nguyễn Cư Trinh sets the solitary fisherman on Sea-Perch Creek against a spectacular backdrop of the moon slowly falling, laterally across the expanse of the night sky. A few small spots of light from the fisherman's lamp escape through the dense reeds by the side of the creek. Nguyễn Cư Trinh reveals his envy of the cultivated nature of Mạc Thiên Tứ's domain, where men and elders have time for leisure and are able to attend Han-style temples and women and children are accustomed to having guests from afar who are of excellent fame. The solitary fisherman punts

³⁹ 辭源(*Ci Yuan*): 2139.1, explanation no. 6: 由東到西的方向, 橫綫和橫路. Horizontal direction.

⁴⁰ The character is originally recorded as 聞, I modified it to 閒.

⁴¹ This is the third time in which I modify 朝 to 廟.

along Sea-Perch Creek, as though on the River Han, collecting with his net the products freely given of Heaven and Earth. Replacing the fish-dragons in Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poem is the solitary *jiao* dragon, who hears the moon in its path. Drowsiness accompanies the moon as it takes its measured steps, and the fisherman's endurance is put to the test as he sits on the creek waiting for fish.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poem beautifully captured the miniscule moments of the passing night with his inspired description of the moon in its path. Unlike the dragons and whales in Nguyễn Cư Trinh's other poems, the *jiao* dragon acquires significance in this poem because of its location in the poem's final couplet. In the case of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's response poems, last couplets capture his "you-comments" directed towards Mạc Thiên Tứ. The *jiao* dragon thus stands in for Mạc Thiên Tứ, who sits listening to the sound of the moon as it makes its way slowly on its pre-determined path. The *jiao* dragon (Mạc Thiên Tứ) knows that there will not be any unexpected activity, and his endurance is put to the test as he patiently awaits the end of the long night. As a final response to Mạc Thiên Tứ, and a final inscription onto Hà Tiên's landscape, Nguyễn Cư Trinh invoked the pre-determined movements of the moon to inscribe the inevitability of historical and political events onto Hà Tiên, which unfortunately went against the interests of the Ming loyalists. At the same time, it brought to a close his message for Mạc Thiên Tứ, that historical events, like the path of the moon, were pre-destined and would follow their course. It follows that it would be better for Mạc Thiên Tứ to take his gaze away from the Ming loyalists scattered in the open sea beyond Hà Tiên, and to reorient instead his political focus to his stewardship of Hà Tiên, where his accomplishments have created a secure, tranquil, and beautifully cultured environment in the midst of the wilderness of the Đàng Trong frontier.

Conclusion

Nguyễn Cư Trinh's responses to Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten poems of Hà Tiên's scenic sites gave him an opportunity to re-inscribe Hà Tiên's landscape from the perspective of a Vietnamese literati-official sent to administer its frontiers. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's political position resulted in the antipathy he felt towards Mạc Thiên Tứ's Ming loyalist ambitions for Hà Tiên. As such, Nguyễn Cư Trinh repeatedly replaced the politically significant fish-dragons of Mạc Thiên Tứ's poems either with other dragons, such as the *jiao* or *chi* dragons, or for large sea-creatures like *Jing* and *Ni* whales, all of which held little meaning in the context of Mạc Thiên Tứ's and Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poems. Nguyễn Cư Trinh also diminished the force of important myths in Mạc Thiên Tứ's poetry by creating new patterns for Hà Tiên's natural phenomena, which had the effect of de-politicizing Mạc Thiên Tứ's inaugural inscriptions of Hà Tiên's ten scenic sites. His distaste for the ways in which Mạc Thiên Tứ positioned Hà Tiên politically, however, did not extend to the works of cultural transformation that Mạc Thiên Tứ had enacted, both on the physical terrain of Hà Tiên and in his discursive enhancement of Hà Tiên's patterns, about which he was whole-heartedly enthused. The detail and color he added to some themes originally created by Mạc Thiên Tứ become meaningful elaborations through which the reader is able to understand both Nguyễn Cư Trinh's political vision for Hà Tiên and his assessment of Mạc Thiên Tứ's position as a Chinese governor on the Vietnamese southern frontier. Even as Nguyễn Cư Trinh wrote in praise of many aspects of Mạc Thiên Tứ's governorship of Hà Tiên, those very lines often reflected the elevated position of the author, thereby revealing the way in which Nguyễn Cư Trinh positioned himself as Mạc Thiên Tứ's superior on a Vietnamese frontier region.

Mạc Thiên Tứ's political ambitions for Hà Tiên, articulated beautifully through the patterns that he recognized in Hà Tiên's scenic sites, was very different from Nguyễn Cư Trinh's vision. The two men on the Mekong delta represented two different political realms, and their poems reflect the difference. Written twenty to thirty years after the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project was completed, Nguyễn Cư Trinh's responses to Mạc Thiên Tứ constitute a re-inscription of Hà Tiên's landscape at a time when Hà Tiên was drawn increasingly deeper into the Vietnamese political realm. Perhaps because Nguyễn Cư Trinh was the more important political actor on the southern Vietnamese frontier, Lê Quý Đôn recorded in the 1770s all Nguyễn Cư Trinh's ten poems in their totality, whereas he only copied two of Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten poems about Hà Tiên. Coincidentally, the woodblocks from Mạc Thiên Tứ's *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project have not survived, and only a hand-copied version of poor quality exists as a testament to Mạc Thiên Tứ's eighteenth-century civilizing mission. On the other hand, woodblocks of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's poems, as they were captured in Lê Quý Đôn's *Frontier Chronicles*, survive in excellent condition. History has ensured that Nguyễn Cư Trinh's re-inscriptions of Hà Tiên remain etched more deeply than Mạc Thiên Tứ's original inscriptions, mirroring the political fates that have since come to pass on that frontier landscape.

Conclusion

Deaths of Authors, Lives of Texts

Nguyễn Cư Trinh died in 1767, two years after he left the southern Vietnamese frontier to return to the capital. The Nguyễn lord under whom he had served for most of his life in officialdom, Nguyễn Phúc Khoát,¹ died in 1765. Upon Nguyễn Phúc Khoát's death, Trương Phúc Loan, a rogue viceroy infamous for the role he played in causing the Tây Sơn uprising in the 1770s, schemed for Nguyễn Phúc Khoát's sixteenth son, a twelve-year-old boy, to ascend the throne.² Trương Phúc Loan was well connected and came from one of the most powerful families in Đàng Trong at that time. With the young boy on the throne, Trương Phúc Loan made himself Regent and attempted to reign over Đàng Trong. The chronicles record that he was afraid that the powerful Nguyễn Cư Trinh would interfere with his consolidation of power from his position on the frontier, and so persuaded the young Nguyễn lord to call him back to the capital where he could keep an eye on him.³ Nguyễn Cư Trinh did not give Trương Phúc Loan an easy time while he was in the capital. Having consolidated much power for himself, Trương Phúc Loan often felt free to summon the officials of Đàng Trong to his personal home to deliberate affairs of the court. Nguyễn Cư Trinh's biography notes his stern disapproval of this state of affairs and records him as saying: "Deliberating affairs in the common area of the royal court has

¹ Born in 1714, he was the eighth Nguyễn lord of Đàng Trong. He reigned from 1739 to the year he died, 1765.

² For more information about Trương Phúc Loan, see Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998) and George Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).

³ Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn [Nguyễn Dynasty Historical Institute], *Đại Nam Thực Lục* [Veritable Records of the Great South], ed. Đào Duy Anh, trans. Nguyễn Ngọc Tinh, vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục Publishing House, 2002), entry for year 1765, pp. 170-71.

been established and fixed for a long time already. Why does Phúc Loan dare to defy the ritual like this! Being on the point of despotism? There is chaos in the whole realm, and surely it is [because of] this person?” As a result of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s words, the officials did not dare to report to Trương Phúc Loan’s home. Although furious, Trương Phúc Loan was fearfully respectful of Nguyễn Cư Trinh and did not dare to cause trouble.⁴ Nguyễn Cư Trinh died in the fifth month of 1767, during the summer, within two years of returning to the capital. The reasons for his death are not recorded, and he was fifty-one years old.

Đàng Trong in the mid-eighteenth century was undergoing rapid decline. Moreover, a prophecy had spread throughout the lands that the house of the Nguyễn would return to the capital in its eighth generation. In response to this prophecy, Nguyễn Phúc Khoát declared himself emperor and the house of the Nguyễn a dynasty in 1744, thereby rhetorically causing the prophecy to come to pass. In reality, however, the economic and social situation continued to spiral downwards. According to Li Tana, the Nguyễn had become “a victim of its own success.”⁵ They had successfully maneuvered for control over the lands of Gia Định and Biên Hòa in 1679, when they settled a large influx of Chinese Ming loyalists with allegiances to the Nguyễn court on those lands that had hitherto belonged to Cambodia. In 1708, the leader of Hà Tiên, Mạc Cửu, chose Nguyễn suzerainty over the tepid and ineffective protection of his Khmer overlords. With the fall of these two key territories in the Mekong delta to the Nguyễn, the rest of the delta

⁴ Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn [Nguyễn Dynasty Historical Institute], *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện Tiền Biên* [Biographies of the Great South, Premier Section], ed. Hoa Bằng, trans. Đỗ Mộng Khương (Huế: Thuận Hoá Publishing House, 1993), p. 143.

⁵ Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, p. 140.

swiftly followed suit.⁶ Along with the delta came the prize of rice, which began to be cultivated in excess of subsistence production on its fertile lands. From the 1720s, the Nguyễn started to systematically export rice from the delta to feed their populations in other parts of Đàng Trong. The Nguyễn administrative system, however, failed to keep up with their political successes. The heavy labor demands for the transportation of these vast amounts of rice fell upon the shoulders of the segment of the population that the Nguyễn could control; these were the people of the south-central region—the Quy Nhơn-Bình Thuận region.⁷ Additionally, the Nguyễn increased taxes on the people to make up for the deficits they faced from the declining overseas trade. The situation spiraled out of control when Trương Phúc Loan seized power in the 1765. Taxation and labor demands increased steadily, and in the early years of the 1770s, the Tây Sơn uprising broke out in Quy Nhơn. Three brothers—Nhạc, Huệ, and Lữ—seized control of the region of Quy Nhơn and started a thirty-year war that overturned the balance of power between the Trịnh and Nguyễn families that had been in place in Vietnam for more than two hundred years. The young Nguyễn lord and an uncle organized Nguyễn troops to resist the Tây Sơn forces but in 1777 both lords were killed by the Tây Sơn, along with most of the Nguyễn family members. One who survived was Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, who fled southwards and sought refuge in the wilderness of the Mekong delta. After several unsuccessful battles and a period of exile in Siam, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh finally gained control, not only of the territories in Đàng Trong but also in Đàng Ngoài. It

⁶ Hãn Nguyên, “Hà Tiên, chìa khóa nam tiến của dân tộc Việt Nam xuống đồng bằng sông Cửu Long” [Hà Tiên, the key to the southern advance of Vietnam into the Mekong delta], *Sử Địa* 19-20 (July-December 1970), pp. 259-283. Hãn Nguyên believed that Hà Tiên formed the other half of the “pincer” that captured the Mekong delta for the Nguyễn.

⁷ Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, pp.141-148.

was only in 1802 that Nguyễn Phúc Ánh declared himself the Emperor Gia Long of the Nguyễn dynasty.⁸

With his death in 1767, Nguyễn Cư Trinh was, perhaps, the lucky one. He avoided the turmoil of the 1770s while Mạc Thiên Tứ was left to face the chaos that ensued with the Tây Sơn rebellion. Hà Tiên was pillaged and destroyed by Siamese troops in 1771, and Mạc Thiên Tứ's sons and daughters were captured and taken to Siam in 1772. They were returned to him in 1773. Lê Quý Đôn remarked at the time of writing his *Frontier Chronicles* that Mạc Thiên Tứ's whereabouts were unknown.⁹ Mạc Thiên Tứ had in fact taken refuge in Trấn Giang in the Mekong delta, and according to his biography sought out opportunities to help the Nguyễn lords whenever he could. In 1777 he joined his forces with the imperial forces in Cần Thơ, successfully repelling the Tây Sơn forces for a while. Later that year, while awaiting a ship that was to bring a Nguyễn petition for help to the Qing government in China, he received news that the Nguyễn lord had been captured. He is said to have wept and cried out to the heavens, saying: "From now onwards, my eyes will never see my lord again!" He fled to Phú Quốc, whereupon the king of Siam, Phya Tak Sin, sent a boat to meet him. Mạc Thiên Tứ spent the next few years in Bangkok, but a false accusation against him arrived in the Siamese capital in 1780. He is reported to have committed suicide in 1780, thus bringing to an end the luminous literary life lived on the southern Vietnamese frontier.¹⁰

⁸ For more information about the nature of Nguyễn Phúc Ánh's regime that was based in Gia Định, see Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng (1820-1841): Central Policies and Local Response* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2004), pp. 24-30.

⁹ Lê Quý Đôn. *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* [Frontier Chronicles], trans. Nguyễn Khắc Thuần (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục Publishing House, 2008), p. 126.

¹⁰ *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*, p. 181.

Mạc Thiên Tứ's and Nguyễn Cư Trinh's literary works, however, survived. In their lifetimes, the intertwining political worlds of the two authors brought their literary creations into each other's realms. Nguyễn Cư Trinh contributed to Mạc Thiên Tứ's *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* project, thereby participating in increasing the "airs and odes" of Hà Tiên. Even though he disagreed with Mạc Thiên Tứ's political orientations for Hà Tiên, he was content to contribute towards Mạc Thiên Tứ's civilizing project, which was directed towards adding to the number of literary works dedicated to Hà Tiên's beauty. While in Mạc Thiên Tứ's company, Nguyễn Cư Trinh would undoubtedly have shared his greatest work, the *Sãi Vãi*, with his closest literary companion on the frontier. Their actions in their lifetimes introduced their literary works into each other's political worlds, and with the deaths of the two men, the works were freed to continue lives outside of the authors' influence.

The *Sãi Vãi* is recorded in the *Đại Nam Thực Lục* and the *Đại Nam Liệt Truyện* as one of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's most masterful literary works. It was composed in 1750 as part of his strategy of pacifying the frontier, and Nguyễn dynasty chroniclers saw it fit to commit the *Sãi Vãi* to history as evidence of Nguyễn Cư Trinh's literary and military genius. The work, however, attained a life of its own after its author's death. The copy of the *Sãi Vãi* that I found in the Bibliothèque des Langues Orientales in Paris is a beautifully preserved woodblock print publication, dating to 1874. Interestingly, nowhere on this text does it bear Nguyễn Cư Trinh's name.¹¹ Lê Ngọc Trụ and Phạm Văn Luật, the two scholars who in 1951 undertook the job of

¹¹ This text, which I used as the basis of my translation, was probably also used by Chéon in his 1886 translation of the *Sãi Vãi* into French. See "Bonze et Bonzesse: Dialogue Annamite," trans. A. Chéon, *Excursions et Reconnaissances* XI, no. 25 (Saigon: Imprimerie Coloniale, 1886), pp. 45-98. Chéon's translation of the *Sãi Vãi* does not indicate that he had any knowledge of who the author was.

synthesizing all available *quốc ngữ* transliterations of the *Sãi Vãi* into one master transliteration, observed that half of the six transliterations into the romanized Vietnamese script did not state Nguyễn Cư Trinh's name. They believed that the transliterators of those texts were in fact unaware of its original authorship.¹²

The cover information of the 1874 woodblock print version notes instead that it was edited in Gia Định by someone called Duy Minh Thị (*Pinyin*: Weiming Shi, 惟明氏), a man from the “Uniquely Ming Clan,” clearly a Ming loyalist label. Moreover, the woodblock was carved in the Golden Jade House (Vietnamese: Kim Ngọc Lôu, *Pinyin*: Jinyu Lou, 金玉樓), located in Guangdong province in southern China. More than a century after it was first composed, the *Sãi Vãi* was adopted as a Ming loyalist text and sent to southern China to be engraved and printed for mass publication. An especially curious fact is that the Ming loyalist publication of the *Sãi Vãi* was not done in translation into Chinese characters. Rather, the text was retained in its original vernacular Vietnamese demotic script, *chữ Nôm*. Nineteenth-century Ming loyalists could possibly have adopted the *Sãi Vãi* because it was a story about setting the civilized apart from the barbarians, which conformed to Ming loyalist ideas of casting the Manchu Qing rulers of China as barbarians. The fact that it was retained in its original *chữ Nôm* script, however, directs our attention inwards towards the domestic politics of the various Chinese diaporic communities who lived in Vietnam. In the nineteenth century, the Chinese in Vietnam could be divided into two categories: *Minh hương* (*Pinyin*: *Mingxiang*, 明香) and *Thanh nhân* (*Pinyin*: *Qingren*, 青人). The *Thanh nhân* were the Chinese who moved to Vietnam in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, arriving after the seventeenth-century waves of Ming

¹² See Lê Ngọc Trụ and Phạm Văn Luật, *Nguyễn Cư Trinh với quyển Sãi Vãi* (Paris: Institute de L'Asie Du Sud-Est, 1984), p. 58

loyalists, or *Minh hương*, had already settled in Vietnam. Ironically, the *Minh hương*, who escaped the rule of the barbarian Manchu dynasty in Qing China to retain their purity as Han Chinese, joined the foreign Vietnamese society in speech and dress and some featured prominently in the Vietnamese governing hierarchy.¹³ The *Thanh nhân*, on the other hand, wore Manchu-styled costumes and had the fronts of their heads shaved and the rest of their hair tied in pigtailed. Unlike the *Minh hương*, they did not assimilate into Vietnamese society and hardly learnt any Vietnamese.¹⁴ I believe that the Ming loyalist adoption of the *Sãi Vãi* retained the text in its original *chữ Nôm* script because the script could most starkly reflect the difference between the *Minh hương* and *Thanh nhân* communities within Vietnam, where the *Minh hương* would have no problem reading the text, unlike the newly arrived and foreign *Thanh nhân*. The Ming loyalists of nineteenth-century Vietnam concerned themselves with more than the Manchu takeover of China; they were also sensitive to setting themselves apart from what they probably considered were the less pure Chinese immigrants of immediately observable Manchu influence.

Many years later, Mạc Thiên Tứ's poems also resurfaced in a modified form in Vietnam. In 1926, Vietnamese literary scholar Đông Hồ (actual name Lâm Trắc Chi) published in the journal *Nam Phong* versions of Mạc Thiên Tứ's ten poems about Hà Tiên written in *chữ Nôm* and composed in the 7/7/6/8 rhyme structure.¹⁵ Trịnh Hoài Đức, the nineteenth-century compiler of the Gia Định gazetteer who found and reprinted Mạc Thiên Tứ's *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*, made no mention of any accompanying poems composed in vernacular Vietnamese; neither did Lê

¹³ Noteworthy members of the *Minh hương* community include Trịnh Hoài Đức, author of the gazetteer of Gia Định. See Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng*, pp. 38-41.

¹⁴ Choi, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng*, p. 41.

¹⁵ The poems were published in *Nam Phong* 107 (July 1926), pp. 31-47.

Quý Đôn, the eighteenth-century observer who recorded all of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s poems on Hà Tiên as well as several of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s, make any record of poems about Hà Tiên composed in *chữ Nôm*. Đông Hồ himself published only the romanized *quốc ngữ* version of the vernacular Vietnamese poems that he found; the poems have never been printed in the demotic script. Some scholars in Vietnam have questioned the veracity of these poems, while others have vouched for their authenticity.¹⁶ Liam Kelly has studied both Chinese and vernacular Vietnamese versions of the first of Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poems “Golden Islet Blocking Waves” together; the conclusions that he draws from that analysis demonstrates that studying the Chinese version of the poem beside the Vietnamese version renders Mạc Thiên Tứ’s Chinese poem far more Vietnam-centered than my analysis of it has shown.¹⁷ Instead of participating in a discussion of whether the poems are authentic or apocryphal, I believe it is worthwhile to consider them as “Mạc Thiên Tứ-style” poetry. Mạc Thiên Tứ has come to be so closely associated with the literature of Hà Tiên, in particular poems about its scenic sites, that any literary project based on the same ten scenic sites invariably bears his name. In the twentieth century, these ten “Mạc Thiên Tứ-style” *chữ Nôm* poems about Hà Tiên served to draw Mạc Thiên Tứ and Hà Tiên into the larger Vietnamese political and literary realm, instead of the overseas Chinese political world. As landscape poems, they contribute towards the “airs and odes” of Vietnam, rather than of Hà Tiên. As with the case of the Ming loyalists’ adoption of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s *Sãi Vãi*, the Mạc Thiên Tứ-style *chữ Nôm* poems have come to be oriented towards the politics of a different group of people.

¹⁶ On the occasion of the 300th year commemoration of Hà Tiên’s incorporation into the southern region of Vietnam, Vietnamese scholar Trương Minh Đạt published an essay listing the times on which suspicions over the authenticity of the vernacular Vietnamese poems have been raised as well as his refutation of those claims. See Trương Minh Đạt, *Nghiên Cứu Hà Tiên* (Ho Chi Minh City: Trẻ Publishing House, 2008), pp. 113-130.

¹⁷ Liam Kelly, “Thoughts on a Chinese Diaspora: The Case of the Mạc of Hà Tiên,” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14, no. 1 (2000), pp. 71-98.

A vernacular Vietnamese drama published on woodblocks by Ming loyalists, and a set of *chữ Nôm* landscape poems attributed to Mạc Thiên Tứ, have come to represent different political and cultural situations. Although the *chữ Nôm* landscape poems took Hà Tiên as their subject, they were no longer an attempt to inscribe cultural and political patterns onto a frontier landscape. Instead, they served to inscribe a larger Vietnamese national landscape, of which Hà Tiên was a part that represented the whole. Through the *chữ Nôm* poems, Mạc Thiên Tứ and Hà Tiên were rendered more Vietnamese in character than they were in actuality. The *Sãi Vãi* in the late nineteenth century, on the other hand, no longer bore Nguyễn Cư Trinh's name and had come to be a part of the Ming loyalist heritage, reflecting the domestic politics between the *Minh hương* and the later Chinese migrants heavily influenced by the Qing dynasty. The two texts, conceived of by their authors as civilizing projects for particular frontier regions, were released from the confines of their native-places and birthed with new life upon their authors' deaths to become others' projects.

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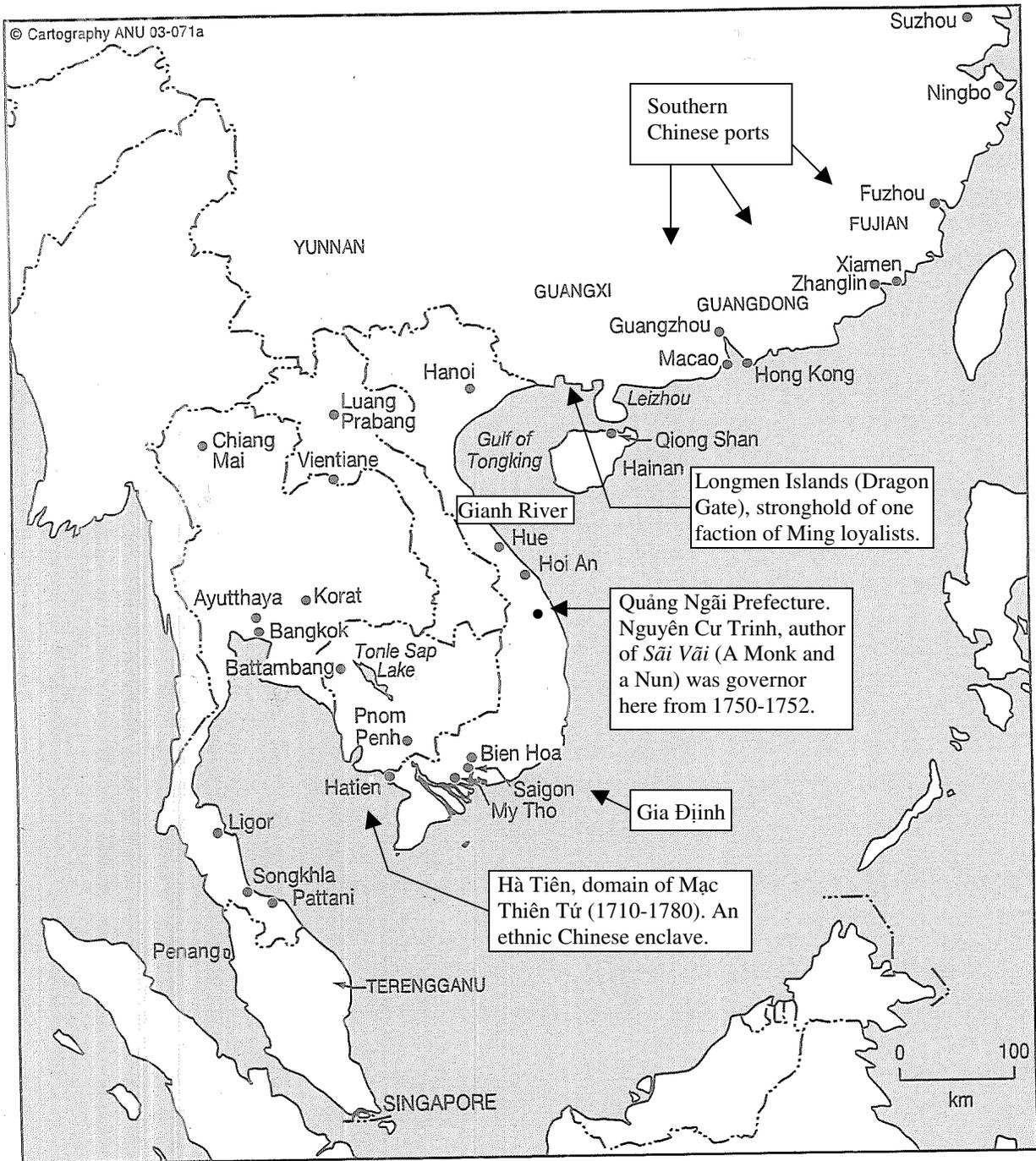
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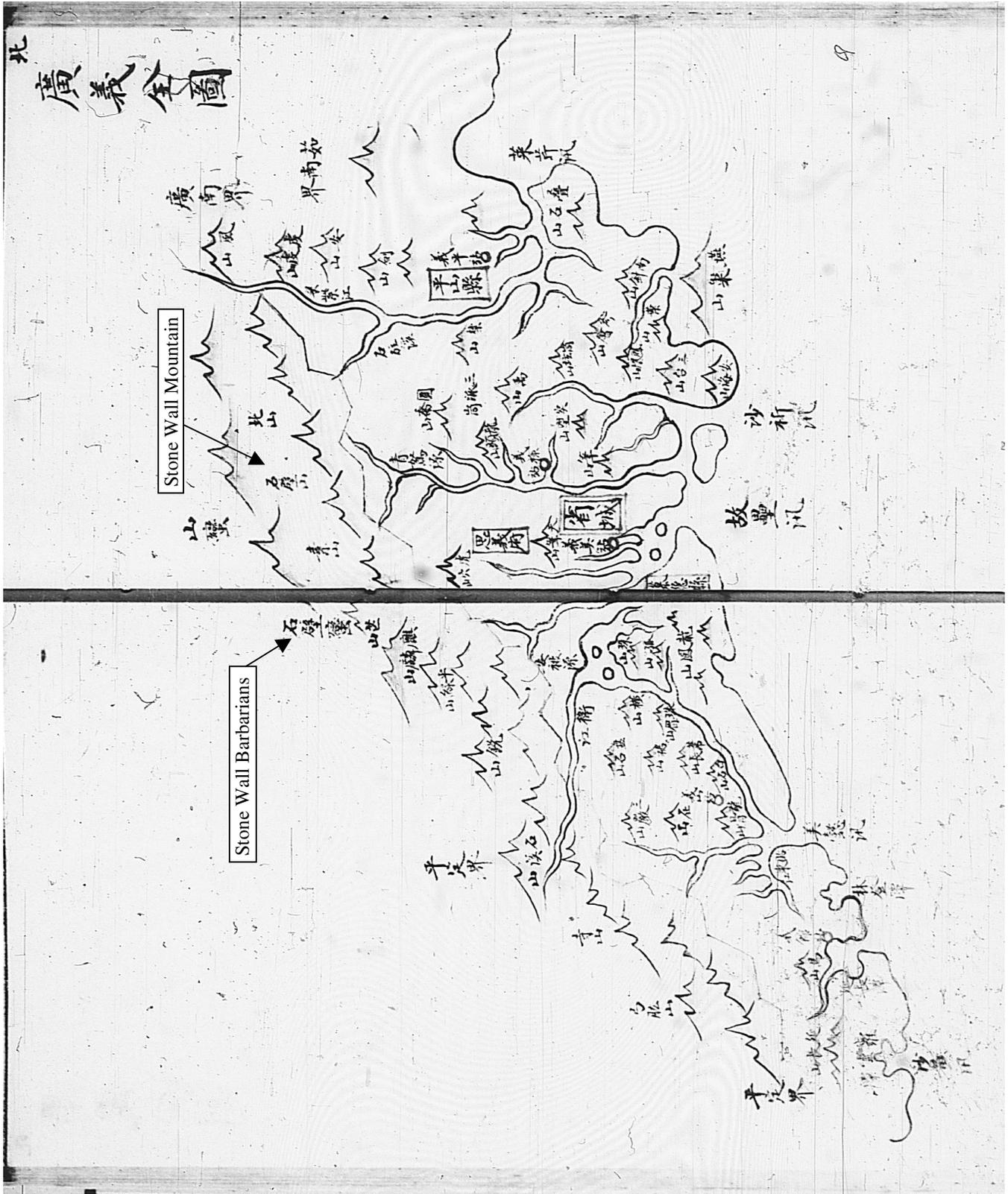
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Figure 1: Map of the South China Sea



Adapted from *Bản Quốc Dư Đồ* [本國輿圖], ca 1800.

Figure 2: Map of Quảng Ngãi Province.