

POETRY AND PROPHECY OF RECLUSION:
THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF VIETNAMESE SCHOLAR
NGUYỄN VĂN ĐẠT (A.K.A., NGUYỄN BÌNH KHIÊM, 1491–1586)

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Nguyễn Văn Đạt (a.k.a., Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, 1491–1586) was a sixteenth century poet, scholar-official, and teacher in northern Vietnam. Starting in 1535, he served as a Mạc Dynasty (1527–1677) official until 1542, when he retired to his native village on the northern Vietnamese coast. He adopted the life of a recluse and produced volumes of poetry about his experiences in politics, war, and reclusion. As valued as he was in life, his reputation only grew after his passing. Later generations remembered him as a sagacious, prophetic figure whose advice to Vietnamese leaders dictated the course of history.

This dissertation explains this transformation as the result of successive replications of Nguyễn Văn Đạt's particular style of reclusion poetry through social literary interactions centered around the places he wrote about in life, namely White Cloud Hermitage and Centered Mooring Shelter. Đạt styled the former in the memory of the renown worthy Nguyễn Trãi (1380–1442), whose dwelling in retirement, White Cloud Hermitage, Đạt assumed as the name of his own retirement studio and sobriquet. With this gesture of association, Đạt cast himself as a recluse of historical proportion even as he abandoned the arena of political contestation.

Although he linked himself to Nguyễn Trãi's memory, Nguyễn Văn Đát forged his own literary persona around the two structures he built upon retirement. Đát made his hermitage and shelter sites of literary exchange and, through such social interactions, Đát and his contemporaries created a style a poetry apropos visitation to his hermitage and shelter. This poetic style incorporated the language of divination from the *Book of Changes* and spoke in the voice of an aloof observer of the world's affairs from the perspective of a conceptual space "outside it all," which was embodied by Đát's hermitage and, especially, Centered Mooring Shelter. Once planted in these tangible sites, Đát's literary persona could outlast the person, and his literary habit eventually grew into a poetic tradition that later poets perpetuated whenever they visited the places Đát inhabited in life. In time, their collective musings fostered Đát's remembrance as a prophet of the ages.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Hoai Khai Tran is a student of Sino-Vietnamese Studies with a particular interest in the literature and religion of Vietnam. As an undergraduate student at George Washington University, he started studying Literary Sinitic (Hán) and the Vietnamese Demotic Sinographic Script (Nôm) with Dr. Phạm Văn Hải of the Institute of Viet Studies in 2002. After graduating from George Washington with a major in Chinese Literature and Language and minor in Japanese Literature and Language, he participated in NGO work in the D.C. area before matriculating at Cornell University, where he earned his master's degree in East Asian Studies with a thesis on Vietnamese Buddhist poetry from the Lý Trần period (1009–1400). He spent almost a decade living in Hanoi, Vietnam, where he worked as a journalist, editor, and translator for Thế Giới Publishers and Vietnam Heritage Magazine. From 2014–2015, he served as the chief curator of the Vietnamese Nôm Preservation Foundation's digital collection of Sino-Vietnamese texts at the National Library of Vietnam. In 2017, he returned to Cornell University to complete his dissertation on the life and writings of the Vietnamese scholar Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (1491–1586) under the guidance of Dr. Keith W. Taylor and graduated with his doctorate degree in May 2021.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1491, Nguyễn Văn Đạt, who is better known by his professional sobriquet Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, was born in Trung Am (now Lý Học), a small village in northern Vietnam along the right bank of the lower Thái Bình River near the Eastern Sea. As an infant, Đạt took the ferry with his mother to the opposite side of the river to live with his maternal family. Whereas his father never achieved much distinction as a scholar, Đạt's mother hailed from the prestigious Nhữ clan and her father was an advanced scholar in the service of the Lê Dynasty at the Thăng Long capital (Hanoi). Within the Nhữ household at his mother's native village, Đạt undertook a traditional education with a particular interest in the *Book of Changes*. In 1503, when Đạt was twelve years old, his grandfather retired from his career at the capital, returned home, and became Đạt's mentor. As Đạt continued his studies under the guidance of his grandfather, he was impressed by the contrast between the career trajectories of his rustic, uncelebrated father and his distinguished grandfather. Equipped with his study of the *Changes*, Đạt could begin to contemplate the conditions, chance, and timing as well as personal choices that factored into such disparate outcomes.

When Nguyễn Văn Đạt came of age, he became a student of Lương Ngạn Ích (a.k.a. Lương Đắc Bằng), second graduate of the 1499 palace examinations. Đạt traveled with his new teacher to the capital, where Ích served as an imperial lecturer. Đạt came to Thăng Long at a turbulent time when the emperor, Lê Tuấn, engaged in increasingly depraved behavior. During this uncertain period, Ích participated in an effort to depose Lê Tuấn, which succeeded. Ích's actions at this juncture would leave a strong impression on his disciple. Once a new emperor was installed, Ích served as a moralizing presence and,

in 1510, when his advice and remonstrations went unheeded, he withdrew from his post, retired to his village at Hói Estuary (Thanh Hoa), and opened a school. There, he taught *Thái Ất* studies for which Đát would become renown. Decades later, when faced with similar circumstances, Đát would take after his tutor's example and seek the life of a reclusive teacher.

In *circa* 1516, Nguyễn Văn Đát returned to Trung Am and became a local teacher much like his father had been. During the ensuing years, Đát weaved the language of the *Changes* and *Thái Ất* studies into his poetry and formed a particular style of expression that reflected his littoral homeland, including images of snow, cold, and whiteness inspired by the local river, which was formerly called “Cold River” and “Snow River.” In 1527, a new ruler, who had emerged from the eastern coast, founded the Mạc Dynasty. Seven years later, in 1534, Đát entered the civil service examinations under this dynasty and, a year later, graduated with highest honors. Đát served as a Mạc Dynasty official until 1542. In that year, recognizing the danger of an increasingly contentious situation at court and the futility of his protestations against its ill-minded actors, Đát left Thăng Long and returned to life as a teacher in the littoral east. Once back at his native village, Đát built a retirement studio that he called White Cloud Hermitage and a rest station along the river that he named Central Mooring Shelter.

Although Nguyễn Văn Đát had quit officialdom, Mạc Dynasty rulers continued to call for his service. This was especially true 1550–1551 and 1559–1561, when parties representing the former Lê Dynasty launched military campaigns that threatened to topple the Mạc regime. Đát dutifully complied and was instrumental to the Mạc's success in weathering these challenges. Afterwards, although the Mạc rewarded Đát and tried to compel his ongoing service, Đát summarily declined and returned to Trung Am. Back

home, Đat further cultivated his style of poetry by reimagining his themes of snow and cold to express his experiences leaving and coming back to life as a retired scholar. As part of this effort, he incorporated images that represented the nobility and wisdom of aging in his later years. Đat was indeed a man of exceptional longevity. In his nineties, he personally compiled at least a thousand poems from throughout his life into a collection that he bequeathed to posterity. He passed away at his home in the eleventh lunar month of Ất Dậu (Dec. 21, 1585–Jan. 19, 1586).

Thus we might summarize Nguyễn Văn Đat's life. However, through the generations much more has been said about him. According to one story that goes back at least to the early eighteenth century, three sixteenth century contenders for control over the lands of the Red River consulted Nguyễn Văn Đat about decisions that would determine the course of history. When the Mạc emperor learned that Đat was ill on his death bed, the emperor dispatched a messenger to pay respects to Đat and solicit his thoughts about the state of the dynasty. Đat mused, "If someday there is an emergency, then although Cao Bằng is small, it is a place where several generations might survive." Seven years after his death, the Mạc indeed faced a crisis that drove them out of the Red River Delta and forced them to seek refuge in the north at Cao Bằng along the Chinese border.

Previously, in 1556, when the exiled Lê emperor died, his military guardian Trịnh Kiểm, whose son would ultimately lead the assault that expelled the Mạc from Thăng Long and the Red River Delta, contemplated doing away with the royal line altogether and vying for supremacy over the lands of the Red River in his own name. However, he was unsure about taking such audacious action. Thus, Kiểm sent a family member to secretly ask Nguyễn Văn Đat's opinion. When Kiểm's kin pressed him, Đat only turned to a

household servant boy and said, “This season the crops did not mature because of a strain of seed that failed to produce issue. You should look for old stock to sow.” When Kiểm learned of the teacher’s words, he understood them to mean that Kiểm must find someone from the old imperial lineage to make emperor. That is, in fact, what Kiểm did.

Two years later, in 1558, Nguyễn Hoàng, whose sister had married Trịnh Kiểm, grew fearful of his brother-in-law. This was because Kiểm was believed responsible for the murder of Hoàng’s brother, and Hoàng was Kiểm’s only rival for control over the forces aligned with the Lê imperial line. Hoàng’s mother, who was also Kiểm’s mother-in-law, became concerned about her son’s safety. Since she hailed from Tứ Kỳ near Nguyễn Văn Đật’s village, she secretly sent a messenger to implore the teacher to think of a way for her son to escape. When the messenger begged for Đật’s help, Đật only sauntered out to a Fengshui rock formation in his garden and, observing a colony of ants crawling along the rocks, commented, “The transverse mountain range can afford refuge.” When Hoàng heard about this, he knew that he should request an assignment in the territories south of the Traverse Mountains (Hoàng Sơn), where he safely governed with virtual autonomy for over half a century.

What was it about Nguyễn Văn Đật that led people of later generations to regard him as a central organizing voice that dictated the course of history, specifically the division of the lands inhabited by Vietnamese speakers among three parties from the late sixteenth century until the second half of the seventeenth century: The Mạc clan in the north at Cao Bằng, Lê emperors under the guardianship of the Trịnh family at Thăng Long, and Nguyễn Hoàng’s lineage that asserted control of territories south of the Gianh River (Quảng Bình)? This dissertation explains that Đật’s transformation in Vietnamese imagination was made possible by Đật’s cultivation of a peculiar style of reclusion poetry

that reflected the culture, geography, and architecture of his homeland, made frequent use of the idiom of the *Changes*, and negotiated the pathways of the scholar's life and his age-old, perennial dilemma regarding the appropriate time to go off into officialdom (*xuất*) or remain unengaged (*xử*). By using language from the *Changes*, Đạm made his poetry a medium to contemplate the whims of time. His answer to the *xuất xử* question, his shuffling back and forth between official service and reclusion, was to inscribe his native landscape with notions of vigilant centeredness based on the *Trung Dong* (*Zhongyong*) or *Centering Constantly* and sequester his place in reclusion from the outside world by distinguishing his later years in reclusion from his former time as an official, positioning his studio apart from everything else, and creating an inward space that, in stillness, was cut off from external troubles.

The longevity of Đạm's literary persona as a centered and indifferent contemplator of time, change, and fate was made possible by its rootedness in physical structures and its replication through social interactions. When Đạm erected his retirement studio and dubbed himself "Abiding Scholar of White Cloud Hermitage," he conjured the remembrance of a former worthy, Nguyễn Trãi, who once adopted that name in reclusion at his ancestral home on Côn Mountain. Trãi was a founding hero of the Lê Dynasty, which preceded the Mạc. Despite Trãi's indispensable contributions to the early Lê, he was dragged away from reclusion on Côn Mountain and suffered an ignominious death because of his role in what came to be known as the Lychee Garden affair. By choosing a style name in retirement that was inspired by a man of Trãi's significance, Đạm elevated his status as a recluse and signaled the pivotal place in history that he sought to occupy himself. At the same time, Đạm's construction of Centered Mooring Shelter, which was inspired by the *Trung Dong*, conveyed a message of non-contention and shared goodness

as a “safe space” removed from outside troubles. At White Cloud Hermitage and Centered Mooring Shelter, Đạt exchanged numerous poems with his contemporaries that partook of Đạt’s signature themes, and visitors to the hermitage and shelter imitated Đạt’s poetic style. Because of this poetry’s social construction, the literary style associated with White Cloud Hermitage and Centered Mooring Shelter outlasted his lifetime. Đạt’s poetic voice endured as successive generations of poets engaged his memory whenever they chanced upon the sites that bore vestiges of his life. Through literary reflection on Đạt’s life, these poets found a kindred spirit through whose voice they could ventriloquized their present. These poems and attendant stories that people circulated about him and his legacy were the fodder that kindled Đạt’s image as a sage and prophet of the ages.

The work that follows examines the creation of Nguyễn Văn Đạt’s literary voice in five chapters. Since Đạt’s thoughts about reclusion and the *xuất xử* question were informed by his early engagement with unengaged scholars and prominent officials, Chapter One looks at Đạt’s upbringing and his encounters with scholars of various stations in life. The chapter explores the contrast between the career trajectories of Đạt’s humble father and the esteemed Nhữ family. In addition, the chapter considers political and moral constructions relating to reclusion and officialdom, especially the scholarly ethos of Emperor Lê Tư Thành (r.1460–1497), who was ruler during Đạt’s childhood, and the emperor’s interactions with recluses who refused to be part of the emperor’s sphere of influence. Đạt discovered several paths for the aspiring scholar, the humble teacher like his father, the successful official like his grandfather, and the recluse who renounced political activity.

Because the culture of reclusion during the reign of Emperor Lê Tư Thành and Nguyễn Văn Đạt’s early life was shaped by remembrances of Nguyễn Trãi, Chapter Two

considers why Trãi's legacy was so vital to conceptions of what it meant to be a scholar for Đat and his contemporaries. Trãi was critical because of his role in shaping how history was written and his place as a foundational character within it. When the Lê Dynasty was established in 1428, Trãi composed *The Great Proclamation of Pacifying Ngô*, which encapsulated the dynasty's core ideology and tentative arrangement between Vietnamese parties from the Mã River Basin and the Red River Delta. Late in his career, Trãi retired to his White Cloud Hermitage on Côn Mountain before his unlucky end following the Lychee Garden affair. His sudden and scandalous execution was readily perceived as a personal betrayal against a founding hero and a volatile disruption of the political arrangement that he represented. It was the searing energies of this drama that Đat tapped when he styled himself in Trãi's likeness as Abiding Scholar of White Cloud Hermitage.

Chapter Three proceeds with Nguyễn Văn Đat's early adult life (*ca.*1508–1534) and his career as a Mạc official (1535–1542). The chapter follows Đat's studies under the tutelage of Lương Ngạn Ích and considers how the latter's example impacted Đat's perspectives on the *xuất xử* dilemma, especially Ích's principled retirement, his role as a schoolteacher, and Ích' struggle to reconcile the Lê Dynasty's beckonings to service with his resolve not to further involve himself in an increasingly degenerate regime. The chapter also looks at Đat's training in *Thái Ất* studies, his poetry as a young adult, and his early attempts at prophecy. Đat's prophetic poetry accorded with the rise of the Mạc Dynasty, whose leaders hailed from Đat's native eastern coast. In 1535, Đat entered into the service of the Mạc. However, faced with political intrigue in which Đat was personally implicated, he quit the capital after a short career in 1542. Đat returned to his

home village, built his shelter and hermitage, and, evoking the ill-fated Nguyễn Trãi, styled himself the Abiding Scholar of White Cloud Hermitage.

Why did Nguyễn Văn Đát summon Nguyễn Trãi's memory and cast himself in Trãi's likeness? Chapter Four addresses this question by exploring the reclusion poetry associated with Côn Mountain, where Trãi retired to live behind a Buddhist Pagoda at a small dwelling, the original White Cloud Hermitage. Examination of Côn Mountain reclusion poetry by Trãi, his grandfather Trần Nguyên Đán, and Đán's contemporary Chu An shows that, by alluding to Côn Mountain poetry, Đát conveyed his misgivings about the Mạc Dynasty's fortunes. The latter two poets became recluses during the decline of a former dynasty, while Trãi was the protagonist of an episode that shook scholars' confidence in their way of life. Thus, Đát suggested that the Mạc Dynasty was precipitating toward failure and his sudden departure was an act of renunciation as pivotal as Trãi's withdrawal to Côn Mountain. If Lychee Garden was a rupture in history, then so, too, Đát determined, was his own retirement. The significance of this act, whether born out of principle, arrogance, disgust, or self-preservation, was immediately understood by the Mạc leadership, and they lavished Đát with praise, investitures, and material rewards.

The fifth and final chapter examines Nguyễn Văn Đát's poetry as a recluse after 1542. Đát's sudden elevation after retirement seemed to contradict his claim to renounce worldly ambitions. This was most evident after his involvement during the crises of 1550–1551 and 1559–1561, when he was pulled from retirement to participate in military missions to territories upriver from the Thăng Long capital. Đát could not actually retire until his seventies. The tug and pull that punctuated Đát's experience with the *xuất xử* question led him to craft a style of poetry characterized by aloof centeredness, embodied

by Centered Mooring Shelter, and placement “outside it all.” Through his poetry and literary exchanges with visiting writers, Đát pictured himself and his hermitage and shelter as apart from the troubles that he left behind in the political arena and the battlefield. At the same time, he drew a line between his later years as a recluse and his former days in officialdom. For Đát, his life as an aged scholar with nothing to do in a place cut off from external worries represented genuine existence, in which he centered himself vigilantly until his last day. Thereafter, poets over the following generations perpetuated the literary tradition that Đát represented while alive and found in Đát’s remembrance a unifying voice.

CHAPTER ONE

NGUYỄN VĂN ĐẠT'S EARLY LIFE

We begin our story of how Nguyễn Văn Đạt became poet, recluse, and prophet with his origins and upbringing by exploring his native place in the littoral east, his family, early mentors, and first encounters with the study of destiny and change, literature, and the concept of reclusion.

The Littoral East

In 1491, Nguyễn Văn Đạt 阮文達 (1491–1586) was born in a small village just south of the Hàn River (today's lower Thái River) in Đại Việt's littoral east approximately thirteen kilometers upstream from the river's mouth leading out to the eastern sea.¹ Facing downstream, to the left of this river, which was also called "Snow River" because *Hàn* meant "Cold," coursed Văn Úc River. Across these two rivers east-north-east about twenty-six kilometers from Đạt's village was Đồ Sơn (Miry Mountain), a small cluster of mountains about 261m high that emerged from the sea at Văn Úc Estuary. Its nine peaks

¹ Nguyễn Văn Đạt's home village is now Lý Học Village in Vĩnh Bảo District of Hải Phòng City. The Hàn (Cold) River (now Thái Bình River) leads out to Thái Bình Estuary (cửa Thái Bình). According the genealogical record by Vũ Khâm Lân in 1744 (A.44, Sino-Vietnamese Institute, Hanoi), Đạt's "taboo name," *húy* 諱, was Bình Khiêm 秉謙, by which he is better known. However, the title of the genealogical record suggests Văn Đạt was his birth name. Another eighteenth-century text, *Lão song thô lục* (A.822, Sino-Vietnamese Institute, Hanoi) says that Văn Đạt was his style name, *tự* 字. I take Văn Đạt as his given name, observing that both his father Văn Định and grandfather Văn Tĩnh had Văn as their middle names. Since many Vietnamese share the same surnames, traditionally they have attached middle names to their surnames to distinguish lineages, and this was probably the case for Nguyễn Văn Đạt as well. The genealogy compiled by the lineage of Đạt's youngest son at Lower Yên Tử also records Văn Đạt as his given name. Moreover, "Bình Khiêm," which means "stay humble," has the air of a sobriquet, one that would suit a renown recluse like Nguyễn Văn Đạt would become. He probably assumed this title when he pursued his studies in the capital *circa* 1506–1511 or later when he took the provincial civil service exams in 1534.

inspired locals to call it Nine Dragons Mountain and its largest peak Mother Mountain.²

At the foot of the mountain towards the sea, a harbor thrived on the trade of ceramics and other goods passing to and from Vân Đồn Island, then the preeminent center for seagoing trade along the Vietnamese coast after the ruination of a southern Cham port two decades earlier.³

As part of this coastal trade, the people of Nguyễn Văn Đát's village controlled Artemisia Estuary, where the Hàn River flowed out to sea.⁴ They grew areca and a variety of sweet orange. They produced exceptionally beautiful silk, which the people of Đát's village used to embroider bamboo chests for gifts and offerings. When they went out to sea, they passed through a village renown for a unique breed of fighting cocks called "ship-dock cocks."⁵ When they traveled west towards the capital, they encountered venomous rays in a certain river, whose fatal sting did not prevent locals from catching them to sell and eat.⁶

Walking distance southwest of Nguyễn Văn Đát's village was a broad lagoon that meandered off into several eddies.⁷ The lagoon's brilliant shimmering beneath the

² Đồ Sơn was 80 *trượng* 丈 high. Phan Tam Tinh 潘三省 (1816–?), *Hải Dương địa dư* (A.568), translated in Đinh Khắc Thuân ed., *Địa phương chí tỉnh Hải Dương qua tư liệu Hán Nôm* (Hà Nội: Viện Khoa học xã hội Việt Nam, Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm, 2009), 308.

³ Diệp Đình Hoa and Nguyễn Văn Sơn, "Làng thủ đồ Dương Kinh: Nhận xét dân tộc – Khảo cổ học," *Những phát hiện mới về khảo cổ học năm 1996* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 1997), 493; Nguyễn Tiến Cảnh, Nguyễn Du Chi, Trần Lâm, and Nguyễn Bá Vân, *Mỹ Thuật Thời Mạc* (Hà Nội: Viện mỹ thuật, 1993), 93-105; John K. Whitmore, "Vân Đồn, 'The Mạc Gap,' and the End of the Jiaozhi Ocean System: Trade and State in Đại Việt, Circa 1450-1550" in *The Tongking Gulf through History*, ed. Li Tana, Nola Cooke, and James A. Anderson (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 101-116.

⁴ Nguyễn Trãi (1380–1442), *Dư địa chí* 輿地志 (1435), annotated by Nguyễn Thiên Tích (fl. 15th C.) and Lý Tử Tấn (1378-1457) in *Nguyễn Trãi toàn tập*, ed. Mai Quốc Liên *et al* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn học, Trung tâm Nghiên cứu Quốc học, 2001), 400. The Hàn ("Cold") River 寒江 is now Thái Bình River; Artemisia Estuary 艾門 is now Thái Bình Estuary.

⁵ That is the *kê ư* 雞塢 ("ship-dock cocks") of An Lão Village. Ibid.

⁶ The rays populated Đường Hào River. Ibid.

⁷ Vũ Khâm Lân (1703–? *t.s.* 1727), "Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đát" 白雲庵居士阮公文達譜記 (1744) in Vũ Phương Đề, *Quick Jottings in Idleness* 公餘捷記, manuscript (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), accession no. A.44, 62b.

dawning sun as it rose in the eastern sea inspired poetry as well as literature about the landscape's marvels. As for the latter, in reference to Đat's home village, an apocryphal geomancy text, *King Cao's Record of Clamping Down [on Geomantic Properties]* 高王鈐記, read:

勢正形昂、砂生瓜節、脈引沿江、水流環遶、山結平洋、硯池水瑩、
筆架山疆、龍重虎疊、主貴客良、士魁天下、位列侯王、貴而肆志、壽考延
長。

The landscape is well aligned with lofty forms. The sands give rise to gourd-like crooks. A geomantic meridian leads along the riverbank. Its waters flow, encircling and meandering about the mountains, which cluster into a calm expanse. At the Inkstone Pool [the southwestern lagoon], the sun's reflection shimmers on the water. Resembling a brush case, the mountains point up austere. One upon another, Dragon and Tiger landforms abound therein.

[Indeed], this is a land that ennobles its hosts, and it is benign to sojourners there. Its scholars shall be foremost beneath heaven's skies, and its ranks shall bear lords and kings. As it ennobles, this land brings one's will to fruition even as it engenders life and longevity.⁸

As the above passage suggests, the people of Nguyễn Văn Đat's village could envision themselves as people born from the fortuitous geomantic properties between Nine Dragons Mountain up the coast and the lagoon, Inkstone Pond, in the southwest. Their fertile land not only produced exceptional crops and products, but also generated talented people. At the same time, the littoral east was fecund with a multitude of commingling ideas and beliefs. New geomantic perceptions of the landscape such as the localized "geo-body" cited above developed in the wake of the Minh (Ming 明) occupation (1407–1427) earlier in the century.⁹ Other ideas entered the coastal region

⁸ Ibid.; *A Concise Survey of Geomancy: The Cao Biền Edition* 地理便覽高駢集, manuscript, (Hanoi: National Library of Vietnam), accession no. R.1923, 96.

⁹ Foremost among the new geomancy texts produced in Đại Việt were those inspired by the memory of the Ming officer Huang Fu 黃福 (1363–1440). See Vũ Phương Đề's biography of Lê Cảnh Tuân in *Công dư*

with Cham peoples, who relocated in the north *circa* 1471, after Đại Việt's conquest of Champa and its main seaport, to ply the trades that Chams formerly engaged in the south as artisans, shipbuilders, and merchants.¹⁰ Naturally, they brought with them their magic, religious traditions, and spiritual beliefs.¹¹ In addition, merchants from the Minh north frequented the coast and along with localized clans descended from southeastern China brought with them their intellectual and spiritual culture.¹² In fact, in his youth, Nguyễn Văn Đát was said to have encountered a seagoing Northerner (i.e. "Chinese"), who was an expert of physiognomy.¹³

How were the people who populated Nguyễn Văn Đát's homeland perceived? A state gazetteer that circulated when Đát was born commented, "The land is fertile, and the people are audacious. When times are peaceful, they can be transformed to obey. [But] in times of chaos, they become recalcitrant. They have been this way since the Đinh and Lý [dynasties]."¹⁴ The responsible subduer must use discretion."¹⁵ The gazetteer's

tiếp ký, 52b; Momoki Shiro, "Nation and Geo-Body in Early Modern Vietnam: A Preliminary Study through Sources of Geomancy" in *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century the China Factor*, ed. Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010), 138-141.

¹⁰ Whitmore, "Vân Đồn, 'The Mạc Gap,' and the End of the Jiaozhi Ocean System: Trade and State in Đại Việt, Circa 1450-1550," 112.

¹¹ This is attested to by Trần Cao's 陳曷 uprising in 1516 (see below). He claimed to be an incarnation of Indra, and his chief general, Phan Ất 潘乙, was Cham. Lê Văn Hưu 黎文休, Phan Phu Tiên 潘孚先, Ngô Sĩ Liên 吳士連 *et al*, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (PD.2310), original text reproduced with translation in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, ed. Phan Huy Lê, Ngô Đức Thọ, and Hà Văn Tấn, 4 vols. (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1998), 15:27a. I am denoting fascicle and page numbers according to how they appear in the Paul Demieville's woodblock edition (accession no. PD2310 at Société asiatique, Paris), which was printed in the nineteenth-century based on a 1697 publication. E.g., 15:27a is fascicle 15, page 27a, which corresponds to vol. 3, pp. 74–75 for the Vietnamese translation.

¹² John K. Whitmore, "Ngô (Chinese) Communities and Montane–Littoral Conflict in Đại Việt, Ca. 1400–1600," *Asia Major* 27, no. 2 (2014): 53–85.

¹³ Vũ Khâm Lân, "Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đát," 56b.

¹⁴ The Đinh and Lý dynasties ruled 968–980 and 1009–1225 respectively.

¹⁵ Lý Tử Tân's (1378–1457) commentary to Nguyễn Trãi, *Dư địa chí*, 401. Nguyễn Trãi's gazetteer was completed in 1435, but was never printed and, seven years later, banned and destroyed after Trãi's dramatic death in 1442. It was most likely recovered and circulated *circa* 1480, when Nguyễn Trãi's poetry collection was also recovered after Trãi's memory was rehabilitated by imperial order. A "subduer" was the commander of the outlying military guard. Original text: 土饒人悍, 時平則順化, 時亂則梗化, 丁李以來為然, 鎮撫之任, 不可不擇也.

apprehension towards people who were “audacious” by nature and potentially “recalcitrant” and, therefore, necessitated a discriminating subduer is telling. From the perspective of the ruling court upstream the Hàn River in the west, the heterogeneous, mobile, and transitory population seemed problematic and difficult to grasp. It is from this perspective that a geomancy text like *King Cao’s Record of Clamping Down* found its use. Whereas local communities in the east might have seen in the text a celebration of their land’s numinous aura and luminaries, powers that claimed to represent the political center looked to such passages for insights on exactly where the subduer should strike to undercut the land’s latent restive potential.

As the above passage suggests, geomancy was a language through which the peoples of Nguyễn Văn Đật’s village and their interactions with outsiders could be understood. Since the mapping of regional qualities through geomancy was not limited to Đật’s homeland alone, but rather was pervasive throughout Đại Việt, such geomantic attributes carried implications for the relationships between various regions and could become grounds for competition. For the ruler, this necessitated control. As a case in point, seven years before Đật was born, the central court in Thăng Long (today Hanoi) issued new laws to restrict and stratify the use of geomancy according to social status because, “When stupid, petty people see officials, [they] think that [the officials] owe [their] achievements to geomancy, [so common people] take advantage of a [relative’s] death and vie to bury [a deceased relative] in front or behind, or to the left or right [of an

official's ancestral gravesite].”¹⁶ In Đại Việt in general and Đat's village in particular, geomancy constituted not only a common body of knowledge, but a contested one.¹⁷

Another perspective that sheds light on how the people of Nguyễn Văn Đat's village were viewed or imagined during his lifetime is that of literature. In 1547, Nguyễn Dữ 阮嶼 (fl.16th C.) compiled a collection of “transmitted wonders” (*truyền kỳ* 傳奇) that were probably inspired by those then popular in the Minh north.¹⁸ A native of Đỗ Tùng Village 36 kilometers from Đat's village midway between the eastern coast and the capital, Dữ culled his strange stories and mapped them onto Đại Việt's physical landscape while projecting his stories into the distant past. In doing so, Dữ crafted a mythical landscape juxtaposed onto physical forms. In this articulation of the numinous essences or spirits of the land, Dữ's *Truyền kỳ mạn lục* 傳奇漫錄 or *Effusive Record of Transmitted Wonders* resembled the geomancy texts. As a writer, Dữ's disengagement from officialdom (he had an elderly mother for whom he cared) and embrace of the “transmitted wonders” genre allowed him greater freedom as a writer relative to more formal genres.¹⁹ Therefore, a look at Dữ's presentation of Nguyễn Văn Đat's homeland and that by another contemporary Nguyễn Thế Nghi 阮世儀 (fl.16th C.), who translated Dữ's text into the

¹⁶ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, 13:38a. Original text: 愚冥細民見有官者, 以為地道所致, 乘有死亡, 競葬前後左右. For other examples of imperial decrees about geomancy, see Shiro, “Nation and Geo-Body in Early Modern Vietnam: A Preliminary Study through Sources of Geomancy,” 128–129.

¹⁷ Geomancy created broad competition among diverse localities throughout Đại Việt, and these tensions played out in gazetteer literature, genealogies, and folklore.

¹⁸ Chen Yiyuan, *Jiandeng xin hua yu Chuanqi Manlu zhi bijiao yanjiu* 剪燈新話與傳奇漫錄之比較研究 (Taipei: Taibei chubanshe, 1990); Nam Nguyen, “Writing as Response and as Translation: *Jiandeng Xinhua* and the Evolution of the Chuanqi Genre in East Asia, Particularly in Vietnam,” dissertation (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2005); Ren Minghua, *Yuenan Hanwen xiaoshuo yanjiu* 越南漢文小說研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), 100–173.

¹⁹ Liam C. Kelley, “Inventing Traditions in Fifteenth-Century Vietnam,” in *Imperial China and Its Southern Neighbors*, ed. Victor H. Mair and Liam C. Kelley (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015), 161–193; Engelbert Thomas, “Mythic History: Representations of the Vietnamese Past in the Collection *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái*” in *Southeast Asia Historiography Unraveling the Myths: Essays in Honour of Barend Jan Terwiel*, ed. Grabowsky Volker (Bangkok: River Books, 2011), 268–275.

Nôm demotic script, can tell us something about the people's relationship to the land and the numinous powers with whom they coexisted.²⁰

In the first story of the second fascicle in the *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, “Record of a Face-to-face Suit in the Dragon Palace” 龍庭對訟錄, Nguyễn Dữ described Nguyễn Văn Đạt's homeland in literary Hán (Sino-Vietnamese) as follows:

洪之永賴，舊多水族，沿江而祠凡十餘所。歲年寢久間或爲妖，
但祈晴禱雨無不立應。故鄉火不絕而人加敬憚焉。

In Vĩnh Lại of Hồng [Châu], in former times there were many water clans. Along the river, there were shrines in ten or more places overall. Year after year, [they] have lain [there] for a long time. Some manifested as demons. But whether praying for clear skies or rain, there was nothing to which [they] did not immediately respond. Thus, the incense fires never ceased, and the people venerated and feared them even more.²¹

Nguyễn Thế Nghi then translated the above passage into the vernacular:

蒸縣永賴於府下洪，初翫水族，唯邊淹麻立廟蜎蒸邁餘淮，辭辭
蒸於數課意或平舉，仍求淨嘖湄庄羅拯立應，爲丕香炤拯剋麻尋強添敬戩
丕。²²

As for Vĩnh Lại District in Hạ Hồng (lit., “Lower Floodplains”) Prefect, in former times there were many water clans.²³ Along the riverbank, [people] erected

²⁰ According to abbreviated language in the 1755 “Later Compilation” of the *Công dư tiếp ký*, the *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* was translated into the vernacular by Nguyễn Thế Nghi. Trần Quý Nha, “Later Compilation” 後編 in Vũ Phương Đề, *Công dư tiếp ký*, 35a. Although this attribution is questionable because of the *Công dư tiếp ký*'s abbreviated and therefore vague reference to Nghi's translation of “the transmission of the bizarre” and the relatively late 18th C. date of the account, I agree with Professor Nguyễn Quang Hồng that the translation's attribution to Nghi is quite plausible. See Nguyễn Dữ, *Truyện kỳ mạn lục giải âm*, translated with annotation by Nguyễn Quang Hồng (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm, 2001), 11–12.

²¹ Nguyễn Dữ, *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, original text reproduced in *Truyện kỳ mạn lục giải âm*, translated with annotation by Nguyễn Quang Hồng (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm, 2001), 2:1a.

²² *Chưng huyện Vĩnh Lại ở phủ Hạ Hồng. Xưa nhiều thủy tộc. Dõi bên sông mà lập miếu thờ chưng mười dư chôn, năm năm chưng ở lâu, thuở ấy hoặc làm gỗ, nhưng cầu tạnh xin mưa chẳng là chẳng lập ứng. Vì vậy hương lửa chẳng dứt mà người càng thêm kính dãi vậy.*

²³ Nguyễn Văn Đạt's home district was called Đồng Lại until 1460–1469, when it was changed to Vĩnh Lại, the name used here. During the Trần Dynasty, it belonged to Hồng Châu Circuit. Then from 1460 to 1469, the Lê Dynasty further delineated the region such that Vĩnh Lại fell under the jurisdiction of Hạ Hồng Prefect. Phan Tam Tỉnh, *Hải Dương địa dư* (A.568), 283, 286.

shrines to worship [spirits] in ten or more places. Year after year [they] dwelt there for a long time. Sometimes [they] would invoke misfortune. But whether praying for clear skies or rain, there was nothing to which [the spirits] did not respond. Because of this, the incense fires never ceased, and people venerated and feared [the spirits] even more.²⁴

Here, both of Nguyễn Văn Đạt's contemporaries Nguyễn Dữ and Nguyễn Thế Nghi depicted the watery domain of the littoral east and its riverine denizens, humans and spirits alike, interacting within a shared waterscape. Whether they implied the water spirits manifested as corporeal demons as did Dữ or more abstractly *làm gở* or "invoked misfortune" as did Nghi, they painted a picture of Đạt's native land reminiscent of "a world of gods and spirits" in a realm with "water, water everywhere" that has been observed elsewhere in Vietnamese cultural history.²⁵

In summary, Nguyễn Văn Đạt grew up among diverse peoples from local villagers, scholars, and craftsmen to migrants and sojourners who frequented the eastern coast. He was born into a transient land marked by change and motion. There, he encountered new ideas and ways of living from which he could cull the intellectual foundations of his youth and, thereafter, draw perspectives on the trajectories of his life story. These ideas included geomancy and the mythical landscape of his littoral homeland and its ambivalent relationship with the state's central authority.

However, even more critical to Nguyễn Văn Đạt's upbringing was the role of his family and teachers. I turn now to the people and mentors who shaped Đạt's youth and the person he would later become.

²⁴ Nguyễn Dữ, *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*, 2:1a.

²⁵ Ho-Tai Hue-Tam, "Religion in Vietnam: A World of Gods and Spirits," *Vietnam Forum* 10 (1987): 113–45; Huỳnh Sanh Thông, "The Vietnamese Worldview: Water, Water Everywhere," *Vietnam Review* 2 (1997): 16–97.

Family and Mentors

Nguyễn Văn Đạt came from a family with a tradition of learning. For successive generations Đạt's paternal family lived in their home village in Vĩnh Lại District and practiced classical scholarship and literature, including geomancy studies associated with the Đường (Tang) Dynasty (618–907) hero venerated as King Cao.²⁶ In fact, Đạt's ancestor chose to settle in their home village after recognizing its fortuitous geomantic properties. His father, Nguyễn Văn Định 阮文定 (fl. 15th–16th C.), had been a scholar of the National Academy (*Quốc tử giám* 國子監), although he never assumed government office. Instead, he seems to have spent much of his career as an unengaged *cư sĩ* 居士 or “abiding scholar” in his native village along the Hàn (Cold) River, where he was known as the Master of Forked River 衢川先生.²⁷ Erudition as a local teacher and scholar outside of officialdom was likely a family tradition for Đạt's paternal lineage. Đạt's grandfather Nguyễn Văn Tĩnh 阮文靖 was not known to have entered government service, and Đạt's eldest son, whose name was lost by the eighteenth-century, did serve as a Censorate Associate, but he was better known as the Abiding Scholar of Hàn (Cold) River 寒江居士 in connection with his homeland.²⁸

The maternal side of Nguyễn Văn Đạt's family also followed a tradition of learning. Đạt's mother, Nhữ Thị Từ Thục 汝氏慈淑 (fl. 15th–16th C.), mastered the classics and histories; she excelled at literature. Moreover, she developed advanced skills

²⁶ King Cao was the Vietnamese remembrance of the Tang dynasty general Gao Pian 高駢 (821–887). Geomancy texts attributed to him date to at least the Trần Dynasty. Momoki Shiro, “Nation and Geo-Body in Early Modern Vietnam: A Preliminary Study through Sources of Geomancy,” 136; Keith W. Taylor, “A Southern Remembrance of Cao Bien” in *Liber Amirorum: Mélanges Offerts Au Professeur Phan Huy Lê*, ed. Philippe Papin and John Kleinen (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Thanh Niên, 1999), 241–258.

²⁷ Cold River (Sông Hàn, Hàn Giang) was also called Snow River (Tuyết Giang). Today it is the southern branch of Thái Bình River that flows out to sea at Thái Bình Estuary.

²⁸ Vũ Khâm Lân, “Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đạt,” 55b–56a, 61a–61b.

in physiognomy and numerology.²⁹ Từ Thục’s father, Nhữ Văn Lan 汝文蘭 (1443–1523) was the first of the Nhữ clan to succeed in the civil service examinations, graduating as *tiến sĩ* 進士 or “advanced scholar” in 1463.³⁰ The Nhữ clan hailed from nearby Lower Yên Tử Village on the northern side of the Hàn (Cold) River about 3km from Đat’s village—less than a day’s journey by ferry.³¹ Whereas Đat’s paternal family remained among those whom Ngô Đăng Lợi called *hàn nho* or “scholars in the cold”—dedicated but undistinguished scholars—the Nhữ clan was ascendant.³² When Đat was born, his grandfather Nhữ Văn Lan had served the Lê king’s court in Thăng Long for almost three decades and achieved lower-second rank (2b) as minister of the Department of Revenue.³³ In keeping with her father’s success, Đat’s mother held seemingly stratospheric expectations for her son’s future.

More than half a century after he was born, Nguyễn Văn Đat, recalling his upbringing, wrote, “In my youth, I received my education from my family.”³⁴ As was generally the case for scholar clans in premodern Vietnam, the burden of Đat’s education fell on his mother.³⁵ The year after Đat was born, widespread famine struck Đại Việt’s

²⁹ Ibid., 55b.

³⁰ Ngô Đức Thọ, ed., *Văn bia tiến sĩ văn miếu-quốc tử giám Thăng Long (Khảo cứu, giới thiệu, nguyên văn, dịch chú)* (Hà Nội: NXB Hà Nội, 2010), 166, 168

³¹ Several of Nguyễn Văn Đat’s poems and his genealogical record by Vũ Khâm Lân make reference to Cold Ferry 寒渡, which ferried travelers across Cold River near Đat’s village. After retiring in 1542, Đat built the Docked in the Center Tavern there. Lower Yên Tử Village is now Nam Tử Village in Kiến Thiết Hamlet of Tiên Lãng District, Hải Phòng City.

³² Ngô Đăng Lợi, “Một số vấn đề về thân thế và sự nghiệp của Nguyễn Bình Khiêm” in *Nguyễn Bình Khiêm trong lịch sử phát triển văn hóa dân tộc* (Đà Nẵng: NXB Đà Nẵng, 2000), 54–56.

³³ Thượng thư bộ Hộ, trật tòng nhị phẩm 戶部上書從二品. Throughout I will follow the conventions from indicating ranks in the nine-grade dynastic ranking system outlined in Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 4 – 5. E.g., 2b is “lower second rank” 從二品; 4a is “upper fourth rank” 正四品, etc.

³⁴ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Bạch Vân am thi tập tự” 白雲庵詩集序 (Preface of White Cloud Hermitage Poetry Collection) in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* 白雲庵詩集 (*White Cloud Hermitage Poetry Collection*), accession no. A2256, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies in Hanoi, 1a.

³⁵ Nhung Tuyet Tran, *Familial Properties: Gender, State, and Society in Early Modern Vietnam, 1463–1778* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2018), 64–65. The *locus classicus* of the role of a scholar’s mother in educating and disciplining her son was Ms. Zhang 仇氏, the mother of Mencius. See “Mother of

people.³⁶ That Đat survived suggests both his family's resilience and resources, the latter most likely sustained by Đat's relatively prosperous maternal family. According to surviving genealogical records from what was Lower Yên Tử Village, the next year, when Đat was two years old, his mother Từ Thục brought him to live at his maternal village just north of Hàn (Cold) River to be raised and educated in his grandfather's care.³⁷ Nhữ Văn Lan would not retire for another decade. In the meantime, Đat's mother became his principle educator, and, by the time he was three (four by traditional count), his mother was already teaching him classical texts and vernacular poetry, which Đat could recite fluently.³⁸

Nguyễn Văn Đat's family had good reason to raise him in Lower Yên Tử. As mentioned above, his maternal family possessed more resources for his education and upbringing at a moment when many people in the country starved.³⁹ At the same time, after three decades in officialdom, Nhữ Văn Lan had galvanized his family into a scholarly clan that would produce eminent scholars up through the twentieth century.⁴⁰ Lower Yên Tử seemed like a natural steppingstone on Đat's path to greatness. This implies the most likely motivation for Đat's move across the river, the expectations of his mother.

Meng Ke (Mencius) from Zou" 鄒孟軻母 in fascicle one of Liu Xiang's *Tales of Exemplary Women* 列女傳 (c.18 B.C.E.).

³⁶ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, 13:68b.

³⁷ The genealogy says that Nguyễn Văn Đat went to Lower Yên Tử when he was three, which is two years old by modern count. Nhữ Đình Toàn (t.s.1736), *Hoạch Trạch Nhữ tộc phả* 穫澤汝族譜, 1745, accession no. A.677, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, Hanoi, cited in Nhữ Đình Văn, "Tiền sử Nhữ Văn Lan: Vị khoa bảng đầu tiên của huyện Tiên Minh, Ông tổ khai họ Nhữ Việt Nam," *Nhữ Đình Văn (blog)*, Oct. 16, 2015, <http://nhudinhvan.blogspot.com/>; An Hương, "Cụm di tích văn hóa: lịch sử họ ngoại Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, tôn tạo xứng tầm giá trị," *Báo Hải Phòng* (Hải Phòng), July 26, 2010; Ngô Đăng Lợi, "Một số vấn đề về thân thế và sự nghiệp của Nguyễn Bình Khiêm," 56.

³⁸ Vũ Khâm Lân, "Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đat," 56a.

³⁹ Many people who survived did so by eating tubers. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, 13:68b.

⁴⁰ Nhữ Đình Văn, "Tiền sử Nhữ Văn Lan: Vị khoa bảng đầu tiên của huyện Tiên Minh, Ông tổ khai họ Nhữ Việt Nam."

Nhữ Thị Từ Thực's reason for bringing her son to her native village is the stuff of legend. Although aspects of the story were likely embellished through successive storytelling, it suggests certain aspects of Nguyễn Văn Đật's upbringing. According to a genealogical record for Đật written in 1744:

公以洪德二十二年辛亥生，身體長大，容貌英偉，未週歲能言。一日味爽，文定抱諸拳，忽語曰『日出東方』。考大驚異。年四歲，太夫人誨以經傳正文，即日爛熟口頭，又暗誦國語詩數十首。時太夫人他出，文定因拽繩樞弄兒，戲吟曰「月撩弓，月撩弓」下句未就，公從旁和云「援猗仙忍忍疼」。文定喜因以示夫人，夫人不得志曰「『月』臣象也，公何以此命兒」。考大慚謝，然恨終不解，夫人竟辭歸，壽終于父家。

The Master (Nguyễn Văn Đật) was born in the twenty-second year of the Hồng Đức 洪德 era (1491). His build grew staunch, his complexion handsome and strong. Within a year's passing, he could already speak. One day at dawning, Văn Định [Đật's father] made several obeisant salutations when the Master suddenly spoke, "The Sun shall emerge from the Eastern Quarter." His father was greatly astonished.

When [Đật] was four years old, the Grand Lady (Đật's mother Từ Thực) taught her son the scholars' classics and orthodox writings, which within a day's time he could thoroughly memorize and recite. In addition, he conned scores of vernacular poems.

Once, while the Grand Lady was away from home, Văn Định tugged on the string binding a door hinge and teased his son with a verse:

The Moon carries a bow!

The Moon carries a bow!

Before Văn Định could recite the concluding lines, the Master responded from beside him:

Drawing—the archer's hand,

Steadily, steadily taking aim.⁴¹

Exhilarated, Văn Định told the lady about what had happened.

However, Từ Thực felt that her ambitions had been shortchanged. She said,

⁴¹ "Nguyệt đeo cung, nguyệt đeo cung; vịn tay tên, nhẵn nhẵn chong"—one of many possible readings of the Nôm, none of which are entirely satisfactory in meaning. The Sinographs of the genealogical record appended to the *Công dư tiếp ký* (A.44) reads "月撩弓, 月撩弓; 援猗仙, 忍忍疼."

“The Moon is the Image of a subject. How could you instruct your son that way?!”

Ashamed, Văn Định apologized. Nevertheless, in the end, Từ Thục’s anger did not subside. She thus bid farewell and returned to her home village. She lived to longevity and expired in her father’s home.⁴²

Vũ Khâm Lân 武欽麟 (a.k.a. Vũ Khâm Thận 武欽慎, 1703–?, *t.s.* 1727), the author of the genealogical record cited above, inserted this story (demarcated in the text by *thời* 時, “at that time” that begins in my translation with “When [Đạt] was four...”) between a series of prophetic events about the rise of the Mạc Dynasty (1527–1597) and its founder Mạc Đăng Dung 莫登庸 (1483–1541). In these stories, Nhữ Thị Từ Thục prognosticated that the then current Lê Dynasty (1428–1526) would come to an end, and so she aspired to marry a husband who would sire the king of a new regime. She was fastidious in selecting a mate, assessing suitors through physiognomy until she settled on Nguyễn Văn Định. Later, she encountered Dung and regretted not having married him instead. It is these stories about Dung, who hailed from Cổ Trai Village near Đồ Sơn (Miry Mountain), that are alluded to by the infant Nguyễn Văn Đạt’s utterance, “The Sun shall emerge from the Eastern Quarter.”

These prophecies about the rise of a ruler from the littoral east, which I shall discuss further in a later chapter, are probably apocryphal. For Nhữ Thị Từ Thục and her son to have envisioned the rise of a new dynasty from the coastal lands when Nguyễn Văn Đạt was still an infant or toddler can only be attributed to the depth of the former’s mastery of prognostication and the latter’s genius, for to the less enlightened observer signs of the east’s growing influence were not apparent until 1504 with the reign of

⁴² Vũ Khâm Lân, “Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đạt,” 56a-56b.

Emperor Lê Tuấn 黎濬 (1488–1509, r.1504–1509), when the clan of a powerful palace woman brought people from the littoral east to Thăng Long.⁴³ Moreover, Mặc Đăng Dung was only seven years old around the time that Đạt was conceived and, even if Từ Thục met Dung later in life—presumably 1504–1507 before Dung went to the capital—the story strains credulity. Finally, during the vigorous reign of Emperor Lê Tư Thành 黎思誠 (1442–1497, r.1460–1497), prognosticating about regime change was punishable by death through strangulation.⁴⁴ Therefore, for Từ Thục to make such a public scene by returning to her homeland because of her prognosticating seems unlikely.

The intricacies of personal human relationships aside, as I indicated above, Nhữ Thị Từ Thục most likely brought her son to Lower Yên Tử for a variety of practical reasons and probably did so with Nguyễn Văn Định's consent.⁴⁵ At the same time, Từ Thục and her son's separation from Định was hardly absolute considering the proximity of their respective home villages. What then can we learn from this passage?

The written word and its oral utterance through poetry are the intertwined substrate of ritual and prophecy.⁴⁶ Here, the crux of this passage is the vernacular poem pronounced by Định and his son. Từ Thục's exegesis of the poem through correlative thinking and Images 象 reminiscent of the *Kinh Dịch* or *Book of Changes* 易經 indicates that the poem, the meaning and pronunciation of which are abstruse, was understood

⁴³ Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 226, 232.

⁴⁴ Nguyễn Ngọc Huy and Tạ Văn Tài, *The Lê Code: Law in Traditional Vietnam, A Comparative Sino-Vietnamese Legal Study with Historical-Juridical Analysis and Annotations*, Vol. 1. (Athens, OH: University of Ohio Press), 212.

⁴⁵ Otherwise, if the law held sway, then Nhữ Thị Từ Thục's leaving her husband without permission would have been punishable by servitude as a kitchen slave. Ibid., Vol. 1., 186; *Hồng Đức thiên chính thư*, trans. Nguyễn Sĩ Giác (Sài Gòn: Đại học viện Saigon, Trường Luật khoa Đại học, 1959), 66-68.

⁴⁶ Michel Strickmann, *Chinese Poetry and Prophecy: The Written Oracle in East Asia*, ed. Bernard Faure (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 93-94.

cabalistically.⁴⁷ Định’s act of uttering the poem’s talismanic language invoked cosmic repercussions. Speaking the Image of the Moon was both prophetic and deterministic. Hence, when Từ Thục asked Đạt’s father, “How could you instruct your son this way?”—she used the term *mệnh*, which can mean “fate” and “order” in a manner akin to the etymologically related *lệnh* in the writ of Daoist talismanic registers. In short, Từ Thục was dismayed that Đạt had *làm gở* or “invoked misfortune” in the language of the Nguyễn Thế Nghi’s vernacular story of river spirits in *Effusive Records of Transmitted Wonders*. Từ Thục knew that Đạt’s father, by invoking the subordinate Image of the Moon, had consigned their son to a lesser fate.

Therefore, vernacular poetry was no trifling matter; it had cosmic implications and determined fate. Both Nguyễn Văn Định and Nhữ Thị Từ Thục recognized the potency of poetic language. What really put them at odds in this story was their vision of how this language was to be used. Nguyễn Văn Định was a reclusive “abiding scholar,” who recited vernacular poetry casually, trivially, and indulgently “to play” (*hý* 戲). Định embodied a particular way of life for a local scholar and his relationship to central authority. He respected and partook of Thăng Long’s capital culture, but he ultimately remained undistinguished, staying quietly in his home village.

By contrast, Từ Thục articulated a different way of practicing erudition in the littoral east, one that asserted local agency, ascendancy, and preeminence. She wanted to invoke the Image of a rising sun in the east and destine her son to kingliness. In her vision of the coastal lands, the east was regal, a tradition that could be traced to the Trần kings of

⁴⁷ Although Từ Thục used the language of Images 象 in her explication, I could not locate any passage in the *Book of Changes* that links the Moon 月 to a Subject 臣.

the thirteenth-century.⁴⁸ At the same time, she believed that classical erudition, vernacular poetry, and prognostication were the education Nguyễn Văn Đát needed to realize her ambitions. Therefore, she could not countenance Đát's father's insouciant use of learning and, as the story goes at least, sympathized instead with Mạc Đăng Dung, who would assert the primacy of the littoral east.

In summary, at the heart of the discordance between Nguyễn Văn Đát's parents in this story were disparate ways of being a scholar in the littoral east. The story suggests that from a young age, Đát's parents ensured that he received an advanced education in classical learning and literature, but, at the same time, they came from different backgrounds and represented divergent ideas about what learning means. From early on, Đát was forced to ponder how a scholar of the east should live his life as a creature culturally embedded in his homeland, while navigating his relationship to the central authority in Thăng Long. Đát would face these questions throughout his entire life.

Grandfather's Return

In 1503, when Nguyễn Văn Đát was twelve years old, his grandfather Nhữ Văn Lan retired to his home village, where Đát had been living for a decade. For forty years, Lan served kings Lê Tư Thành and his son Lê Tranh 黎鑑 (1461–1504, r.1497–1504) during a period of unparalleled florescence for classical learning and literature in Đại Việt.⁴⁹ The former minister of the Department of Revenue, Lan was no doubt well connected and, as was generally the case for distinguished worthies in retirement, Lan's former colleagues

⁴⁸ John K. Whitmore, "Ngo (Chinese) Communities and Montane-Littoral Conflict in Dai Viet, Ca. 1400–1600." *Asia Major* 27, no. 2 (2014): 54–56.

⁴⁹ Trần Thị Kim Anh, "Vai trò của nhà nước trong quá trình Nho giáo hóa xã hội thời Lê" in *Nho giáo ở Việt Nam*, ed. Trịnh Khắc Mạnh *et. al.* (Hà Nội: NBX Khoa học xã hội, 2006), 106–108; Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 205–211; John K. Whitmore, "The Tao-Đàn Group: Poetry, Cosmology, and the State in the Hồng Đức Period (1470–1497)," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 7, no. 2 (1992), 55–70.

and aspiring youths most likely sought his company and counsel. Lan's visitors were probably substantial, since travel to and from Artemisia Estuary along the Cold River routinely passed through Lower Yên Tử. Having returned to his homeland, Lan was now Đat's principle mentor as well. By 1503, Đat had attained a foundation in classical learning, could interact with Lan's visitors, and was mature enough to meaningfully consider his sixty-year-old grandfather's "life lessons." At twelve, he was probably impressionable, too. What did Đat learn?

Nhữ Văn Lan's most immediate and perhaps lasting impression on his grandson after returning to Lower Yên Tử was his personal bearing and behavior as a retired scholar-official. Back in his home village, Lan assumed the roles of family patriarch and village dignitary. Lan divided gold and silks he received from Emperor Lê Tranh for his distinguished service among family, friends, and fellow villagers. The rest he used to build his retirement studio west of the village, where he taught local students, encouraged moral character, and promoted activities that benefitted his village community. For twenty years until the end of his life, Lan served as a local leader who, among other things, organized fellow villages to build dykes and improve the village's irrigation system.⁵⁰ The lessons Đat gleaned from the example of his grandfather in these years would later shape Đat's own relationship to his home village on the other side of Cold River.

Witnessing his grandfather's return, Nguyễn Văn Đat would have been able to find some sense of resolution in the arc of Nhữ Văn Lan's career to the incongruent expectations of Đat's meek father and venturesome mother. At seventeen, Lan sought out a teacher; two years later, he attempted the provincial exams; at twenty, he went to the

⁵⁰ Nhữ Đình Văn, "Tiền sĩ Nhữ Văn Lan: Vị khoa bảng đầu tiên của huyện Tiên Minh, Ông tổ khai họ Nhữ Việt Nam."

capital, where he graduated as *tiến sĩ* or “advanced scholar” in 1463.⁵¹ For forty years, he participated in the central court, thereby fulfilling the expectations of a dutiful scholar, and then he returned home, where he dedicated the last two decades of his life to service of his village and family. Đat could see that, in retirement, Lan’s life was not unlike that of his father as a local teacher and abiding scholar, while, formerly at the capital, Lan’s career approached the greatness his mother wished upon Đat, albeit that of a subject rather than king.

Witnessing his grandfather’s life in retirement, Đat was able to imagine that the question of what it meant to be a scholar was not about conflicting values but timing. The ideals of classical learning and its attendant imperative to serve the central state on one hand, and local agency and withdrawal for personal gratification on the other, could be reconciled in accord with the proper time. The question Đat then considered, which he would repeatedly express in his writings, was *xuất xứ* 出處—when to leave home for officialdom and when to abide in his native place. For this, Đat would need to understand the moment, and perhaps because of this, he intently studied the *Book of Changes* and the revolutions of fate.

Another way Nhữ Văn Lan impacted his grandson’s education was as a window into the culture of the capital. As Nguyễn Văn Đat’s teacher, Lan would have impressed on Đat the vision for scholars held by Emperor Lê Tư Thành and his capable successor Lê Tranh, who invested in the wisdom and talents of learned scholars and empowered them at court.⁵² At the same time, Lan (like most any grandfather) surely related to Đat many stories, including those about the people whose lives intersected his journey through

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² John K. Whitmore, “The Development of Lê Government in Fifteenth-century Vietnam” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1968), 98–143, 177–182, 200–205.

officialdom. Some of them, Lan could have reminisced with in person and introduced to Đat, including perhaps Đat's future father-in-law Dương Đức Nhan 楊德顏 (*t.s.* 1463), who hailed from Đat's home district.⁵³

What kind of stories did Nhữ Văn Lan tell his grandson? What lessons about literature and classical learning did he want to share? And how did what Lan have to say resonate with Nguyễn Văn Đat and the learning he had thus far acquired? Much of what Lan had to share no doubt reiterated themes of moral rectitude, the ritual power of language and literature, and the cycles of fate that Đat already learned from his parents. However, as a former luminary of the Thăng Long court, Lan could speak from the perspective of the center. This perspective was artfully crafted by Emperor Lê Tư Thành. Thus, examining Lan's and his contemporaries' interactions with this exceptional king will shed light on the stories and ideas Lan related to his grandson.

The King

Embodying the Dao

During the first third of the eighth lunar month (early September) of 1462, Nhữ Văn Lan registered for the provincial level civil service exams under the nascent reign of Emperor Lê Tư Thành.⁵⁴ The examination process had a way of creating social bonds among aspiring scholars and creating groups of likeminded individuals.⁵⁵ In Lan's case, if he had not already known Dương Đức Nhan owing to the relative proximity of their villages, then he certainly would have interacted with him at that time, and the two seem

⁵³ Dương Đức Nhan's home village was Hà Dương Village on the western banks of the Hóa River about 7km southwest from Nguyễn Văn Đat's home village.

⁵⁴ Phan Huy Chú, "Khoa mục chí," in *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, vol. 2, ed. Đào Duy Anh (Hà Nội: NXB Giáo dục and Viện Sử học, 2008), 14.

⁵⁵ For an example of this during mid-Tang China see Anna M. Shields, *One Who Knows Me: Friendship and Literati Culture in Mid-Tang China* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 64–74.

to have developed a close friendship. During the provincial exams, Lan probably also met Đào Văn Hiến 陶文顯 (*t.s.* 1463), who hailed from An Bò Village on the southern bank of the Luộc River (10km from Đạt's village) and would become Minister of the Department of Justice, although no direct evidence of their interactions remains.⁵⁶

After passing the provincial exams, six months later, in the second lunar month of the fourth year of Quang Thuận (January 1463), Nhữ Văn Lan, Dương Đức Nhan, and Đào Văn Hiến arrived in Thăng Long among 4,400 recommended scholars (*cử nhân*) to participate in the examinations of gathered candidates (*thi hội*) at the capital.⁵⁷ All three ranked among the one percent of recommended scholars who proceeded to the palace examinations. There, they encountered a king with a vision. Emperor Lê Tư Thành was intent on revitalizing the dynasty after the fractious reigns of his two puerile predecessors. He sought to balance the pervasive regional and ideological factions in his government by injecting it with capable scholars like Nhữ Văn Lan, molding them in character and ideology according to his vision of moral idealism, and fostering an open court culture with a vibrant bureaucracy. As king, he fashioned himself as a moralizing reformer at the center of the court, the kingdom, and “all under heaven.”⁵⁸

Thus, in early 1463, Nhữ Văn Lan and forty-three fellow advanced scholars received Emperor Lê Tư Thành's question for the palace examination. The king was vexed that the state's institutions had been well established, but, in his opinion, had thus far failed to realize the purport of their creation and achieve real results. The reason, the king suspected, was that the pristine way of the sages of high antiquity had been corrupted

⁵⁶ Ngô Đức Thọ, ed., *Văn bia tiến sĩ văn miếu-quốc tử giám Thăng Long*, 157–170.

⁵⁷ Ibid.; Phan Huy Chú, “Khoa mục chí,” 14.

⁵⁸ John K. Whitmore, “The Development of Lê Government in Fifteenth-century Vietnam,” 105–110, 116–119, 162–164, 181–182.

by the teachings of Lão Tử (Laozi) and Buddha. The king asked the presented scholars to explain why and propose what to do about it.

Lê Tư Thành was concerned with matters of practical governance, but by framing his question to solicit commentary on the “Three Schools” (*tam giáo* 三教) philosophy then vogue in the Minh north, the king was essentially asking about the cosmogony and metaphysics of good governance. Looking at the scholars’ responses that the king chose to distinguish can therefore tell us about how the king’s central court envisioned the role of the scholar, education, and literature, including the study of the *Changes*, correlative response, and prognostic poetry that Nguyễn Văn Đật started learning from a young age.

The 1463 examinations recruited Lê Tư Thành’s first generation of scholars for his reign. The three highest ranking of them, the Three Laureates (*tam khôi* 三魁), became principle figures during his reign. The Prime Laureate, Lương Thế Vinh 梁世榮 (1441–?), composed two numerological treatises and was remembered as a numerologist and founder of Vietnamese mathematics.⁵⁹ The Second Laureate, Nguyễn Đức Trinh 阮德貞 (1439–1472), became not only a powerful court figure, but also the king’s father-in-law, while the Third Laureate, Quách Đình Bảo (1440–?), became one of the king’s celebrated poets.⁶⁰ The responses for the 1463 palace examinations of two of them, Lương Thế Vinh and Nguyễn Đức Trinh, were preserved. As for the former’s, in decrying the heterodox teachings of Lão Tử and Buddha and asserting the proper way of the (Confucian) sages, Lương Thế Vinh spoke in language that sought not to deny the philosophy and metaphysics of “tranquil extinguishing” and “empty void” of Buddhism

⁵⁹ Alexei Volkov, “State Mathematics Education in Traditional China and Vietnam: Formation of ‘Mathematical Hagiography’ of Lương Thế Vinh (1441-1496) in *Nho giáo ở Việt Nam*, ed. Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, Tu Weiming, Phan Văn Các, *et al* (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã học, 2006), 272-310.

⁶⁰ Ngô Đức Thọ, ed., *Văn bia tiến sĩ văn miếu-quốc tử giám Thăng Long*, 157–170; John K. Whitmore, “The Tao-Dân Group: Poetry, Cosmology, and the State in the Hồng Đức Period (1470-1497).”

and Daoism respectively, but rather supplant them with the “correct” moral cosmogony of his heroes of high antiquity.⁶¹ He wrote:

一陰一陽，道之在天地者，然也。繼善成性，道之散於人物者，然也。惟聖人爲能盡之，故必歸於聖人乎？以其原於天而盡於聖人，此所以爲繼天也。聖人之體道，則必施於用，此所以爲出治也。故伏羲之畫八卦以通神明，神農之作耒耜以厚民生，皆是道之所發也。

One Yin and One Yang—thus is the *Đạo* (Way) in Heaven and Earth. Nature proceeds from the maturation of goodness—thus does the *Đạo* disperse to people and creatures. Can only a Sage thoroughly [realize] this and, therefore, must [the *Đạo*] defer [solely] to the Sage? To take [the *Đạo*’s] origination in Heaven and exhaustively [realize the *Đạo*] in the person of the Sage is what is called “proceeding from Heaven.” As for embodying the *Đạo* in the person of the Sage, [the *Đạo*] must be carried out in practice. This is what is done to bring forth order. Thus, Phục Hy (Fu Xi) drew the eight trigrams to fathom spiritual quickening, and the Divine Farmer created the plow and spade to nourish people’s lives. All of this was the issuing of the *Đạo*.⁶²

Emperor Lê Tư Thành thought Vinh’s passage above exemplary enough to comment, “Well-articulated with acceptable meaning.”⁶³ What I think the king took a liking to in Vinh’s response was Vinh’s formulation of a universal *Đạo* that emanated to all people (and creatures) with equanimity, but required a quickened sage, i.e., ruler, to thoroughly realize it and, more importantly, effect it in practice. The *Đạo* thus reached to the essence of all people’s innate goodness, while the ruler retained a unique place in the cosmos by embodying the *Đạo* and manifesting it through governance.

⁶¹ Đinh Khắc Thuân, *Giáo dục và khoa cử Nho học thời Lê ở Việt Nam qua tài liệu Hán Nôm* (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2009), 180. Lương Thế Vinh wrote of the Three Teachings, “As for the correctness of the Way of the Sages and the heterodoxy of [the Ways of] Laozi and Buddha, how could they be revered as three [equal teachings]?” 然聖道乃其正，佛老乃其邪也，安可以儼以爲三哉。In his rather stereotyped description of Buddhism, by “tranquil extinguishing,” Lương Thế Vinh was referring to *nirvāṇa*.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid. 御筆批：「頗達意可」。

As for Nguyễn Đức Trinh, in his response, he made the primacy of the king even more explicit. He wrote:

陛下身體是道… 蓋人受天地之中以生，則是道也。人皆有之，不以賢智而有餘，不以愚昧而不足。但其氣稟或有不齊，爲聖人有以全是道焉。

The king's body embodies the Đạo... All people receive [the Đạo] between Heaven and Earth to live; this is the Đạo. All people have it. It is not that the wise have plenty of it, while the befuddled do not have enough of it, but rather that their innate vital qualities are not even, [so he who] becomes a sage has what it takes within to complete the Đạo.⁶⁴

In Nguyễn Đức Trinh's response, albeit all people have the Đạo, their innate vital qualities 氣稟 vary such that only a sage possessed the replete metaphysical, spiritual, and somatic composition needed to fully embody and perfect the Đạo.⁶⁵ In light of this, Lê Tư Thành selected Vinh and Trinh's essays not simply because they conformed to orthodoxy and refuted "heterodox" teachings. Indeed, Vinh was an avid Buddhist himself and produced writings on Buddhism.⁶⁶ In fact, in unofficial histories, Vinh was remembered as a Daoist immortal himself, who (in the uncanny logic of literati karma) was reincarnated in an underwater purgatory as retribution for his "heterodox" devotion to Buddhism.⁶⁷ The irony of Vinh's memory—crafted firmly in the Three Teachings tradition such that he could be at once the epitome of a Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist hero *and* anti-hero—

⁶⁴ Ibid., 202.

⁶⁵ This is an allusion to Chu Hy's (Zhu Xi) preface to the *Great Learning* (*Đại Học*). Ian Johnson and Wang Ping, *Daxue and Zhongyong* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2012), 126–127.

⁶⁶ E.g., Lương Thế Vinh wrote the preface for the *Nam tông tự pháp đồ* 南宗嗣法圖 (*Diagram of the Southern School's Succession of the Dharma*). Trần Văn Giáp, *Tìm hiểu kho sách Hán Nôm*, Tác phẩm được Giải thưởng Hồ Chí Minh (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2002), 711.

⁶⁷ These folk histories were deeply indebted to the Transmitted Marvels 傳奇 literary tradition and works such as Nguyễn Dữ's *Truyền kỳ mạn lục*. *Dã sử tạp biên* 野史雜編 (*Miscellaneous Compilation of Rustic Histories*), accession no. VHV.1310, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, 15a–17b; *Đại Việt đình nguyên hật lục* 大越鼎元佛錄 (*Buddhist Records of Top Examination Laureates in Đại Việt*), accession no. A.771, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, Hanoi, 35b–40a; *Thỉnh văn dị lục* 咱聞異錄 (*Strange Records of [Things] Heard*), accession no. VHC.343, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, 33a–35b.

would not have disturbed the king.⁶⁸ What resonated with Lê Tư Thành was his laureates' language of a cosmic, metaphysical moral body that emanated from the king and resonated with the correctable innate goodness of all his subjects.

Thus, Emperor Lê Tư Thành hoped to embody the moral center of his kingdom. Moreover, he regarded the scholars he recruited, his three top laureates and fellow graduates like Nhữ Văn Lan, as an extension of his moral being. He made this clear in a stele inscription commemorating the 1463 palace examination. Đào Cử 陶舉 (*t.s.* 1466), whom the king charged with composing the inscription, wrote, "The August One (i.e., emperor) especially contemplates talented people's being the primal life force of the kingdom—[they] cannot but be broadly cultivated."⁶⁹ Đào Cử then elaborated on the king's understanding of the relationship between scholars and the king, "The True Primal [life force] converges and unites, and the worthy talents beneath heaven are thereupon born. The True Ruler flourishes, and then all worthy talents under heaven are employed."⁷⁰

By using the cosmogonic term "primal life force" 元氣, Đào Cử likened scholars to the lifeblood of the kingdom. The medical analogy is pertinent. Cử depicted scholars as satellite appendages of the moral body of the king, who uniquely embodied the Đạo. Lê Tư Thành imagined that he directed scholar's talents from the center of the kingdom's geo-somatic moral center within his own person at his court. The scholars in turn

⁶⁸ The king did, however, scold Lương Thế Vinh for his lax studying in 1467. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, 12:46a–46b; John K. Whitmore, "The Development of Lê Government in Fifteenth-century Vietnam," 181.

⁶⁹ The stele was erected later in Lê Tư Thành's reign in 1484. Ngô Đức Thọ, ed., *Văn bia tiến sĩ văn miếu-quốc tử giám Thăng Long*, 157–158, 161–162. Original text: 皇上特念人才國家之元氣、不可不廣其栽培.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Original text: 真元會合、而後天下之賢才間生；真主興隆、而後天下之賢才畢用.

embodied a “primal life force” as extensions of his moral person, and thereby they transformed all the kingdom’s people through literature and learning (*giáo hóa*).

In effecting this transformation, Emperor Lê Tư Thành treated literature as his principle means of disseminating his moralizing vision. For the king, literature, especially poetry, projected a cosmic order that originated from the king, transmitted through his scholars, and radiated throughout the kingdom. Thus, Lê Tư Thành wrote and promoted poetry to inscribe the land, the people, and the minutia of everyday life with moral meaning and order.⁷¹

Vernacular Poetry

Lê Tư Thành loved poetry. Late in his reign in 1495, Tư Thành culled together twenty-seven relatively young scholars and established his circle of Tao Đàn poets.⁷² The formation of the king’s poetry club not only gave the king a venue to indulge his literary passions, but it was also meant to reflect a cosmic order parallel to twenty-eight constellations, seven in each quarter of the sky.⁷³ In the same year, the king and his elite poets composed the *Quỳnh viên cửu ca* 瓊苑九歌 or *Nine Songs from the Immortals’ Garden*.⁷⁴ He crafted the title of the poem in a way that imagined his literary circle as celestial poets, since by the eleventh-century the term *quỳnh viên*, literally “fine-jade garden” alluded to the realm of transcendents as well as the lunar palace.⁷⁵ In his nine

⁷¹ John K. Whitmore, “The Tao-Đàn Group: Poetry, Cosmology, and the State in the Hồng Đức Period (1470-1497).”

⁷² *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* 欽定越史通鑑綱目, 1881, accession no. A.1/1-9, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, 24:17a-17b.

⁷³ John K. Whitmore, “The Tao-Đàn Group: Poetry, Cosmology, and the State in the Hồng Đức Period (1470-1497),” 59.

⁷⁴ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, 13:71a.

⁷⁵ See for instance Shao Yong’s 邵雍 (1011-1077) poem “Rhymed Response to Chen Chengbo’s ‘Longevity Snow Meeting’” 依韻和陳成伯著作長壽雪會 in volume seven of the *Striking the Earth Collection* 擊壤集: 「瓊苑群花一夜新，瑤臺十二玉爲塵，城中竹葉湧增價，坐上楊花盛學春，時會梁園皆墨客，誰思姑射有神人，餘糧豈止千倉望，盈尺仍宜莫厭頻」. *Jirang ji* in *Wenyange*

songs, the king and his poets progressed through an elite literary world that began with time, a moment of prosperity; proceeded through the human sphere with the ruler, officials, worthies, literary men, and experts of occult arts; remarked on books; and culminated with natural beauty.⁷⁶ With his circle of poets, Lê Tư Thành sought to write his moral vision into existence and “issue the Đạo” as his Prime Laureate had written thirty-two years earlier.⁷⁷ In this way, Lê Tư Thành crafted a literary universe where, in keeping with the moral theory of *Đại Học* 大學 or *Great Learning*, the king perfected his inner person, somatically embodied the Dao, and projected his august morality throughout his kingdom. The king inwardly “purified his heart and rarified his passions like a straight tree from its roots and a river from its source” and issued poetry as a vehicle for Đạo.⁷⁸

However, by directing his poets through the elite literary world through the classical language, Sino-Vietnamese (Hán), the king’s experiment was incomplete. The success of Lê Tư Thành’s order hinged on balancing the diverse powers and factions within his government and the kingdom. For his virtue to truly reach what he considered the innate “goodness” of all his subjects, he could not rely merely on the language of elite scholars. In order for the king to extend his moral prowess everywhere and to everyone—soldiers, commoners, traders, the recluse, and down to every aspect of quotidian life—Lê Tư Thành needed to speak in the vernacular.

sikuquanshu (Hong Kong: Digital Heritage Publishing Limited, 2007), digital edition, 7:2b–3a. Striking the earth was the name of a game in medieval China.

⁷⁶ *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục*, 17b; John K. Whitmore, “The Tao-Đàn Group: Poetry, Cosmology, and the State in the Hồng Đức Period (1470-1497),” 63–67.

⁷⁷ According to some nineteenth-century sources, Lương Thế Vinh was included as a marginal member of the king’s Tao Đàn group. Bùi Văn Nguyễn, “Lời giới thiệu” (Introduction) in *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập*, ed. Phạm Trọng Điềm and Bùi Văn Nguyên (Hà Nội: NXB Văn học, 1982), 13. The *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập* includes a vernacular poem about the king’s visit to Lương Thế Vinh. *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập*, 17a.

⁷⁸ Phan Huy Chú, “Văn tịch chí,” ed. Đào Duy Anh in *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, vol. 2 (Hà Nội: NXB Giáo dục and Viện Sử học, 2008), 436.

Realizing this, Lê Tư Thành embraced vernacular poetry with alacrity. His approach was twofold. First, he sought to bring a centralizing order to poetic composition by insisting on the use of the highly-regulated “contemporary style” of Đường (Tang) poetry, *cận thể* 進體. Second, the king directed his literati to compose over three hundred vernacular poems, enough to match the canonized *Three Hundred Đường Poems*, and write about every facet of his kingdom from the cosmos, heroes of the past, and luminaries of his court to ordinary peasants, animals, and inanimate everyday objects. In this way, he endeavored to make his literary and therefore moral prowess inhabit his entire domain while instilling unity in a standardized poetic form.

Such was the king that Nhữ Văn Lan, Dương Đức Nhan and the other forty-two advanced scholars encountered in early 1463. Having already intimated his vision through his prompt for the 1463 palace exams and selected candidates favorable to his ideas, Lê Tư Thành moved quickly to ensure that his burgeoning literati understood his vision and what that meant for poetry. At the end of the year, the king issued a series of stern admonishments. Among those he chose to censure was Lương Như Hộc 梁如鵠 (1420–1501, *t.s.* 1442).

The process of going through successive rounds of the civil service examination created a space for likeminded candidates to associate, form lasting connections, and seek a patron.⁷⁹ In the case of Dương Đức Nhan, he not only befriended Nhữ Văn Lan, but he also seems to have found a mentor in Lương Như Hộc, who earned Third Laureate in the 1442 palace examinations.⁸⁰ By 1463, Hộc was an eminent member of the court, and he

⁷⁹ Anna M. Shields, *One Who Knows Me: Friendship and Literati Culture in Mid-Tang China*, 64–74, 82–101.

⁸⁰ Vũ Ngọc Khánh, ed., *Nhân vật chí Việt Nam* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa thông tin, 2009), 59.

had been assigned twice as an envoy to the Minh north.⁸¹ Lương Như Hộc and Dương Đức Nhan both enjoyed poetry, and they went on to produce a poetry anthology together.⁸² Since Lương Như Hộc had brought printing technology to his native village, he likely published the collection in print.⁸³ Dương Đức Nhan came from the same village as Nguyễn Văn Đạt, so the anthology was probably among Đạt's study materials.

However, whatever deference Dương Đức Nhan may have had for Lương Như Hộc, the king did not share. Among a flurry of admonishments in the twelfth lunar month of 1463, Lê Tư Thành singled out Hộc and his vernacular poetry for public censure, saying, "Earlier, Nguyễn Vĩnh Trinh, without studying vernacular poetic styles, created poems that did not conform to the rules. I thought that *you* would know, so I asked to test you. [But], you do not know either! Moreover, I looked at your *Hồng Châu Vernacular Poetry Collection*, which loses form in great abundance. I thought that you [must] not know, so I am speaking of this."⁸⁴

Here, the king wanted to discipline poetic composition. Unfortunately, we can only conjecture about the extent of the king's literary genocide and its consequences for Vietnamese vernacular literature. A dynamic and vigorous king, he may have been largely successful. Lương Như Hộc's vernacular poetry collection was lost, and virtually all extant vernacular poetry from fifteenth-century Vietnam recognizably conforms to

⁸¹ Lương Như Hộc went to Ming China in 1443 and 1459. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, 11:59b, 11:98b.

⁸² *Cổ kim chư gia tinh tuyển* 古今諸家精選 or *Selected Anthology of Past and Present Writers*, accession no. A.2567, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, Hanoi; Trần Văn Giáp, *Tìm hiểu kho sách Hán Nôm*, 793–798.

⁸³ *Hải Dương phong vật chí* 海陽風物誌, accession no. A.88, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, Hanoi, 37b–38a. Lương Như Hộc hailed from Hồng Lục Village, which is now Thanh Liễu Village, Tân Kỳ Hamlet in Tứ Kỳ District of Hải Dương Province.

⁸⁴ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, 14a–14b. Original text: 昨阮永禎不學國語詩體，作詩不入法。吾意爾知，故試問爾，爾皆不知，且吾見爾洪州國語詩集，失律尚多。意爾不知，吾便言之。Nothing is known of a Nguyễn Vĩnh Trinh; the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* may have confused the surname of Vũ Vĩnh Trinh 武永禎 (t.s. 1429).

Đường regulated verse.⁸⁵ That this is the case despite Vietnamese speakers' general preference for a cadence of even-numbered words per line (rather than the odd-numbered five or seven words per line in Đường regulated verse) and an initial consonant structure in many fifteenth-century Vietnamese words that did not neatly match the more monosyllabic Middle Chinese of Đường poetry, suggests that Lê Tư Thành's command to write strict regulated verse was rather forced and unnatural.⁸⁶ If this is true, then Lê Tư Thành's fiat would have had the effect of accenting the sense of discipline he imposed by circumscribing the laws of poetry.

The second way Lê Tư Thành employed vernacular poetry was to write profusely in order to disseminate his moral literary prowess to every dimension of his kingdom. He did this in part by writing *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập* 洪德國音詩集 or *Hồng Đức* (1470–1497) *Vernacular Poetry Collection* with his circle of poets.⁸⁷ Like the *Nine Songs from the Immortals' Garden* the *Hồng Đức Vernacular Poetry Collection* was divided into several sections that covered various facets of the realm. It began with ritual and cosmic time—seasons, holidays, watches of the day, and cycles of the moon—and proceeded to human worthies, nature and landscapes, plants and animals, inanimate objects, and a range of sundry poems, many of them written at leisure.

Some of the poems used cabalistic language alluding to the *Changes* in a way similar to those said to be part of Nguyễn Văn Dật's early education. However, the court

⁸⁵ A possible exception may be a poem by Lê Đức Mạo sometime before 1504. Phan Diễm Phương, *Lục bát và song thất lục bát (lịch sử phát triển, đặc trưng thể loại)* (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 1998), 21–22.

⁸⁶ This may account for the appearance of six-word lines in vernacular regulated verse during the 15th–16th centuries. For fifteenth-century Vietnamese and its initial consonants, see Vũ Đức Nghiệu, “Từ vựng tiếng Việt từ khoảng thế kỷ XII, XIII, đến đầu thế kỷ XX,” in *Tiếng Việt lịch sử trước thế kỷ XX: Những vấn đề quan yếu*, ed. Đinh Văn Đức (Hà Nội: NXB Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội, 2018), 113–148. On how language change affected the composition of poetic forms, see John Duong Phan, “Sesquisyllabicity, Chữ Nôm, and the Early Modern Embrace of Vernacular Writing in Vietnam,” *Journal of Chinese Writing Systems* 4, no. 3 (September 2020): 169–182.

⁸⁷ *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập* 洪德國音詩集, accession no. AB.292, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, Hanoi.

poems differed by celebrating the king. For instance, in the section on ritual, cosmic time, “Thiên địa môn” (Heaven and Earth) a court poet evoked the first hexagram of the

Changes to signal the start of the new year:

*Ba dương đã gặp thuở thời vắn,
Bốn bể đều mừng một chúa xuân.
Nức ngai vàng hương mấy hộc,
Trang cửa phượng ngọc mười phân.
Trời lồng lộng hay lòng thánh,
Gió hây hây khắp muôn dân.
Nhờ ấm nhân khi hạnh bóng nắng,
Ước dân muôn tuổi chúc ngô quân.*

Three Yangs already arrive at a revolution of time,
The four seas all celebrate the lord of spring.
Redolent about the golden throne, several hộc of incense,⁸⁸
Decorating the phoenix gate, ten parts of jade,
The vast sky knows the heart of the sage;
A gentle wind blows to the ten thousand people.
Relying on warmth when dry and bright,
Offer wishes of ten thousand years to our lord.⁸⁹

Like the poems in the story about Nguyễn Văn Đật’s early education, this poem (and others in its series about the new year) speak about the cosmic revolutions of fate. Moreover, it used coded cabalistic language. “Three Yangs” represent three solid Yang lines of the trigram Càn 乾 ☰ as shorthand for the hexagram Thái 泰 ☰, in which three Yang lines emerge at the bottom. When grafted spatially onto the geomancer’s compass and temporally through the lunar-solar calendar, the hexagram Thái correlates to the first month of the year as in the classical phrase *tam dương khai thái* 三陽開泰 or “three Yangs initiate Tranquility.” In other words, it means “three Yangs inaugurate the first month (of spring).”⁹⁰ The first line thus meant that the first month of spring had arrived at the beginning of a new yearly cycle of time.

⁸⁸ A hộc 斛 or “bushel” was a volume unit for grain equal to ten *đấu*.

⁸⁹ *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập*, 1b. Original text: 匹陽包馭課報運，翠液調恩沒主春。嚙皚鑽春余斛，粧翬鳳玉坵分，歪弄弄哈惹聖。廳熙熙恰闔民，恹蔭因欺馨膝曩，約趾闔歲祝吾君。

⁹⁰ The specific methods used in this divination technique are the Eight Palaces 八宮 formation and the Hexagram and Vital-Force 卦氣 method. Thái literally means “tranquility.” Bent Nielson, *A Companion to Yi Jing Numerology and Cosmology* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 226–227.

In the second line, the four seas celebrated the lord of spring. In the classical register, *chúa xuân* or lord of spring is *xuân đế* 春帝, a term that alluded to the God of Spring. However, the implication of this court poem is that the seas pay homage to Emperor Lê Tư Thành, fêted on his golden throne. In the sixth line, the Heavens acknowledge his sagacity. In the seventh, the king's wisdom reaches all his people like Mencius's moralizing wind that moved people's hearts just as the wind causes grasses to bow.⁹¹ In the final couplet, the king's subjects, grateful for his beneficence, wish him longevity. In the poem, the poet likened the king to a sagely divine power that inaugurated a new age of prosperity for the grateful masses.

Elsewhere in the *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập*, Lê Tư Thành used the vernacular to speak for himself. In his poem "Tự thuật" or "Self-Narrative," the king wrote:

*Lòng vì thiên hạ những sơ âu,
Thay việc trời dảm trễ dàu.
Trông dờn canh còn đọc sách,
Chiêng xé bóng chữa thôi chầu.
Nhân khi cơ biến xem người biết,⁹²
Chứa thuở kinh quyền xét lẽ mầu.
Mưa óc áo vàng chẳng có việc,
Đã muôn sự nhiệm trước vào tâu.⁹³*

[My] heart worries first for all under
heaven;
Representing Heaven's work, [I] dare not
dither.
As the bell leaves the watch, [I] am still
reading books;
With the evening gong, [I] have not stopped
holding audience at court.
When a development occurs, I see knowing
people,
Taking the time to nimbly assess the
miraculous principle.
Do not say that the golden sleeved have no
work!
Ten thousand things must be dealt with
[even] before [they are] reported.

⁹¹ Mencius is attributed with saying, "The cultivated man's virtue is the wind. Lesser people's virtue is the grass. [When] the grass bears the wind, it bends. Mencius, "Teng Wengong shang" 《孟子》滕文公上：「君子之德風也。小人之德草也草尚之風必偃。」

⁹² AB.292 seems to be missing a character in this line. I have added the word *biến* following Phạm Trọng Điềm and Bùi Văn Nguyên, ed., *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập*, 79.

⁹³ *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập*, 14a. Original text: 悉爲天下仍初謳，台役至嗽龜兜。藏移更群讀冊，鉦熾膝耆催朝。因欺機[變]貼得別，渚課經權察跡牟。嗎襖鑛庄固役，缶闌事冉輶匏奏。

In his literary self-portrait, Lê Tư Thành, true to Mencius, was a moral idealist. Placing his poem first among a host of historical, divine, and contemporary worthies in a section on “the human world,” the king displayed his benevolence by putting the people before himself and working tirelessly on their behalf.⁹⁴ At the same time, the king studied and strived to grasp the mysterious workings of the cosmos, *lẽ mầu*, to cultivate the prescience of a sage, who could attend to his people’s troubles before they even arose. Whereas, in the new year poem, Lê Tư Thành contemplated the mysteries of seasonal transformation, in his “Self-Narrative,” he fathomed the hidden machinery (*cơ biến*) behind social developments and human interactions.

However, as mentioned earlier, the king could not simply pontificate lofty ideals. He needed to ensure that his moral being could touch the least sophisticated and unreceptive people in his land. Realizing the limits of elite didacticism through classical learning, the king focused much of his literary reformation on poetic form. Poetry could serve as a vessel to transmit transformative teachings, but in Lê Tư Thành’s moral cosmogony, the very existence of poetry was transformative.⁹⁵ For Lê Tư Thành, any poetry was a manifestation of his moral prowess, the vibrancy of his “primal life force,” and the health of the king’s inner-spirit and by extension the wellbeing of the kingdom and its peoples. Any poetry that was not seditious or outright offensive was good poetry so long as it “conformed to the laws” of poetry (*nhập pháp* 入法 as the king reminded Lương Như Hộc) and exhibited order through regulated verse.

⁹⁴ The vernacular term *sơ âu* is probably a vernacular allusion to Fan Zhongyan’s 范仲淹 (989–1052) concept of *xianyou* 先憂 in his maxim in *Record of Yueyang Tower* 岳陽樓記 (1046), “Worry first before all under heaven [must] worry; rejoice last after all under heaven have rejoiced” 先天下之憂而憂，後天下之樂而樂. Nguyễn Văn Đạt would use this allusion repeatedly in his vernacular and classical poetry.

⁹⁵ John K. Whitmore, “The Tao-Dàn Group: Poetry, Cosmology, and the State in the Hồng Đức Period (1470-1497),” 67.

Therefore, in the *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập*, the king and his poets applied their writing talents in regulated verse to the most mundane minutia of plebian life—the kitchen, bamboo, various flowers, chickens, bananas, tubers, conical hats, toads, pestles, mosquitoes, ants, canes, fans, kites, eggs, lice, a stone dog, etc. To cite one notable example, consider “*Cây đánh đu*” or “The Swing.”

*Bốn cột lang nha cắm để trồng,
 Ả đã đánh cái ả thì ngong.
 Tế hạt thổ khom khom cật,
 Vái hoàng thiên giữa giữa lòng.
 Tám bức quần hồng bay phới phới,
 Hai hàng chân ngọc đứng song song.
 Chơi xuân hết tác đường xuân ấy,
 Nhỏ cột đem về để lỗ không.⁹⁶*

Four poles of areca branches are stuck in and
 planted;
 One girl swings—one girl watches.
 Worshipping the Earth God, back hunched
 up,
 Praying to August Heaven, breast supine,
 Eight flaps of rosy dresses fly, flapping
 about,⁹⁷
 Two pairs of jade legs standing parallel,
 Disporting in spring to their hearts’
 content—such is spring,
 Pulling out the pole to carry it back, the hole
 is left empty.

In contrast to the two previous poems, in “The Swing,” the king’s poet used ordinary language without alluding to an obscure literary past, lofty morals, or esoteric terminology. Instead, he wrote about a rustic image of playing girls with everyday props, areca branches, and the four-piece dress. In place of the king, the girls appeared to be revering the Earth God and August Heaven, spirits of common folk. The king receded in majesty and presence, but his poetic form remained. Thus, the king’s literary body manifested therein.

In order to maximize the effect of his court’s more folkish poems, the king probably encouraged their oral transmission among common folk. Moreover, I would conjecture that he may have disseminated the *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập* as templates for

⁹⁶ *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập*, 54b. Original text: 翠檳榔杪攢底揔，姪它打丐姪群顛。祭后土欽欽脍，拜皇天語語悉。綵幅裙紅毵派派，缸行躡玉蹲雙雙。制春歇掇春兼意，撸檳尤術底魯空。

⁹⁷ Possibly a reference to two sets of the traditional “four-piece dress” or *áo tứ thân* of northern Vietnam.

folk vernacular compositions as well. If that were his intention, then he appears to have succeeded, since the poems were clearly spread orally and inspired novel literary adaptations. Indeed, a more sensual modification of “The Swing” would later be attributed to an early nineteenth-century courtesan (and other less saucy ones to Nguyễn Văn Đạt, too) through folk adaptation and attribution.⁹⁸ Although the extent of common folks’ use of vernacular poetry is difficult to assess, the apparent widespread use of regulated verse in the fifteenth-century and thereafter points to the success of the king’s literary project.⁹⁹

The Recluse

As I have attempted to show, Emperor Lê Tư Thành was an idealist who believed that, by inwardly cultivating his moral being and projecting it outwardly through the scholars, he could bring order and prosperity to his people. Essential to this project was poetry, including vernacular literature. From his court in Thăng Long, Lê Tư Thành performed the work of Heaven, and, from the zenith of his transcendent garden of poets, he radiated poetry’s transformative power so that his perfected moral body would pulse throughout the kingdom.

This is where Lê Tư Thành’s view of literature differed fundamentally from those Nguyễn Văn Đạt experienced from his parents. His father Nguyễn Văn Định acknowledged the primacy of the king’s moral being, but he chose to remain detached from it. He heeded the king’s instruction, but he remained vigilantly aloof. Meanwhile,

⁹⁸ A similar poem also called “The Swing” is attributed to Hồ Xuân Hương (fl. early 19th C.). Hoàng Ngọc Bích noted that four other poems in the *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập* may have inspired adaptations in Hồ Xuân Hương’s poetry. Đào Thái Tôn, “Về bài thơ ‘đánh đu’ được xem là của Hồ Xuân Hương,” *Văn Nghệ* 25 (June 1978); Hoàng Ngọc Bích, *Hồ Xuân Hương: con người, tư tưởng, tác phẩm* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa Thông tin, 2003), 441–442. Two other poems titled “Self-Narrative” in the *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập* reflect a literary style like that of Nguyễn Văn Đạt. *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập*, 58b–59a, 60b–61a.

⁹⁹ Lê Nhâm Thìn, *Thơ Nôm Đường luật* (Hà Nội: NXB Giáo dục, 1998), 41–43.

Đạt's mother Từ Thục appeared willing to contemplate alternative geo-somatic centers to the king's; she envisioned her littoral homeland with its own regal geomantic properties and a "primal life force" of its own originating with the Yang of the rising sun. By contrast, Nhữ Văn Lan was in the king's blood at the very heart of the latter's moralizing project since its inception during the 1463 examinations.

How did Nguyễn Văn Đạt reconcile these divergent messages? Where did he see himself as an aspiring scholar? With his grandfather as mentor starting in 1503, Đạt encountered a range of novel ideas and literature associated with the late king's Hồng Đức reign. How did he make sense of them?

One way that Nguyễn Văn Đạt interpreted the divergent life trajectories presented to him by his parents and grandfather was through reclusion. His father was an unengaged scholar as was his grandfather after retirement. Moreover, as Đạt studied the literature of the Hồng Đức period from his grandfather, including the poetry anthology published by Dương Đức Nhân and Lương Như Hộc, he would have encountered new precedents for reclusion from the Hồng Đức period.

One such precedent was the recluse Vũ Dật Trai 武逸齋 (fl. 15th C.). Known only as the recluse Dật Trai (his sobriquet), Dật Trai was like Nguyễn Văn Đạt's father a local teacher who refused to participate in Lê Tư Thành's regime. He hailed from Mộ Trạch Village and came from the same family lineage as the prominent scholar and historian Vũ Quỳnh 武瓊 (1453–1497, *t.s.* 1478).¹⁰⁰ Once, while visiting the capital, Dật Trai was shown a series of poems from the *Hồng Đức Vernacular Poetry Collection* about four quintessential images of the recluse in classical learning: the fisherman, woodcutter,

¹⁰⁰ Mộ Trạch Village is now in Tân Hồng Hamlet in Bình Giang District of Hải Dương Province.

ploughman, and ox herder.¹⁰¹ However, Dật Trai was unimpressed. A recluse himself, he felt that the king and his poets were “a bit pretentious.”¹⁰²

Someone reported Dật Trai’s unflattering commentary to Emperor Lê Tư Thành. (Such was the importance of poetry in the age of this king!). Livid, the Hồng Đức king summoned Dật Trai and issued a challenge: do better or suffer severe punishment. Dật Trai meditated deep into the night (with such effort that his hair turned white!), culled his poems, and, the next day, submitted his elucubrations to the throne.

The now pacific king praised the recluse’s poems and, recognizing his talent, richly rewarded him. The king then tried to recruit him into his service. However, Dật Trai, true to form, declined and returned home, where he spent the remainder of his life.¹⁰³

This interaction, however embellished in the hybrid genealogical genre, reflects how Lê Tư Thành dealt with the problem of disengaged scholars. Whether they eschewed state politics out of principle or personal preference, recluses like Nguyễn Văn Định and Vũ Dật Trai presented the king with a problem: how to extend the king’s moral being to those who deliberately renounced or even snubbed his sense of august virtue?

Lê Tư Thành’s solution was to participate in and thereby celebrate the eremitic tradition. The king embraced the somewhat ritualized tradition of “summoning the recluse,” the *locus classicus* of which originated in the *Masters of Hoài Nam*’s “Summoning the Recluse” (“Chiêu ẩn sĩ” 招隱士, c. 139).¹⁰⁴ This is why, for his *Hồng Đức Vernacular Poetry Collection*, the king included a series of poems on those whom

¹⁰¹ These are the set of poems “Tứ thú” (four delights) in *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập*, 33a–35b.

¹⁰² My interpretation of 微有不足意. *Vũ tộc thế hệ sự tích* 武族世系事跡, original text in Nguyễn Văn Nguyên, ed. *Vũ tộc thế hệ sự tích, Mộ Trạch, Hải Dương*, trans. Vũ Thế Khôi (Hà Nội: NXB Thế Giới, 2004), 677.

¹⁰³ *Vũ tộc thế hệ sự tích*, 677–678.

¹⁰⁴ Alan Berkowitz, “The Moral Hero: A Pattern of Reclusion in Traditional China,” *Monumenta Serica* 40 (1992): 1–32; A.E. Erkes, “The Chao-Yin-Shi: ‘Calling Back the Scholar,’ by Huai-Nan-Tze,” *Asia Major* 1 (1924): 119–124.

Alan Berkowitz called “wise rustics,” recluses unassumingly guised as fishermen, woodcutters, ploughman, or ox herders, etc.¹⁰⁵ By summoning Dật Trai, who had deemed the king’s series of poems “pretentious,” to the court and testing Dật Trai’s integrity and literary skill, the king effectively appropriated his principled livelihood while allowing the recluse to extemporaneously participate in the king’s literary universe before returning to obscurity. Thus, Lê Tư Thành simultaneously acknowledged Dật Trai’s integrity and affirmed his own magnanimity.

To better understand how Nguyễn Văn Đật may have encountered seclusion in his youth, let us look at how Dật Trai presented his “authentic” vision of eremitism in the *Hồng Đức Vernacular Poetry Collection*. Although the extant text of collection does not record the authors of the series of sixteen poems on the “four delights” (that is the four recluses), we can reasonably infer who wrote them based on what we know about Vũ Dật Trai and the poems’ sequence. First appears four poems on each of the “four delights”—fisherman, woodcutter, ploughman, and ox herder (1–4). These are then followed by four poems in response (5–8). All eight of these poems follow the same rhyme. After these eight poems is a summary poem (9), in which all four recluses speak to one another. This is followed by another set of four poems on each recluse (10–13). Finally, there is a poem on the fisherman (14) and two responses to them in matching rhyme (15–16).

The genealogical record on Dật Trai says that he responded to poems on the four recluses, so I take the first four poems as the king’s (or his poets’) original compositions (1–4) and the next four as Dật Trai’s responses (5–8). The summary poem (9) suggests that it was composed at court after Dật Trai submitted his responses, which were well-received. Having succeeded in impressing the king (and avoiding punishment), Dật Trai

¹⁰⁵ Alan Berkowitz, “The Moral Hero: A Pattern of Reclusion in Traditional China,” 22–24.

may have been invited to engage in another ceremonial round of poetry exchanges, this time in person at court. The next four (10–13) would then be the court’s poems. These poems are followed by a poem on a fisherman (14), and two responses (15–16). The latter two may have been by Dật Trai, since no other responses to the court’s second round of poems survived.

Below is the last poem in the series on the “four delights” (16). Even though Dật Trai’s authorship of the poem cannot be definitively confirmed, the poem, “The Fisherman’s Boat” reflects how Lê Tư Thành’s court and the recluse probably interacted:

*Ngày hằng cuối bãi đỗ phơi chài,
Ra rả nhàn qua tháng tiểu đài.
Nước ngược xuôi dòng màng chực rốn,
Rượu ngon lạt đối quán liêu đài.
Thẳng lèo buồm vượt giương chèo quế,
Đắp cửa mũi nằm mãi giấc hòe.
Xuất xứ đòi thì đều phải đạo,
Trong đời há có mấy lầm ai.¹⁰⁶*

All day moored at the end of the dock,
drying fishing nets,
Constantly at leisure, passing months long
and short,
Against the stream or with the current—no
need to wait on the line!
Exchanging fine wine for the bland, [I]
adjust [my] belt.
Sailing straight across, raising the
cinnamon oars,
Sealing the door, I lie on top of the boat,
forever dreaming about the ghost
tree.
To go off or abide—following the times
must be true to the Đạo,
In life, how many have mistaken who?

Here, Vũ Dật Trai described the idyllic life of the reclusive fisherman. At the docks, he was unengaged, only idly waiting for his nets to dry (a rather pointless exercise!). He was carefree in the face of change and the procession of time, indifferent to the changing flow of the river as time ceaselessly passed uneventfully. The fisherman was passionless. He had no ambition for his catch, and he delighted in tasteless wine. In motion on the river, too, he was unperturbed. He shut out the world and set straight off to

¹⁰⁶ *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập*, 36b. Original text: 晷恆踰壘杜披紆，呂呂閑戈腦小大。諾虐吹泫忙直脰，醕喧瀲對管料帶。醴繚帆漣揚棹桂，塔鰲簌齟買職槐。出處隊報調沛道，工代呵固余林埃。

drift in dreams. His life was aimless, having mastered Trang Tử's (Zhuangzi) art of immaculate uselessness.¹⁰⁷

However, what is more remarkable about the poem is that Vũ Dật Trai intimated the epistemology of the recluse: how does one truly know people and the times? The pivotal question for the recluse was *xuất xử*—to go off into officialdom or abide disengaged. As Dật Trai wrote in the seventh line, choosing when to go or stay required prescience. Moreover, the recluse needed insight into human character. In the final line, Dật Trai effectively asks, “Who has mistaken who?” Has the fisherman mistaken the king as an unworthy ruler, or is the ruler actually a sage? Has the king in turn mistaken the recluse for a virtuous eremite, or is he really just a lazy fisherman? Of course, the fisherman elides certainty. He allows the beauty of the poem to hinge on the irreconcilable irony of the “wise rustic” with his invisible virtue and its clever juxtaposition with the king’s self-professed sagacity.

As the fisherman, Vũ Dật Trai not only presented this paradox to the beckoning king, he preempted such questioning and nipped it in the bud. He did this through literary allusions. In the third line, the poet wrote, “No need to wait on the line.” He was speaking not only about his approach to fishing, but also by allusion to the story of Khương Tử Nha 姜子牙 (Jiang Ziya, fl. 11th B.C.E.), who in legend fished patiently with a hookless fishing line until his worth was recognized by a sage.¹⁰⁸ But Dật Trai was not waiting. Traveling upstream and downstream, Dật Trai eluded inquiry and absconded to dreams of the ghost tree.

¹⁰⁷ Zhuangzi developed his idea of immaculate uselessness in “Idyllic Wandering” 逍遙遊, the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子.

¹⁰⁸ Jiang Ziya is said to have been discovered by King Wen of Zhou. His story was richly embellished in the sixteenth-century novel *Investiture of the Gods* 封神演義.

In the sixth line, *giác hòe* or “dream of the ghost tree” invoked Lý Công Tá’s 李公佐 (Li Gongzuo, c.778-848) story about the Commander of the Southern Branch.¹⁰⁹ I will say much more about this Đường Dynasty tale of “transmitted wonder” in a later chapter. Here, Dật Trai alluded to this dream journey to signal his disinterest in officialdom. In the story, an errant drunk slumbered beneath a ghost tree and, in his dreams, experienced an entire life and career in the Tranquil Kingdom of the Ghost Tree.¹¹⁰ When he woke up, he discovered that it was all a dream, drunken hallucinations about an ant colony, which soon vanished in an extempore storm. Or perhaps it was really a journey to the realm of the dead?¹¹¹ The elisions of such uncanny tales aside, Dật Trai’s message to the king was clear. Officialdom (indeed life) was of no more significance to him than a fleeting dream.

Conclusion

Nguyễn Văn Dật was born into an erudite family in the littoral east. During his childhood, his native coastal lands prospered from maritime trade that fostered an environment of plural ethnicities, livelihoods, and ideas. People of the east, including those of Dật’s lineage, believed in the geomantic excellence of their lands and by extension the inhabitants it nurtured. At the same time, Dật encountered a landscape inscribed with legends and literature about its water-bound denizens. Thus, Dật experienced a range of ideas and images about his homeland that were plaited through the

¹⁰⁹ Li Gongzuo, “Nanke Taishou Zhuan 南柯太守傳 (An Account of the Governor of the Southern Branch)” in *Tang Dynasty Tales a Guided Reader*, ed. and trans. William H. Nienhauser (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), 131-187.

¹¹⁰ William H. Nienhauser more accurately translates *huai* 槐 “locust tree.” See note 12 on page 134 of his translation “Nanke Taishou Zhuan 南柯太守傳 (An Account of the Governor of the Southern Branch).” I translate *huai* “ghost tree” to highlight the word’s eeriness in “Transmitted Wonders” literature and draw attention to the ideograph’s reading in “split character” 折字 logomancy, in which its constituent parts are tree 木 and ghost 鬼. In the “Transmitted Wonders” genre, the tree was associated with seductive female tree spirits called *mumei* 木魅.

¹¹¹ Carrie Reed, “Messages from the Dead in “Nanke Taishou Zhuan,” *CLEAR: Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 31 (2009): 121-30.

conflated mediums of state geographies, geomantic texts, storytelling, and talismanic poetry.

There, what it meant to be a scholar of the east was changing and uncertain. Core to this question was the local scholar's relationship to the central authority. Nguyễn Văn Đạt's confrontation with this was both familial and immediate. His father chose to remain disengaged from the state. He willfully entertained the possibility of learning and literature that was inconsequential, indulgent, and fun. He acknowledged the authority of the capital, but he reserved a degree of aloof autonomy. By contrast, Đạt's mother's vision for learning was deliberate and uniquely tied to the geomantic qualities of her homeland. She saw the east with exceptionalism. She felt a sense of a tradition that could be traced to the thirteenth-century Trần kings as well as a destiny for her homeland that could eclipse Thăng Long.

But for several years starting in 1503, Nguyễn Văn Đạt's principle teacher, his grandfather, presented Đạt with an equally imposing "orthodox" role for the budding scholar. Imbedded in Thăng Long's court culture for four decades, Đạt's grandfather represented the vision of the former Emperor Lê Tư Thành. For men like Đạt's grandfather, scholar-officials were vessels of a morality rooted in classical learning as extensions of the ruler's central erudition and benevolence. Scholars had no real literary autonomy. For an official during the reigns of Lê Tư Thành and his son, any and all poetry was ultimately a manifestation of the king's immaculate "innate vital quality," which radiated to all dimensions of the realm.

Still, the anomalous persisted. Men emerged like the recluse Vũ Dật Trai. They renounced the king and audaciously denied his right to speak for them. Emperor Lê Tư Thành understood the disruption men like Dật Trai posed to his moral literary order. He

tried to threaten, bribe, and compel them to enter his fold, but faced with uncompromising renunciants like Dật Trai, the king demurred. By interacting with them through poetry and discourse, the king may have succeeded in appropriating their image, but not without tacitly acknowledging the recluses' superior virtue.

As we shall see, anomalous scholars like Vũ Dật Trai fascinated Nguyễn Văn Đật even as he delved increasingly deeper into his studies on the workings of fate. But the recluse Dật Trai was not the only hero to dream of the “ghost tree.” Another was Nguyễn Trãi. As much as Đật's family and teachers, the legacy of Nguyễn Trãi impacted how Đật (and indeed his entire generation) viewed the scholar's trade in Đại Việt. Trãi's legacy(ies) questioned not only the role of the scholar vis-à-vis the state, but moreover it challenged the very meaningfulness of the scholars themselves. Therefore, like the recluse, Lê Tư Thành wished to carefully curate Trãi's image. But anomalies endured. It is to Đật's encounter with Nguyễn Trãi's legacy that we turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

NGUYỄN TRÃI AND FIFTEENTH CENTURY STORYTELLING AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Death of a Unicorn

During the latter half of the first century of the common era, Dương Phu 楊孚 (fl. 77–88), a native of Phiên Ngung 番禺 (modern Quảng Châu/Guangzhou), culled the extraordinary and strange things he witnessed “south of the passes” at the periphery of the Eastern Hán (Han) empire into a compendium known as the *Dị vật chí* 異物志 or *Gazetteer of Unusual Things*. In his accounts of the strange, Dương Phu described the *trãi*, “In the northeastern wilds, there is a beast called the *giải trãi*. It has one horn. By nature, it is devoted. When it sees people fight, it rams the one who is not upright. When it hears people argue, it yells at the one who is improper.”¹¹²

Nguyễn Trãi 阮鵬 (1380–1442) was such a unicorn.¹¹³ He was irrepressibly devoted to his family’s legacy as an honest scholar and incorruptible statesman as well as the displaced progeny of royal blood. In many ways, he was an idealist, a stubborn believer in humankind’s capacity for moral betterment and the simple, but elegant ways of the past, including the music and rites at the time of his upbringing.¹¹⁴ Like his audacious father, who had wooed Trãi’s mother, a royal princess, through vernacular poetry, Trãi

¹¹² Wu Yongzhang 吳永章, *Yiwu zhi jidie xiaozhu* 異物輯佚校注 (*Collation and Annotation of the Lost Writings of the Gazetteer of Uncanny Things*) (Guangzhou: Guangdong Renmin Chubanshe, 2010), 38.

¹¹³ Esta Ungar, “Vietnamese Leadership and Order: Dai Viet under the Le Dynasty” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1983), 221.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 222–228.

was fond of women and literature.¹¹⁵ He was known to visit pleasure quarters, and he exchanged vernacular poems with women he fancied.¹¹⁶ His descendants recorded that Trãi won over his comely wife, Nguyễn Thị Lộ 阮氏路 (?–1442) through such a poetic encounter.¹¹⁷ Whether Lộ was herself a courtesan is uncertain, but she was clearly well-versed in the feminine arts of literary entertainment. Moreover, she possessed both a pleasant complexion and refined talent. Lộ was presumably acclimated to life in Thăng Long (Hà Nội) during Minh (Ming) rule (1407–1427), but then she appears to have been displaced in the wake of the Minh's departure. Afterwards, she was reduced to peddling in the capital's streets.¹¹⁸ By the time she met Trãi as she hawked her wares, the scholar had endured two decades of restless adventuring. They suited one another well.

Approximately a decade and a half later, Nguyễn Thị Lộ had (whether by design or happenstance is uncertain) caught the attention of Đại Việt's young king, who became infatuated with her. She found herself at the center of intrigue as a tutor to palace woman, while her husband, Nguyễn Trãi, had effectively banished himself from the capital and retired to his family retreat in the mountains east of where Thiên Đức (Đuống) River ended as it flowed out into tributaries further down the delta. In the seventh lunar month of 1442, when the king went on an inspection tour east of the capital, Trãi, who, despite

¹¹⁵ Stephen O'Harrow, "Nguyen Trai's *Binh Ngo Dai Cao* 平吳大誥 of 1428: The Development of Vietnamese National Identity," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 10, no. 1 (March 1979): 161; John K. Whitmore, *Vietnam, Ho Quy Ly, and the Ming (1371-1421)* (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1985), 25.

¹¹⁶ Cao Hữu Lạng, "Một bài thơ tình của Nguyễn Trãi," in *Nguyễn Trãi về tác gia và tác phẩm*, ed. Nguyễn Hữu Sơn (Hà Nội: NXB Giáo dục, 1999), 564–565.

¹¹⁷ The poem is found in the extant genealogies of Nguyễn Trãi's son, Phạm (Nguyễn) Anh Vũ 范鸚鵡, and brother Nguyễn Nhữ Soạn 阮汝撰 (1391–1448). Bùi Văn Nguyên, *Nguyễn Trãi* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa: 1980), 96.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

retirement still acted in attenuated official capacity, ventured to invite the king to Trãi's family retreat. The king agreed.¹¹⁹

On the way to Nguyễn Trãi's place, the king encountered something strange. A spirit, perhaps foreboding things to come, prevented the king's boat from advancing. However, after soliciting local wisdom, the king propitiated the spirit and punted on. He met with Trãi and then departed. Before leaving, however, the king insisted that Nguyễn Thị Lộ accompany him back to his palace.¹²⁰

On September 7, 1442, travelling upstream along Thiên Đức River, the king and Nguyễn Thị Lộ stopped at Lychee Garden.¹²¹ They "passed the night" together—a clear reference to the sexual act.¹²² By morning, the king was dead. Lộ was dragged back to the capital, tortured to extract confession of regicide, and placed in a cage, after which she was tossed into a river to drown. The unicorn was summarily killed.¹²³

The Shadow of Lychee Garden

In the last chapter, I drew attention to the indeterminacy of Nguyễn Văn Dật's life trajectory in light of his upbringing. He experienced plural articulations about what it meant to be a student of the Confucian classics, Sinographic writing, vernacular literature, and the cultured heritage of his littoral homeland. Dật's father embodied detachment from central authority in pursuit of the quiet pleasures of a local scholar, while his mother cast a

¹¹⁹ Lê Văn Hưu 黎文休, Phan Phu Tiên 潘孚先, Ngô Sĩ Liên 吳士連 et al, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 大越史記全書 (printed in 1697, accession number PD.2310), original Sinographic text with translation in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, ed. Phan Huy Lê, Ngô Đức Thọ, and Hà Văn Tấn, 4 vols. (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1998), bản kỷ, 11.55a–b.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Lychee Garden 荔枝園 is now in Gia Bình District of Bắc Ninh Province.

¹²² *Thông* 通 in "passed the night" 通宵, the phrase used in the dynastic annals, meant "penetration" and "fornicate" in Lê Dynasty legal texts. Trần Tuyết Nhung, *Familial Properties: Gender, State, and Society in Early Modern Vietnam, 1463–1778* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2018), 119–120.

¹²³ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 11.55b–56a; Phan Huy Chú 潘輝注 (1782–1840), *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí* (1819) (Hà Nội: Viện Sử học và NXB Giáo dục, 2007), vol. 1, .276. Details Nguyễn Thị Lộ's torture and watery death come from transmitted lore about her as a snake spirit. See below.

larger purview that imagined the local scholar as temporally connected to the legacy of the former Trần Dynasty and projected her vision into a future when the littoral east was again ascendant through a revival that she hoped her son would lead. A decade later, Đạ's celebrated grandfather Nhữ Văn Lan began formally imparting to him Emperor Lê Tu Thành's vision for the young scholar as part of the cultured literary lifeblood of the kingdom. At the same time, Đạ realized that the arc of his mentor's career from aspiring student and then government official to retired local dignitary and teacher intimated the temporality of this indeterminacy—what it meant to embody learning as a scholar was a matter of timing. *Xuất xử*—to go into action or to quietly abide? Đạ ruminated about this question. Thus, he engaged his era's arts of time: numerology, astrology, and geomancy as well as its idiom as expressed through poetry and canonized in the *Changes*.

At the heart of Đạ's inquiry was the question of reclusion. Although less immediate than Nguyễn Văn Đạ's experiences with his family mentors, the possibility of renouncing the call to officialdom represented by men like Vũ Dật Trai piqued the young scholar. Renunciation was a radical departure from the paths exemplified by Đạ's grandfather, mother, and father. Whereas the latter was reclusive but never outright renounced central authority, Dật Trai's chose a path that ejected him from the king's *văn* 文, "patterned" universe and cultured, moral cosmology. The renunciant, Đạ would have quickly understood, was anomalous to dynastic time and space. Therein, Đạ seems to have been fascinated by the possibility of standing outside time and space such that the cultured body of the renunciant floated above convention and sojourned through historical time and space. Indeed, future generations of men would remember him thus.¹²⁴ But

¹²⁴ Keith W. Taylor, "Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of History and Nation," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 51, no. 4 (November 1998), 961–962.

during his lifetime in sixteenth century Đại Việt, Đat began to reshape the question of “to go or to abide” so that like a wandering literary traveler he could ask, “Where to moor?”

At the age of fifty-one, Nguyễn Văn Đat would eventually choose to moor centered along the banks of Tuyết (“snow”) River 雪江 “left” of his village.¹²⁵ However, in the years immediately after his grandfather returned and educated him, Đat would have witnessed the fragility of the “patterned,” hereafter “cultured,” tradition preeminent during his grandfather’s career. Despite Emperor Lê Tư Thành’s attempt to revitalize his family’s imperial project through bureaucratic governance undergirded by an ideology rooted in learning and the so-called Confucian classics, his cultural “experiment” quickly unraveled with the death of his successor.¹²⁶ More violent and seemingly capricious men, puerile rulers depicted by later scholar-historians as the “Demon King” and “Pig King”—the apparent anathema to Emperor Lê Tư Thành’s experiment—came to power.

Thus, at the end of 1504, when the so-called Demon King took the throne, Nguyễn Văn Đat’s path as a scholar remained uncertain. Not only had he received “mixed messages” about how a scholar should lead his life, the possibility of resolution through a life trajectory like his grandfather’s seemed increasingly tenuous. As Đat’s mother is said to have presaged, “The surging flames of [the Lê Dynasty’s] destiny would grow faint.”¹²⁷ Faced with the dynasty’s precipitating course of events, Đat must have contemplated his future: to “lay low” as a peripheral village scholar like his father, to “stand out” by striving

¹²⁵ In geomancy, “left” means east. The river was also called Hàn (“cold”) River 寒江, where the Hàn (“cold”) Ferry Crossing 寒渡 was located.

¹²⁶ Here, I am evoking Keith Taylor’s depiction of King Lê Tư Thành’s reorientation of government as a fragile and somewhat anomalous experiment. See his *History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 219, 222–223.

¹²⁷ Vũ Khâm Lân (1703–? t.s. 1727), “Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đat” 白雲庵居士阮公文達譜記 (1744) appended to Vũ Phương Đê, *Quick Jottings in Idleness* 公餘捷記, manuscript (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), accession no. A.44, 56a.

to dictate his land's fate as his mother inculcated, or to "exit" through renunciation as did the recluse Dật Trai.

Here is where Nguyễn Văn Đạm's story intersects that of Nguyễn Trãi. From the instance of the latter's death after the Lychee Garden affair, individuals of various backgrounds and ambitions evoked Trãi's memory in response to the troubles of the moment. For men like Đạm (indeed, for generations of men like him), the spectacle and apparent inexplicability of the Lychee Garden affair converged to create a troubling memory that resonated with increasingly vulnerable scholars as custodians of an endangered cultured heritage during the Lê dynasty's degeneration. Therefore, to understand how Đạm navigated these moments of his life, we must study, as did Đạm, the life, legacy, and remembrances of Nguyễn Trãi.

Recluses of White Cloud Hermitage

Many scholars have commented on the pronounced similarity of vernacular poems attributed to Nguyễn Văn Đạm and Nguyễn Trãi.¹²⁸ While the apparent commercial, indiscriminate "crowd-sourcing" efforts of self-described fanatic admirers of the two poets who anthologized their writings in print surely had much to do with this, that the reading communities that sourced these publications so readily conflated the poets' writings

¹²⁸ Bùi Duy Tân, "Một thế kỷ khảo cứu văn bản thơ Nôm Nguyễn Trãi," in *Nhìn Lại Hán Nôm Học Việt Nam Thế Kỷ XX* (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2003): 548–563; Bùi Thanh Ba, "Chữ của Nguyễn Trãi nên trả về cho Nguyễn Trãi," *Tạp Chí Văn Học* 2 (1975): 75; Bùi Văn Nguyên, "Mấy vấn đề cần được xác minh thêm trong văn thơ Nguyễn Trãi," *Tạp Chí Văn Học* 6, no. 138 (Nov/Dec 1972); _____, *Thơ quốc âm Nguyễn Trãi* (Tân Bình: NXB Giáo dục, 1994), 24–30; Hoàng Thị Ngo, "Suy nghĩ thêm về quá trình truyền bản *Quốc âm thi tập* của Nguyễn Trãi," *Tạp chí Hán Nôm* 57, no. 2 (2003), 64–69; Nguyễn Tài Cẩn, "Thử tìm cách xác định tác giả một số bài thơ hiện chưa rõ là của Nguyễn Trãi hay của Nguyễn Bình Khiêm," *Tạp chí Văn Học* 3 (1986): 76–86; Nguyễn Thiên Thư, *Nguyễn Trãi* (Saigon: Lửa Thiêng, 1973), 230–254; Tạ Ngọc Liễn, "Bài thơ Nôm của Nguyễn Trãi hay của Nguyễn Bình Khiêm," *Tạp chí Hán Nôm* 53, no. 4 (2002): 45–46.

suggests some connection between.¹²⁹ The following is one example of remarkably similar poems.

Nguyễn Trãi is believed to have written:

“Lamenting Myself,” No. 15
自嘆十五

*Lòng người Man Xúc nhọc đua hơi,
Chẳng cóc nhân sinh gửi chơi.
Thoi nhạt nguyệt đưa qua mỗi phút,
Áng phồn hoa hợp mấy trăm đời.
Hoa càng khoe tốt tốt thì rữa,
Nước chứa cho đầy đầy ắt vơi.
Mới biết doanh hư đà có số,
Ai từng cải được lòng trời.*

The hearts of people of the Man and Xúc
[clans] exhausted themselves
contending,
Not knowing that [we] are tossed into human
life in jest.
Sun and moon shuttle by in just moments,
While burgeoning flowers meet over several
hundred generations.
Flowers show off beauty more and more, until
beauty rots;
Water fills until full, until the full is depleted.
Only then is it realized that repletion and
depletion are numbered [by fate];
Who has ever changed heaven’s heart?¹³⁰

Meanwhile, Nguyễn Văn Đạt is thought to have written:

White Cloud Hermitage Poems,
“No. 52”
白雲庵詩·五拾貳

Làm người chen chúc nhọc đua hơi,

To be a human is to jostle, exhaustively

¹²⁹ Dương Bá Cung 楊伯恭 (1794-1868), a native of Nguyễn Trãi’s home village, collected materials about Trãi from genealogies, private collections, unofficial histories, dynastic histories, and oral tales to compile and, in circa 1837, print a seven-fascicle anthology of Trãi’s writings along with stories about him. The manner in which Cung conducted the bookmaking process suggests that his motivations may have been partially commercial, since he traveled north and south to solicit materials from “every scholar he met,” recruited an esteemed editor (Ngô Thế Vinh 吳世榮, 1802-1856), and acquired prefaces from accomplished scholars (Vinh and Nguyễn Năng Tĩnh 阮能靜, fl. 19th C.). These practices, namely the establishment of elite networks to source materials and prepare them for print, parallel those of Qing commercial publishers in China during the nineteenth-century. See Cung, Vinh, and Tĩnh’s prefaces in the Phúc Khê edition (1868) of *Ức Trai di tập* (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. A.134) in Hoàng Khôi, ed., *Nguyễn Trãi toàn tập* (NXB Văn hóa thông tin, 2001), 1.1a–6b. For examples of publishers’ networking see Hilde De Weerd, “Continuities between Scribal and Print Publishing in Twelfth-Century Song China—the Case of Wang Míngqíng’s Serialized Notebooks” *East Asian Publishing and Society* 6, no. 1 (2016): 54-83; for Qing commercial publishing see Cynthia J. Brokaw, “Commercial Publishing in Late Imperial China: The Zou and Ma Family Businesses of Sibao, Fujian.” *Late Imperial China* 7, no. 1 (1996): 49-83; Tobie Meyer-Fong, “Packaging the Men of Our Times: Literary Anthologies, Friendship Networks, and Political Accommodation in the Early Qing.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 64.1 (2004): 5–56.

¹³⁰ Nguyễn Trãi, *Quốc âm thi tập*, volume 7 of *Ức Trai di tập* 抑齋遺集 (Phúc Khê edition, 1868) in Mai Quốc Liên ed., *Nguyễn Trãi toàn tập tân biên*, vol. 3 (Hà Nội: NXB Văn học, 2001), 832.

Chẳng khác nhân sinh ở gửi chơi.
 Thoi nhật nguyệt đưa thắm thoát,
 Ấng phần hoa khá lạt phai.
 Hoa càng khoe nở hoa nên rữa,
 Nước chứa cho đầy nước ắt vơi.
 Mới biết doanh hư đà có số,
 Ai từng dời được đạo trời.

contending;
 Human life is no different than being tossed
 into a game.
 Sun and moon shuttle by in a flicker;
 Burgeoning flowers are apt to fade.
 The more flowers display and bloom, the
 more flowers rot;
 Water fills until full, until the water is
 depleted.
 Only then is it realized that repletion and
 depletion are numbered [by fate];
 Who has ever shifted the Đạo of Heaven? ¹³¹

In both poems, the authors speak of antagonistic struggle, transience, wandering, images of growth and decline, fate, and the impartiality of Heaven. Such images and themes regularly appear in the poets' vernacular poems and, in many cases like the poems above, Đạt's language appears to mirror his predecessor's. Did Đạt find inspiration in Trãi's writings and echo them by refining their language as he did with his contemporaries' Hán (literary Sinitic) poems?¹³² Did Đạt have Trãi's poems in hand? This was quite possible, since Dương Đức Nhan, Đạt's father-in-law, published Nguyễn Trãi's poetry as part of the anthology Nhan printed with the technology his mentor Lương Như Hộc brought back from Minh China.¹³³ However, there is no direct evidence that Trãi's vernacular poetry was part of Nhan's printing projects.

Although the above suggestion is possible, I tend to think that a more likely explanation for the apparent similarity between the poets' literary styles in extant redactions is that later compilers confused the identities of the two authors. Anthologists

¹³¹ Duke of State Trinh (Nguyễn Văn Đạt), *Bạch Vân am thi* 白雲庵詩, manuscript (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), accession no. AB.157, 12a–b.

¹³² See for instance “By the Magistrate of Thượng Cối, in order to further refine it” 上檜知縣作以加潤色, *Bạch Vân am thi tập* 白雲庵詩集, xylographic text (c.1814) (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), accession no. A.2256, 57a.

¹³³ Extant versions of Dương Đức Nhan and Lương Như Hộc's anthology contain fifty-four of Nguyễn Trãi's Hán poems. Trần Văn Giáp, *Tìm hiểu kho sách Hán Nôm*, series Tác phẩm được tặng giải thưởng Hồ Chí Minh (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2002), 794.

conflated the poets because both Nguyễn Văn Đát and Nguyễn Trãi wrote their reclusion poems as abiding scholars of White Cloud Hermitage (*Bạch Vân am* 白雲庵). According to a gazetteer created between 1407 and 1427, a White Cloud Hermitage was located atop Côn Sơn 崑山 or Côn Mountain, where Trãi's grandfather went into reclusion and established a family retreat.¹³⁴ A later nineteenth-century gazetteer noted that Nguyễn Trãi once dwelled at the hermitage late in life. The same gazetteer explains that Trãi stayed at the hermitage, which was situated behind Tư Phúc Pagoda on Côn Mountain, when he retired there five years before his tragic death.¹³⁵ As was the case with many of Trãi's Hán poems about reclusion, he probably composed much of his vernacular poems at this hermitage.

By the early fifteenth century, Côn Mountain was a pilgrimage site renowned for its scenic landscape.¹³⁶ Tư Phúc Pagoda along with the surrounding mountains associated with Trần period (1225–1400) Buddhist worthies attracted many visitors, especially in spring.¹³⁷ By his own account, Nguyễn Văn Đát was fond of travelling to such scenic places.¹³⁸ Naturally, Côn Mountain was among the places he visited.¹³⁹ There, Đát would have encountered White Cloud Hermitage, and he seems to have adopted its name for his own hermitage and sobriquet in retirement precisely one century after Trãi's death.

¹³⁴ *Ngan-nan tche yuan* 安南志原 (hereafter *An Nam chí nguyên*), introduction by E. Gaspardone (Hanoi: École Française D'Extrême-orient, 1932), 43, 147.

¹³⁵ *Đồng Khánh địa dư chí* (1886-1887), edited and translated by Ngô Đức Thọ, Nguyễn Văn Nguyên, Phan Văn Các, et. al. (Hanoi: NXB Thế giới, 2003), vol. 1, 109, 195.

¹³⁶ *An Nam chí nguyên*, 43.

¹³⁷ *Đồng Khánh địa dư chí*, 109, 195.

¹³⁸ Nguyễn Văn Đát, "Preface to *Bạch Vân am thi tập*" in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (A.2256), 1a.

¹³⁹ Trần Huy Phác 陳輝樸 (1754-1834), *Hải Dương phong vật chí* 海陽風物志, manuscript (1814) (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), accession no. A.88, 11b. The gazetteer does not Nguyễn Văn Đát specifically visited Côn Sơn, but it does indicate that he travelled the mountains of Chí Linh Côn Sơn is located.

Why did Nguyễn Văn Đạt take interest in the former worthy? The oscillating crests and valleys of Nguyễn Trãi's career posed a valuable foil for Đạt's reflection on the *xuất xử* question. Trãi at once represented the noblest of literati aspirations and its most tragic possibility. He was the unicorn of his time, an unflinching stalwart of Confucian idealism who dared speak his sense of right, despite the temerity of his rulers and those who had the kings' ear. As such, Trãi came to represent the Lê regime's moral and cultured counterpart to the dynasty's militant provincial founder Lê Lợi 黎利 (1385–1433) and his entourage of warriors from south of the Red River Delta. From the perspective of literary men "east of the (Red) river," Trãi was the delta scholars' finest proponent and exemplar.

A decade after being displaced in 1407 by the Ming overthrow of the short-lived Hồ regime (1400-1407), Nguyễn Trãi entered Lê Lợi's service.¹⁴⁰ From then on, he handled the bulk of the leader's literary tasks.¹⁴¹ He proposed key military stratagems as well.¹⁴² However, Trãi's most significant achievement as it related to Đạt was his conceptualization of how literati scholars could participate in a regime founded and

¹⁴⁰ Writing in c.1759, Lê Quý Đôn tells us that Nguyễn Trãi was present when Lê Lợi "raised the flag of righteousness" against the Ming in 1418. Phan Phu Tiên, in an earlier dynastic history, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, suggests that Trãi, who handled all of Lê Lợi's most important paperwork, entered the latter's service considerably earlier. Some genealogical records list Trãi as a member of the Congregation of the Oath of Lũng Nhai in 1416. However, Lê Quý Đôn did not mention Trãi as an oath-taker and ignored him in Đôn's section on meritorious subjects. See Hoàng Xuân Hãn, "Lời thề Lũng Nhai," *Tập san Khoa học xã hội* 7 (1980): 4; Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử* 大越通史 (preface 1759), original Sinographic text (Viện Khảo cổ, accession number VS-15) with translation by Lê Mạnh Liêu (Saigon: Bộ Văn hóa giáo dục và thanh niên, 1973), 1:11a; Lê Văn Hưu 黎文休, Phan Phu Tiên 潘孚先, Ngô Sĩ Liên 吳士連 et al, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 大越史記全書 (printed in 1697, accession number PD.2310), original Sinographic text with translation in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, ed. Phan Huy Lê, Ngô Đức Thọ, and Hà Văn Tấn, 4 vols. (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1998), bản ký 10:1b.

¹⁴¹ Nguyễn Trãi (?), *Lam Sơn thực lục* 藍山實錄 (1431) in Dương Bá Cung, et. al., ed., *Ức Trai di tập* (1868), xylographic text (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), accession no. A.134. 2.30b, photocopy reproduction with translation in Mai Quốc Liên, ed., *Nguyễn Trãi toàn tập*, 3 vols. (Hanoi: NXB Văn học, 2001), vol. 2, 283; *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản ký, 10.2a.

¹⁴² Lê Quý Đôn, "Lê Trãi," in *Toàn Việt thi lục*, manuscript (Hanoi: National Library of Vietnam), accession no. R.2199, 1a–2a.

dominated by southern warriors, whose values and interests diverged from those of delta scholars. Writing on behalf of Lê Lợi, Trãi repeatedly called for scholars to follow the leader.¹⁴³ Moreover, after the Lê Dynasty was established in 1428, Trãi formulated the relationship between military heroes and literary exemplars in the widely circulated *Bình Ngô đại cáo* 平吳大誥 or *Great Proclamation on Pacifying Ngô*.¹⁴⁴ In the proclamation, Trãi presented Lê Lợi's vision of literary men who do not renounce violence, but rather seek out martial heroes like the new king. In addition, he displayed Lợi's purported appreciation for literary men. Thus, as the proclamation's author, Trãi spoke to the *xuất xử* question by creating a narrative that invited scholars to cooperate with martial heroes.

However, Nguyễn Trãi's life trajectory precipitated dramatically to his end. Lê Lợi died in 1433, and Trãi's untimely death along with Lợi's successor's in 1442 exposed the fragility of this arrangement. The two pillars of the dynasty fell and the neat balance they represented as the martial hero and literary subject, whom men would later wistfully recall with the saying "Lê Lợi as emperor and Nguyễn Trãi as [his] assistant," came undone.¹⁴⁵ This balance was not restored until Lê Tư Thành rose to the throne in 1460.

¹⁴³ In addition to the *Bình Ngô đại cáo* (1428), Nguyễn Trãi was involved in recruitment efforts in 1417, 1429, and 1434. An edict he wrote and issued in Lê Lợi's name in 1429, *Cầu hiền tài chiếu* 求賢才詔 (*Edict Seeking Worthy Talents*) is extant as part of the *Ức Trai di tập* (1868) and *Hoàng Việt văn tuyển* 皇越文選 (1825). Dương Bá Cung, *et. al.*, ed., *Ức Trai di tập*, 3.8a–9a; Bùi Huy Bích 裴輝璧 (1744–1818), *Hoàng Việt văn tuyển*, xylographic text (1825) (Hanoi: National Library of Vietnam), accession no. R.602, 5.6a–7b; *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư, bản kỷ*, 10.2a, 10.47b–51a, 10.59b–60a, 11.6a–b; Phan Thanh Giản, Phạm Xuân Quế, *et. al.*, *Khâm Định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* (1881), xylographic text (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), accession no. A.1/1–9, 4.357.

¹⁴⁴ The *Bình Ngô đại cáo* concluded with the words "Loudly spread this new proclamation! Promulgate it resoundingly so that all will hear and know!" 誕布維新之誥，播告遐邇咸使聞知." The issuance of the great proclamation was modelled after Ming Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang's 朱元璋 (1328–1398) *Great Proclamation*, which was intended for distribution throughout the empire. Later, Mạc Đăng Dung 莫登庸 (1483–1541), founder of the Mạc Dynasty (1527–1677), issued his own *Great Proclamation*, which appears to have been widely disseminated as well. From this, we can imagine that Lê Lợi's *Great Proclamation* was likewise intended for promulgation throughout Đại Việt. Kathlene Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia* (Cambridge, UK, 2016), 80, 99.

¹⁴⁵ Esta Ungar, "Vietnamese Leadership and Order: Dai Viet under the Le Dynasty" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1983), 14.

After receiving his first batch of select scholars from the civil service exams, vigorously disciplining their ranks, and pushing his vision for them in 1463, the king recognized the demoralizing message left by Trãi's death. The Lê regime's execution of Trãi, who vouched for Lê Lợi to delta scholars, created a negative precedent. In order to reassure the scholars that he genuinely valued them, Lê Tư Thành understood that he needed to rehabilitate Trãi's image. This he did in 1464, and three years later, he ordered the collection, restoration, and publication of Trãi's writings, which had been systematically destroyed after the Lychee Garden affair.¹⁴⁶

Nevertheless, the fundamental tensions between the scholars and the southern warriors remained. Eventually, they even entered history. Lê Tư Thành ascended the throne as a king, but he died an emperor. In 1470, he invaded Đại Việt's longtime enemy Champa and, in 1471, annexed its territories.¹⁴⁷ Whereas previous Đại Việt rulers repeatedly raided and sacked Champa (as Champa did in kind) in a "Southeast Asian" conduct of war that primarily targeted peoples and assets, for the first time Đại Việt possessed a new administrative structure and bureaucracy created under Lê Tư Thành to undergird more direct control of the new territories with an ideology to culturally transform new subjects through classical learning.¹⁴⁸

Meanwhile, Lê Tư Thành took keen interest in how his legacy was crafted in the dynastic record.¹⁴⁹ He apparently felt that his unprecedented military accomplishment, in

¹⁴⁶ The restored collection was completed by Trần Khắc Kiệm in 1480. Trần Khắc Kiệm, "Úc Trai thi tập tự" 抑齋詩集序 in Hoàng Khôi, ed., *Nguyễn Trãi toàn tập*, 583–584. On the destruction of Nguyễn Trãi's works after the Lychee Garden affair, see Phan Huy Lê, "Lời giới thiệu" in Nguyễn Văn Nguyên, *Những vấn đề văn bản học* Quân trung từ mệnh của Nguyễn Trãi (Hà Nội: NXB Văn học, 1998), 23.

¹⁴⁷ The annexed territories are the modern provinces of Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, and Bình Định.

¹⁴⁸ John K. Whitmore, "The Two Great Campaigns of the Hong Duc Era (1470-1497) in Dai Viet," *South East Asia Research* 12, no. 1 (2004): 119–136; _____, "The Development of Le Government in Fifteenth-Century Vietnam" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1968), 207–215.

¹⁴⁹ In 1467, Lê Tư Thành sent a eunuch to demand that the king be allowed to read his reign's veritable records. In doing so, the king taunted his dynastic historian Lê Nghĩa by alluding to Tang Taizong's apparent revisions of history (635, 642, and 643). With reservation, Nghĩa acquiesced to the king's request,

combination with his literary achievements, warranted a grander imperial history. For this task, he chose Ngô Sĩ Liên 吳士連 (1442 *t.s.*), who had been at the imperial court for less than half a year when Nguyễn Trãi was killed, to compile the new history. This, Liên completed in 1479.¹⁵⁰ He succeeded in part by compiling the “Peripheral Annals” (*ngoại kỷ* 外紀), the outer chapters that trace Đại Việt’s early history before (or outside) the time of autochthonous dynastic rule beginning in the late tenth century. In them, Liên relied on unofficial histories, including “anomaly accounts,” to trace a myth-laden past that both positioned Đại Việt externally in relation to the northern dynasties and situated the different lands and peoples within Đại Việt.¹⁵¹ In the “Peripheral Annals,” Liên traced the mythical consanguinity between the northern central plains and Đại Việt south as well as between the mountain highland and delta lowland peoples in his own kingdom. The legends of the “Peripheral Annals,” especially those about the Dragon Lord and the Hung-Lạc Kings, simultaneously harmonized and affirmed the irresolvable differences between north and south; that is between neighboring Vietnamese and Chinese kingdoms and, within Đại Việt, the basin of the Cả and Mã rivers, Lê Lợi’s southern homeland, and the Red River Delta to the north.¹⁵²

In this way, Ngô Sĩ Liên’s history with its yoking of storytelling traditions to juxtapose two stories of north and south, internal and external, mirrored the work of

after hearing the king’s claim that he wanted to better himself by reviewing his errors. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư, bản kỷ*, 12.38b–39a.

¹⁵⁰ Lê Văn Hưu 黎文休, Phan Phu Tiên 潘孚先, Ngô Sĩ Liên 吳士連 *et al*, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (PD.2310), photocopy of xylographic text with Vietnamese translation in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, ed. Phan Huy Lê, Ngô Đức Thọ, and Hà Văn Tấn, 4 vols. (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 1998), bản kỷ, 13.17a.

¹⁵¹ On the meaning of the category (genre) “anomaly accounts” see Robert Ford Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 24–32.

¹⁵² It remains debatable whether Hùng, Lạc, both or neither are correct for the ancient kings, whose existence itself is contested. With this in mind, I will use the hyphenated Hùng-Lạc. See Liam C. Kelley, “The Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan as a Medieval Vietnamese Invented Tradition,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 87–130; Nguyễn Phương, *Ancient History of Vietnam: A New Study* (s.l.: s.n., 1976), 41–61; Keith W. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 306–308.

Nguyễn Trãi's *Bình Ngô đại cáo*. In it, Trãi juxtaposed Đại Việt's defeat of the Minh and the people of the Cả and Mã River Basins' seizure of the Red River Delta through allusion to the Việt Kingdom's 越國 conquest of the Ngô Kingdom 吳國 during the fifth century B.C.E. and its associated storytelling tradition, namely Triệu Diệp's 趙曄 (40–100 C.E.) *Springs and Autumns of Ngô and Việt* 吳越春秋.¹⁵³ In his proclamation, Trãi likened Lê Lợi's heroism in the quest to expel the Minh and capture the Red River Delta to King of Việt Câu Tiễn's 越王句踐 (r.496–465 B.C.E.) efforts to seek revenge on Phù Sai 夫差, King of Ngô 吳國夫差 (r.495–473 B.C.E.). Trãi portrayed Lê Lợi as an indignant hero willing to suffer, “taste bile and sleep on bramble wood,” and intensely study military strategy, history, and literature to right injustice and “wash away shame to be as clean as fresh snow.”¹⁵⁴ Moreover, Trãi's depiction of Lê Lợi cast him in the light of the former King of Việt, who sought the guidance of scholar worthies like Phạm Lãi 范蠡 (517–? B.C.E.) and Văn Chủng 文種 (?–472 B.C.E.). Thus, in addition to exalting the merits of the new king, *Bình Ngô đại cáo* acknowledged Lê Lợi's need for and appreciation of men of learning and beckoned the scholars to his cause.

Thus, by 1503, when Nguyễn Văn Đạt's grandfather returned to Lower Yên Tử and oversaw Đạt's education, Nguyễn Trãi's *Bình Ngô đại cáo* told the story of the Lê Dynasty's beginning, while the anxiety it belied about incongruous peoples had entered imperial history through legends about ancestral consanguinity. However, one year later, as Đạt prepared for study at the capital, where he would travel by the end of the decade, the tensions enshrined in historical narrative began to unravel with the ascension of the so-

¹⁵³ Stephen O'Harrow, "Nguyen Trai's *Binh Ngo Dai Cao* 平吳大誥 of 1428: The Development of Vietnamese National Identity," 166.

¹⁵⁴ *Infra*.

called Demon King. These tensions between men of the Cà–Mã River Basins and those of the delta would characterize Đại Việt’s history for the rest of Đạt’s life. For Đạt, the contradictions of Trãi’s life story, his literary legacy, and the official and unofficial narratives spoken about him provided much for Đạt to ponder in respect to the *xuất xứ* question. Moreover, parallels between Trãi’s life and his own led Đạt to seek inspiration from Trãi, and Đạt styled himself after the former worthy.

In this chapter, I contextualize Nguyễn Trãi’s legacy as it would have impacted Nguyễn Văn Đạt. I begin by first looking at fourteenth and fifteenth century storytelling traditions, especially accounted oddities and transmitted wonders.¹⁵⁵ This is because, as I will show, Trãi’s major contribution with the *Bình Ngô đại cáo* was to reorient late-Trần Dynasty storytelling from speaking about differences among peoples along the course of the Red River to articulating the relationship between contrasting peoples of the Cà–Mã River Basins and the Red River Delta. I hope to show that interaction with the north (“China”) shaped expressions of place and identity within Đại Việt, including Trãi’s. In addition, I highlight the vibrancy of oral storytelling to reveal that even by the end of the fifteenth century, literati storytellers situated themselves within a closely knit group peripheral to a larger multifaceted and inconsistent tradition. I argue that by translating oral storytelling into a reading practice, the scholars found a way to engage the bizarre and unconventional. Their conceptual movement from the weird to the familiar mirrored the work of Trãi’s *Bình Ngô đại cáo*, which was intended to bring delta scholars closer to seemingly foreign “uncultured” men.

¹⁵⁵ Accounted oddities and transmitted wonders are my translations of related genres generally represented by the Sinographic 志怪 and 傳奇.

Second, I focus on the *Bình Ngô đại cáo* to explain how Trãi alluded to the internecine wars between the former states of Ngô and Việt and the message it conveyed at the Lê Dynasty's founding. I examine Trãi's nuanced juxtaposition of an international and domestic north and south as well as its ordering of tensions among the peoples therein. Trãi found continuity in heroism, and he articulated a "cultured heritage" for Đại Việt marked by martial heroes who recruited literary talents. Lê Lợi like Câu Tiễn achieved martial greatness by soliciting scholars' wisdom. In doing so, Trãi set the historiographical tone for the dynasty and shaped Ngô Sĩ Liên's crafting of Lê Tư Thành's imperial history.

As we will see in coming chapters, these developments set the stage for Nguyễn Văn Đật's eventual decisions to enter officialdom and then retire as a recluse. The apparent dissonance between dynastic narratives and the tragedies of Nguyễn Trãi's life story problematized the path of officialdom for educated men and cautioned them about it. This is where Trãi's poetry at White Cloud Hermitage on Côn Mountain becomes significant. During the final years of his life, from 1437 to 1442, Trãi retired to his family retreat on Côn Mountain only to be recalled back into service in *circa* 1439. Although he was allowed to remain at Côn Mountain, he could not (or did not want to) fully renounce the political sphere and its attendant dangers. Frustrated with his situation and reflecting on his past, Trãi wrote poems at Côn Mountain that revealed his long-felt ambivalence about officialdom. By alluding to a transmitted wonder tale about the ghost tree and the language of dreams, Trãi expressed disenchantment with the life of a scholar.

Moreover, Nguyễn Trãi himself became the subject of tales like the one to which he alluded in his poetry. The spectacle and controversy of Nguyễn Trãi's death quickly found expression in stories of the strange. Nguyễn Văn Đật would have been familiar

with them, since he took keen interest in such stories, as is evident in his later editing of the *Effusive Records of Transmitted Wonders* mentioned in the previous chapter.¹⁵⁶ These stories told about how Trãi met his end as the victim of a seductive shape-shifting snake spirit, who sought retribution against him. Such tales contrasted sharply with the official narratives and would have colored Đat's reading of Trãi's poetry. Trãi's storied legacy like the messages that Đat received about *xuất xử* was inconsistent and multivocal.

Storytelling, 14th–15th centuries

By ghostwriting the *Bình Ngô đại cáo* and evoking storytelling traditions about lands south of the Yangzi River, Nguyễn Trãi sought to position Đại Việt in relation to the Minh while, at the same time, reconciling differences between the highland peoples of the Cả–Mã River Basins like Lê Lợi, the new king, and those of lowland peoples like Trãi from the Red River Delta. These differences were palpable. In regard to the Minh, Trãi and his colleagues voiced stern disapproval towards Minh language, dress, hairstyle, and white teeth that contrasted sharply with their sense of more authentic Đại Việt customs.¹⁵⁷ But more immediate in Đại Việt were anxieties about differences between the people of the Cả–Mã River Basins and those of the Red River Delta. The people of the basin were linguistically and culturally related to people of the Red River Delta, but they exhibited pronounced differences as well. Since the first century of the common era, lowland

¹⁵⁶ Vũ Khâm Lân, “Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đat,” 60b. Nguyễn Trãi as a background figure in the *Truyền kỳ mạn lục* (*Effusive Records of Transmitted Wonders*), in which a story is told about one of Trãi's students at the capital. His poetry and loyalty are also mentioned in passing. Nguyễn Dữ, “Tây viên kỳ ngộ ký” 西垣奇遇記 and “Kim Hoa thi thoại ký” 金華詩話記 in *Tân biên Truyền kỳ mạn lục* 新編傳奇漫錄, photocopy of xylographic text (HN.257–8) with translation in Nguyễn Quang Hồng, *Truyền kỳ mạn lục giải âm* (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2001), 1.61a, 4.52b.

¹⁵⁷ Nguyễn Trãi and his contemporary commentators referred to Đại Việt customs as *quốc tục* (national customs), not Việt customs. See Lý Tử Tấn and Nguyễn Thiên Túng's commentary to Nguyễn Trãi's *Dư địa chí*, fascicle 6 of Dương Bá Cung, ed. *Ức Trai di tập*, xylographic text (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, 1868), photocopy reproduction in Mai Quốc Liên, ed., *Nguyễn Trãi toàn tập*, vol. 2, 444–445/6.29b–30a.

peoples of the delta experienced greater interaction with Sinitic culture and classical learning than those of the more remote Cà-Mã River Basins. The people who inhabited the basin were probably related to those whom we have come to call “Mường.”¹⁵⁸ In contrast to people of the delta flood plains, the basin peoples practiced terrace and slash-and-burn agriculture. Culturally, the basin elites placed greater value on martial pursuits, and they were more inclined towards sacrifices, magic, and spectacle.¹⁵⁹

In the early days of the Lê Dynasty, the king and most of his “meritorious subjects” hailed from the Cà-Mã River Basins; the delta scholars found themselves a marginalized minority. Only four delta men figured in Lê Lợi’s entourage, Nguyễn Trãi among them.¹⁶⁰ They were vulnerable, too. By early 1434, Trãi alone remained alive.¹⁶¹ At that time, Trãi must have felt deep apprehension about the men from the southern basins. Later storytellers expressed such apprehension in an anecdote they transmitted about him:

世傳：先生精于術數，知我國旺氣當在清華，因往求之。及至藍山與太祖相遇，情願為奴，太祖收之。居一年，日事耕作，宿于舍外，別無所見。一日遇皇考諱日，見太祖即坐几切肉食之。先生鄙為蠻，乃辭去。

It has been passed down through generations that the former master [Nguyễn Trãi] excelled at numerology. He knew that our kingdom’s burgeoning vital-energy then lay at Thanh Hoa, so he went in search of it. When he got to Lam Son, he met Thái Tổ [Lê Lợi] with the volition to become [Lê Lợi’s] serf. Thái Tổ took him in. [Trãi] lived there for a year. Every day he engaged in farm work. He spent nights outside the residence. Otherwise, he went unnoticed.

¹⁵⁸ John K. Whitmore, “The Development of Le Government in Fifteenth-Century Vietnam” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1968), 4; Keith W. Taylor, “On Being Muonged,” *Asian Ethnicity* 2, no. 1 (March 2001): 33–34.

¹⁵⁹ Esta Ungar, “Vietnamese Leadership and Order: Dai Viet under the Le Dynasty,” 261.

¹⁶⁰ John K. Whitmore, “The Development of Le Government in Fifteenth-Century Vietnam,” 5.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 25–28.

One day, coming to the observance day for the August Patriarch, [Trãi] saw Thái Tổ sitting down, cutting meat, and eating it.¹⁶² The former master degraded [Lê Lợi], considering [him] a barbarian, so he left.¹⁶³

Notably, the narrator of this passage tells us that Nguyễn Trãi regarded Lê Lợi, a native of Lam Sơn on the banks of the Chu River in the southern basin, as “barbarian” 蠻 because of Lợi’s uncouth behavior (eating raw meat) during the observances for his late father. The man from the southern basin demonstrated ignorance of the scholar’s sense of propriety. Here belies the conflict of Trãi’s character in the story; he knew from his advanced studies that Lê Lợi was destined for greatness, but Lợi was culturally unworthy and so repulsive that Trãi abandoned him.

But the story continues:

前往諫口渡，留宿隔壁有明人，夜出望見天象，常急呼同伴指示曰：「安南將星顯現，吾輩當早去，不可以留」。同伴問是何如體貌意象。其人曰：「他是虎將多殺，且飲食粗惡」。

先生所之，乃返藍山。始細觀動靜，見每市太祖常買酒携回。先者酒多於油，至是油多於酒。

[Nguyễn Trãi] went ahead to Gián Khẩu ferry crossing. On the other side of the wall where [Trãi] lodged, there was a Minh person. He went out at night and looked at the signs of the sky. He incessantly and urgently called his [Minh] companion and pointed, saying, “The heavenly sign of An Nam’s general has appeared! Our kind should go soon. We cannot stay.”

The companion asked about [the An Nam general’s] countenance and demeanor. The other person said, “He is a tiger general who kills prodigiously. Moreover, [he] drinks and eats coarsely and awfully.”

¹⁶² The “observance day” 諫日 was the death anniversary of Lê Lợi’s father Lê Khoáng 黎曠, here referred to as the August Patriarch.

¹⁶³ Dương Bá Cung, ed., “Sự trạng” 事狀 in *Ức Trai di tập* (Hanoi: Sino-Vietnamese Institute, 1868), xylographic text, accession no. A134, photocopy reproduction in Hoàng Khôi, *Nguyễn Trãi toàn tập* (Hanoi: NXB Văn hóa thông tin, 2001), 5.2a. Dương Bá Cung sourced a genealogical record of Lê Thụ (“Công thần Lê Thụ phả ký” 功臣黎受普記) for this anecdote.

The former master's travels took him back to Lam Son. He began to carefully observe [Lê Lợi] in action and at rest. [Trãi] saw that every time at market, Thái Tổ would buy alcohol and oil and carry them back. Before, the alcohol was more than the oil, but this time, the oil was more than the alcohol...¹⁶⁴

Here, the Minh astrologist and his companion confirmed Lê Lợi's coarse, awful behavior, but they also confessed their terrible fear of the tiger-like beast. This observation led Nguyễn Trãi to seek out Lê Lợi again. Recognizing that Lợi was corrigible, Trãi continued to spy on him and, eventually, Trãi followed him into the jungle, where Lợi was plotting with an advisor by conducting numerological calculations. To Lợi's surprise, his former serf came forward, revealed his mastery of Thái Ất prognostication (the method of prognostication that Nguyễn Văn Đật would also master), and corrected the calculation for the timing of the future king's uprising.¹⁶⁵ Thereafter, we are told, Lê Lợi held Trãi in the highest esteem.¹⁶⁶

Trãi's dilemma in this story revolved around the *xuất xử* question and reflected the anxieties of scholars from the Red River Delta in working for a regime founded by men of the south. Trãi's initial aversion to Lợi's crude behavior was overcome by Trãi's antagonism towards a more repulsive alternative, the Minh, and the belief that Lợi's bestial character could be tempered. Trãi hesitated, hiding his talents by posing as a serf, but, ultimately, he felt compelled to reveal his talents in time to win the day. The arc of Trãi's story thus mirrored the path of the reluctant scholar, who must be summoned out of seclusion.

Anxieties between highland and lowland peoples predated Nguyễn Trãi's lifetime. In the fourteenth century, several stories were told about them. For example, one story

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 5.2b.

¹⁶⁵ Nguyễn Trãi corrected the year of Lê Lợi's uprising from 1419 to 1417.

¹⁶⁶ Dương Bá Cung, ed., "Sự trạng," 5.2b–5.3a.

recorded in 1329 spoke of the perennial internecine struggle of the terrene human and extraordinary forces of a spirit residing at Tản Viên Mountain against the armies of a water spirit, who repeatedly deluged them.¹⁶⁷ Đại Việt peoples may have told the story to express their relationship to natural phenomenon like monsoons and tidal flooding.¹⁶⁸ At the same time, the story's mention of "terrene humans" 土人, which can also refer to ostensibly less sophisticated peripheral peoples, suggests tensions between contrasting cultures. In fact, the identity of the spirit *residing* at Tản Viên Mountain as an aquatic or terrene spirit was contested.¹⁶⁹

The ambiguity of the spirit's affiliation revolved around another story that reflected anxieties between highland and lowland peoples, that of the Hùng-Lạc Dragon King. Like Nguyễn Trãi's *Bình Ngô đại cáo*, the story simultaneously speaks to the relationship between the people of Đại Việt and those of the north and between highland and lowland peoples within Đại Việt. In the story, a leader of a northern clan sojourned south to the Five Passes, acquired the daughter of an Immortal of Vực River, and begot a

¹⁶⁷ Lý Tế Xuyên 李濟川, "Hựu Thánh Hiến Ứng Vương" 佑聖顯應王 in *Việt điện u linh tập lục* 粵甸幽靈集錄 (1329), modern reproduction of Sinographic text (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. A.47) in Sun Xun, Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, and Chen Yiyuan, ed., *Yuenan Hanwen xiaoshuo jicheng* 越南漢文小說集成 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), vol. 2, 31. According to Keith W. Taylor, the version of the extant text with accession no. A.47, which I cite here, most closely reflects Lý Tế Xuyên's fourteenth-century text(s). Keith W. Taylor, "Notes on the *Việt Điện U Linh Tập*" *The Vietnam Forum* 8 (1986): 31.

¹⁶⁸ Keith W. Taylor, *Birth of Vietnam*, 5.

¹⁶⁹ In Kiều Phú's 喬富 (*t.s.* 1475) late fifteenth-century comments on the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*, Phú expressed disapproval of some storytellers' belief that the spirit in question was associated with the terrene fairy Âu Cơ (rather than the marine-riverine Dragon Lord). The story in the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*, which cites a text by Trần Thế Pháp 陳世法 (fl. 14th C.?), identifies the spirit residing at Tản Viên Mountain as a son who followed the Dragon Lord (rather than the terrene fairy) and came to Tản Viên Mt. from the sea. Kiều Phú, "Hậu tự," Sinographic text cited in Trần Văn Giáp, *Tìm hiểu kho sách Hán Nôm*, 1112; *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*, modern reproduction of Sinographic text ((Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. A.33) in Sun Xun, Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, and Chen Yiyuan, ed., *Yuenan Hanwen xiaoshuo jicheng* 越南漢文小說集成 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), vol. 1, 52. For *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*, I am using the recension A.33, which according to Đinh Gia Khánh, represents the text as copied in 1695. Đinh Gia Khánh, ed., *Lĩnh Nam chích quái: truyện cổ dân gian sưu tập biên soạn thế kỷ XV* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn học Hà Nội, 2001), 12, 188–189.

son.¹⁷⁰ This son, whom his father favored, was invested as King Kinh Dương 涇陽王 and assigned to rule over the south. King Kinh Dương, the son of a river spirit, could travel to water palaces, where he wed the daughter of the Dragon King of Động Đình Lake.¹⁷¹ He and the dragon daughter gave birth to Sùng Lãm 崇纘, who assumed the title [Hùng]-Lạc Dragon Lord 貉龍君. The Dragon Lord took over the south, while his father King Kinh Dương absconded, to where no one knows.

The [Hùng]-Lạc Dragon Lord preferred to stay at his water palace and frequently left his people on land unattended. During one such time, the Dragon Lord's cousin, who had assumed rule of the north, sojourned to the south. Enchanted by the southern lands, its features, and its treasures; he abandoned his beloved daughter Âu Cơ, whom he had brought along, and wandered around the south.¹⁷² The people there suffered from the disturbances caused by the northerner. They called out for the Dragon Lord to rescue them. The Dragon Lord then appeared and, seeing the fair Âu Cơ, took a liking to her. He successfully wooed her and hid her away on Long Đại Cliff.¹⁷³ When the Dragon Lord's northern cousin noticed Âu Cơ was missing, he ordered a search. However, the Dragon

¹⁷⁰ The Five Passes 五領 referred to the mountain passes along the borders of modern China's Guangxi and Guangdong provinces. They also marked the northern border of Southern Việt 南越 (204–311 B.C.E.).

¹⁷¹ King Kinh Dương was the daughter of the Immortal of Vụ River. The king's mother has also been interpreted as a constellation in the southern sky. However, celestial and astral spirits do not otherwise appear in the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*, and the spirits of this period tended to be more akin to those Tạ Chí Đại Trường categorizes as nature spirits (*nhiên thần*) like those of trees, stones, mountains, and rivers and spirits of apotheosized humans (*nhân thần*). King Kinh Dương's marriage to the daughter of the Dragon King of Động Đình Lake (along the Yangzi River between China's Hubei and Hunan provinces) thus parallels his father's and mother's union and follows the theme of interaction between continental and marine cultures discussed by Keith W. Taylor. Hence, I take *vụ tiên* to mean the "immortal of Vụ River," which flows between Jiangxi and Zhejiang provinces south of the lower Yangzi River. Notice that the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* (A.33) has *vụ tiên chi nữ* 婺仙之女, "daughter of Vụ (River) immortal" rather than *Vụ nữ* ("Northern Weaving Maid," according to the *Records of the Scribe* 史記), the name of the constellation. "Hong Bang thi," in *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* (A.33), 16; Keith W. Taylor, *Birth of Vietnam*, 1–7, 304; Tạ Chí Đại Trường, *Thần, người và đất Việt* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa thông tin, 2006), 31–71.

¹⁷² According to recension VHv.1473 of the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*, Âu Cơ was the wife of the Dragon Lord's cousin. See also Keith W. Taylor, *Birth of Vietnam*, 303.

¹⁷³ The location and meaning of Long Đại (Dragon Tày?) Cliff 龍岱巖 is unclear.

Lord used his powers of transformation to ward off the forces of the cousin, who then returned to the north.¹⁷⁴

Âu Cơ and the Dragon Lord lived together for a year, after which Âu Cơ gave birth to a sack. Believing it an ill omen, they discarded it in the fields. After six or seven days, the sack opened to reveal one hundred eggs. When they hatched, one hundred sons emerged. Miraculously, they quickly matured without being nursed. All the people were awed by them, and, despite earlier suspicions, people now regarded them as an auspicious sign.¹⁷⁵

However, as was his habit, the Dragon Lord stayed long in his water palace, effectively abandoning Âu Cơ and their sons. Âu Cơ's lineage had since terminated in the north, and, however distraught, she and her sons could no longer seek refuge there.¹⁷⁶ They cried out for the Dragon Lord. When he appeared, Âu Cơ shared the distress he had caused her by leaving her to lament her plight, displaced in unfamiliar lands to care for their sons alone. The Dragon Lord responded:

「我是龍種，水族之長。你是仙種，地上之人。雖陰陽之氣合而有子，然水火相尅，種類不同，難以久居。今相分別，吾將五十男歸水府，分治各處。五十男從汝居地上，分國而治。登山入水，有事相聞，無有相廢」。

“I am of dragon stock. I am chief of the water clans. You are of fairy stock. You are a person on the land. Although [our] yin and yang vital-essences met and had sons, water and fire subdue one another. [Our] stock and species are not the same. It would be difficult for [us] to live [together] for long.”

¹⁷⁴ “Hồng Bàng thị” in *Lĩnh Nam chí quái liệt truyện*, 16–17.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Âu Cơ and Hùng-Lạc Dragon Lord were sixth and fifth generation descendants respectively of the Flaming Emperor 炎帝 of the Shennong clan 神農氏 (taking Âu Cơ as the daughter of the Dragon Lord's cousin). In the *Records of the Scribe* 史記, the Flaming Emperor is depicted as a degenerate ruler, who was eventually overthrown by the Yellow Emperor. In the *Lĩnh Nam chí quái liệt truyện*, the Yellow Emperor, apparently fearing the descendants of the vanquished Shennong clan, sent armies to prevent Âu Cơ and her hundred sons from returning to the north. William H. Nienhauser, Jr., ed., *The Grand Scribe's Records* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), vol. 1, 3–5.

“Now, let us divide and separate. I will take fifty sons and return to [my] water palace. [We] will divide governing for each place. Fifty sons will follow you to live on the land. [We] will divide the kingdom and govern. Ascending the mountains and entering the water, whenever there is an issue, [we] will hear one other. [We] will not abandon one another.”¹⁷⁷

The foremost among the fifty sons who stayed with Âu Cơ on land became the first Hùng-Lạc king of Văn Lang Kingdom. He ruled from Phong Châu, also called Bạch Hạc, where two river spirits guarded over the place of the three Red, Đà, and Lô rivers’ convergence between the upriver highlands and the downstream lowlands.¹⁷⁸ In the kingdom’s early days, the people built stilt house to avoid dangerous creatures, tattooed their bodies to safely fish the waters, cut their hair short to traverse mountains and rivers, and practiced slash and burn agriculture. The story then concludes, telling us that the hundred sons of the Dragon Lord and Âu Cơ were the forebears of the “Hundred Viêts.”¹⁷⁹

Reading the Dragon Lord narrative, we see consanguinity between incongruous peoples. The Hùng-Lạc Kings and the “Hundred Viêts,” a term loosely applied to various peoples south of the Yangzi River, descended from a lineage that originated in the north, from where they were permanently removed.¹⁸⁰ At the same time, the story conveyed a powerful message about peoples within Đại Việt. In his speech to Âu Cơ, the Dragon Lord said that the Vietnamese peoples are inexorably incompatible, and yet bound by blood. Because of this consanguinity, unlike southerners’ attitude to people of the north, where the southerners’ lineage expired, his southern born children could not forsake one

¹⁷⁷ “Hồng Bàng thị,” 17.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.; Lý Tế Xuyên, “Trung Dục Uy Hiên Đại Vương” 忠翊威顯達王 in *Việt điện u linh tập lục*, 33.

¹⁷⁹ “Hồng Bàng thị,” 17.

¹⁸⁰ On the uses of “hundred Viêt” 百越, see Erica Fox Brindley, *Ancient China and the Yue: Perceptions and Identities on the Southern Frontier* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 30–33.

another. Thus, the Dragon Lord simultaneously drew his children together even as he split them apart. In effect, the tenor of the story is punctuated by anxiety; order is achieved among the Vietnamese only through division, and harmony is found only in the momentary, tenuous coexistence of a mythical past.

This message likely resonated with the fourteenth-century world of Đại Việt storytellers and their audience, who found it meaningful to affirm irreconcilable differences among Vietnamese peoples, while harboring a comforting sense of shared identity and origin. The story was probably recorded as part of an accounted oddities compilation sometime during the last decades of the Trần Dynasty (1225–1400).¹⁸¹ If this is true, then certainly Nguyễn Trãi, a well-trained student of classical learning, whose equally erudite father married into the royal family, would have been familiar with it. Oliver Wolters observed that Trãi bridged the literati traditions of the Trần and Lê dynasties.¹⁸² Trãi may well have been aware that the remnants of the Hùng Lạc King's palace still remained during his lifetime.¹⁸³ Thus, in writing the *Bình Ngô đại cáo*, Trãi was able to tap the storytelling traditions of his youth in the fourteenth century and

¹⁸¹ Tạ Chí Đại Tàng, "Comments on Liam Kelley's 'The Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan as a Medieval Invented Tradition,'" trans. Trần Hạnh, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 142–151. Liam C. Kelley, who has extensively studied the *Lĩnh Nam chí quái liệt truyện*, the source of the Hùng-Lạc Dragon Lord story, tentatively dated the recording of the story to the 1380s, although he has more recently hypothesized that it was compiled during the Minh period (1407–1427). The dating of the *Lĩnh Nam chí quái* is based on one of the "core" twenty-two stories that are mentioned in a late fifteenth-century preface. The story takes place during the reign of Trần Hạo 陳暲 (r.1341–1369). Since the story may be a near contemporary reflection on events of Trần Hạo's reign, the *Lĩnh Nam chí quái liệt truyện* may have been compiled sometime between the end of Trần Hạo's reign and the collapse of the Trần Dynasty (1370–1400). See Lê Hữu Muc, "Dẫn nhập," in *Lĩnh Nam chí quái* (Sàigòn: Nhà sách Khai Trí, 1960), 13–15; Liam C. Kelley, "Constructing Local Narratives: Spirits, Dreams, and Prophecies in the Medieval Red River Delta," in *China's Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier over Two Millennia*, edited by James A. Anderson and John K. Whitmore (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2015), 87, n20; _____, "The Ming-Occupation-Period Origins of the Lĩnh Nam Chí Quái?" *Le Minh Khai's SEAsian History Blog* (blog), 5 April 2017, <https://leminhkhai.wordpress.com/2017/04/05/the-ming-occupation-period-origins-of-the-linh-nam-chich-quai/>; Keith W. Taylor, *Birth of Vietnam*, 354–357.

¹⁸² Oliver W. Wolters, "Assertions of Cultural Well-Being in Fourteenth-Century Vietnam," in *Two Essays on Đại Việt in the Fourteenth Century* (New Haven and Boston: Yale Southeast Asia Studies and William Joiner Center, University of Massachusetts,), 41.

¹⁸³ *An Nam chí nguyên*, 136.

reoriented them to speak to the new geopolitical realities of Đại Việt for the nascent Lê Dynasty after Minh occupation.

What then was at stake in the late-Trần storytelling traditions that Nguyễn Trãi recast in early 1428, especially regarding the Hùng-Lạc Dragon Lord? The story of the Dragon Lord, as I interpret it, conveyed a sense of shared cultural continuity among peoples with disparate ways of life along the Red River, the lifeblood of their livelihoods, from the highland Thao portion of the river upstream of Bạch Hạc to the downstream Nhị section of the river that flowed through the ruddy alluvial delta towards the east. Văn Lang, the purported center of Hùng-Lạc rule, thus stood at the intersection of upstream and downstream peoples at a site of intensive economic and cultural intercourse. The story of Hùng-Lạc Dragon King created continuity between upstream slash-and-burn agricultural communities and the peoples who practiced tidal agriculture in the downriver floodplains by imagining ancestral consanguinity.¹⁸⁴

In addition to storytelling, a sense of cultural consanguinity among peoples with different ways of life was also expressed in physical culture, namely tattoos. In the Dragon Lord story, “people at the foot of the forested mountains,” presumably upstream peoples just west of Bạch Hạc, were constantly harassed by “flood dragons” whenever they approached the waters to fish.¹⁸⁵ Learning of this, a Hùng-Lạc King (it is unclear which one) told them, “Real differences exist between those of mountain *man* stock and the water clans. They [the latter] favor the familiar and despise the strange. Thus, they invasively cause harm.”¹⁸⁶ The narrator then tells us that the Hùng-Lạc King instructed

¹⁸⁴ According to Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Hùng and Lạc denote people who practiced upstream and downstream agriculture, respectively. Tạ Chí Đại Trường, “Comments on Liam Kelley’s ‘The Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan as a Medieval Invented Tradition,’” 145–146; _____, *Thần, người và đất Việt Nam*, 39–40. See also Keith W. Taylor, *Birth of Vietnam*, 10–13.

¹⁸⁵ *Lĩnh Nam chí quái liệt truyện* (A.33), 18.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

the people to tattoo their bodies in the image of water creatures and the Dragon Lord, their ancestor.¹⁸⁷

What is fascinating here is that the Hùng-Lạc King refers to his own “people at the foot of the forested mountains” as “mountain *man*” 山蠻. *Man*, “savage,” is usually condescending, and here might belie the voice of an elite delta narrator in describing his consanguineous mountain brethren. However, there is dissonance in this voice, since the narrator also spoke of the water clans as *other*—threatening *thủy quái* 水怪 or “water oddities.” The narrator’s anxious outward-facing gaze casts both ways.¹⁸⁸ Therefore, the passage was multivocal; it could express apprehensiveness for peoples all along the course of the Red River.

At the same time, the Hùng-Lạc King at Văn Lang, where upland and lowland cultures intersected, was a liminal character with ambiguous (and contested) upstream and downstream affiliation. Only the consanguinity he represented as a descendant of the mountain fairy and the dragon lord was certain. As such, he stood for unity and order among incongruous peoples as mutually opposed as the floodwaters and the earthen banks they inundated. Like the meeting of these natural forces in life-rearing agriculture, these peoples were both inconsonant and mutually dependent. Their intercourse was tenuous. Therefore, kingship, order, and livelihood along the Red River necessitated the indeterminant but balanced liminality epitomized by the Hùng-Lạc King.

In addition to embodying consanguinity along the Red River, Văn Lang and the Hùng-Lạc kings represented a point of intersection between the Chinese north and Vietnamese south. This is because stories about the Hùng-Lạc kings like that of the

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ I suspect this might be the legacy of a Ming period redaction.

Dragon Lord figured in early medieval texts, which were written in the classical Sinographic idiom, and physical traces of them still existed where the rivers converged at Bạch Hạc.¹⁸⁹ At the same time, the stories bore a local character, and they were transmitted orally in vernacular Vietnamese.¹⁹⁰ Thus, in the second half of the fourteenth-century, alluding to Văn Lang could evoke continuity between the two northern and southern realms. We see this, for example, when envoys from the newly established Minh and Trần Dynasty Đại Việt met and exchanged poems. In response to his Minh counterpart's poem, Phạm Sư Mạnh 范師孟 (1314–1329 *t.s.*) wrote:

和大明使題洱河驛

新朝使者日從容
江上春風試倚筇
玉洱寒光浸廣野
傘圓霽色照昇龍
文郎城古山重疊
翁仲祠深雲淡濃
醉墨淋漓題驛壁
清時人物盛三雍¹⁹¹

Response to the Great Minh Envoy Inscribed at Nhị River Station

The new dynasty's envoy by day is at ease;
On the river in the spring wind, [he] tries leaning on his
bamboo staff.
Jade Ear [waters], a chilly shimmer dips onto the Expansive
Fields;
Umbrella Ring [mountain], the colors of clearing rain shine
on Ascending Dragon.
Văn Lang, the city ancient, where mountains abound in
succession;
Ông Trọng, the shrine deep with faint and dense clouds.
Drunkenly, ink wets an inscription on the station wall;
When it clears, people and things shall flourish with the
Three Ung Palaces.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Liam C. Kelley discusses three such texts in "The Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan as a Medieval Vietnamese Invented Tradition," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 105–110. Vestiges of the Hùng-Lạc Kings' palace at Bạch Hạc remained until at least the fifteenth century. See *An Nam chí nguyên*, 136.

¹⁹⁰ Storytelling traditions in fourteenth and fifteenth century Vietnam (and, perhaps, to varying degrees, from the late-Tang through to the present) replicated through the coproduction of textual and oral transmissions. I make this point below.

¹⁹¹ For *thi* 時 in the last line, Bùi Huy Bích 裴輝璧 (1744 – 1818) noted the variant character *triều* 朝. Sometime after 1644, the poem may have been dissociated from Phạm Sư Mạnh, the poem's presumed author, and reinterpreted as a poem about the founding of the Qing Dynasty 清朝. Bùi Huy Bích, *Hoàng Việt thi tuyển* 皇越詩選, xylographic text (Hanoi: National Library Vietnam, 1826), accession no. R.968, 2.15a-b, available from the Digital Collections of the Vietnamese Nôm Preservation Foundation, <http://lib.nomfoundation.org/collection/1/volume/89/page/4>.

¹⁹² The Three Ung Palaces refer to the Han Dynasty palaces: Biyong 辟雍, Mingtang 明堂 and Lingtai 靈台.

Phạm Sư Mạnh, the Đại Việt diplomat, inscribed his poetic reply on the wall of a station on the Red River (Nhị River) downstream from Bạch Hạc.¹⁹³ There, he harmonized the frontier space between the north and south through the parallelism of his poem's second couplet. The Jade Ear waters, a euphemism for Lake Nhị Hải (Erhai) 洱海, the source of the Red River in the Đại Lý (Dali) Mountains, shimmered with the Expansive Fields, which referred to the north's "two expanses" 兩廣 of Quảng Tây (Guangxi) and Quảng Đông (Guangdong) provinces.¹⁹⁴ In the couplet, Mạnh likens the Minh envoy's travels to the coursing of the Red River from the north's jade waters southward to Đại Việt, where the river meets the south's Umbrella Ring Mountain (Mt. Tản Viên) and capital of Ascending Dragon (Thăng Long). Then, in the next couplet, Mạnh closes in on sites of continuity in the common Sinographic textual heritage, the Hùng-Lạc capital of Văn Lang and the fabled hero Lý Ông Trọng.¹⁹⁵ In the poem, Mạnh has travelers north and south follow the course of the Red River to meet physically where the rivers converge at Bạch Hạc and find common ground in the Sinographic textual heritage. Envoy poetry like Mạnh's show how literary and geographic artifacts that figured in old Sinographic texts could be evoked through the classical idiom to render Văn Lang a liminal space between distinct dynastic lineages, where northerners and southerners shared a common past. Indeed, we are perhaps indebted to the diplomatic value of Văn Lang as a fluid peripheral place between north and south in writings like

¹⁹³ *Nhị hà* (Nhị River) referred to the portion of the Red River downstream of Bạch Hạc, which is now in Việt Trì of Phú Thọ Province.

¹⁹⁴ *Nhị Hải/Erhai* 洱海 or "Ear Sea" received its name from the lake's purported ear-like shape. The Sinograph for *nhị/er* combines the semantic component for water 氵 with the both semantic and phonetic component 耳.

¹⁹⁵ For Lý Ông Trọng, see Liam C. Kelley, "Constructing Local Narratives: Spirits, Dreams, and Prophecies in the Medieval Red River Delta," 91–95.

Mạnh's poem for the transmission of remembrances about the Hùng-Lạc kings up to the present.

In addition to Văn Lang's geographic role in storytelling as a place between cultures, north and south met somatically, too, through articulations of embodied practices. Once again, we return to tattoo practices like those said to originate with the Hùng-Lạc king. Places in the south like Văn Lang were sites of cultural intercourse where the classical storytelling heritage transmitted through common Sinographic texts and local (often vernacular) expressions of lived experience commingled. For example, the narrator of the Dragon Lord story speculated that for all the "Hundred Viêts"—a broad term that in Sinographic texts could refer indiscriminately to peoples as distant from one another as Hàng Châu (Hangzhou) Bay to the Cả-Lam River Basins—tattooing originated with the Hùng-Lạc king.¹⁹⁶ This rhetorical speculation allowed the tattooing purportedly taught by the king to resonate with tattooing practices of the "hundred Viêt" wherever they were found in classical histories and literature.

Similarly, after taking refuge in the Yuan north, Lê Tắc 黎嶠 (c.1260s–c.1340s) found it meaningful to articulate the tattooing he experienced in Đại Việt by way of classical texts.¹⁹⁷ In doing so, he intended, in part, to make tattooing more familiar to his northern overlords. By referring to old books, Tắc reminded his northern readers about textual remembrances of southerners' tattooing in a remote but common past. Of course, Tắc's replication (i.e. citation) of classical Sinographic texts in no way diminished the reality of his personal encounters with tattoo culture. Tắc's sourcing of former texts did,

¹⁹⁶ "Hồng Bàng thị," 18.

¹⁹⁷ Lê Tắc, *An Nam chí lược* 安南志略 (c.1330s), 1.17b, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=en&file=59047&page=40>; Kathlene Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam*, 41–42.

however, render his lived experiences more communicable to educated people in the north.

The process by which endemic southern attitudes towards tattooing intersected with northern storytelling is found in an episode that took place in Trần Đại Việt during the summer of 1299 and a later (15th C.?) Vietnamese historian's commentary about it. Sometime after renouncing the household (i.e., become a monk) and retiring for a second time to Yên Tử Mountain to practice asceticism, Trần Khâm 陳吟 (1258–1308), then the senior king, prepared a tattooing ceremony for his son, the sitting king. Khâm explained the meaning of this rite of passage to his son as follows.

上皇曰：「我家本下流人(始祖顯慶人)，世尚雄勇，每刺龍梭於髀間。世業武，固宜文髀，示不忘本」。

The senior king [Trần Khâm] said, “Our clan originated as downriver men. [commentary]: (the first [Trần] ancestor was a person from Hiên Khánh). For generations [we] have remained heroic and brave. Each [generation of our kin] tattooed the ‘dragon shuttle’ on [our] thighs. For generations, [ours] was the warrior’s trade. Firmly, [you] should adorn [your] thighs and show that [you] have not forgotten [your] origins.”¹⁹⁸

Here, Trần Khâm’s concern was endemic to his homeland. He explained his family’s roots in the ruddy alluvial delta about forty-five kilometers upstream from the mouth of the Red River, where crocodiles, regarded as lower delta dragons, abounded.¹⁹⁹ Generations ago, Khâm’s ancestors settled there as a fishing family, and his kinfolk

¹⁹⁸ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản ký, 6.7a–b. This passage has also been translated in Shawn Frederick McHale, “Texts and Bodies: Refashioning the Disturbing Past of Trần Vietnam (1225–1400),” *Journal of the Social and Economic History of the Orient* 42, no. 2 (1999): 504; Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 138–139.

¹⁹⁹ Hiên Khánh, from where the commentary says the first Trần ancestor hailed, was also called Tức Mặc. Today, it is in Vụ Bản District of Nam Định Province. For delta crocodiles and dragons, see Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 139.

assumed vernacular names of fish as their own in childhood.²⁰⁰ By alluding to crocodiles and his clan's fishing origins as “downriver men,” Khâm conjured those “upriver men,” with whom he implicitly contrasted his lineage. Thus, his words reflected palpable distinctiveness among upriver and downriver peoples during his lifetime. Indeed, as a leader from the lower delta, Trần Khâm harbored deep apprehension about mountain peoples far upstream the three rivers that meet at Bạch Hạc.²⁰¹ In dealing with them, he saw himself as champion of the lowlands. When the king sent his forces west of Bạch Hạc to battle upriver men, he stressed his role as guardian of the delta not only by having his warriors tattooed with crocodiles, but also by having the scholars who accompanied them bear talismans described as “turtle and fish amulet-seals.”²⁰² In pushing to tattoo his son with such images, Trần Khâm, the hardened king, who had been successively buffeted by invaders led by Mongols, felt the need to impress upon his son family continuity and the value of martial prowess in ensuring its longevity. In short, Khâm needed his son to understand the endemic message that as downriver men, the Trần were martial heroes on the defensive against threats from upriver as well as the north.

At the same time, Trần Khâm evoked the Sinographic idiom to describe the Trần tattooing tradition as adorning the “dragon shuttle” on the thighs. In medieval Sinographic texts, the “dragon shuttle” alluded to the Tấn (Jin) Dynasty general Đào Khản's 陶侃 (259–334) encounter with a dragon. According to the *Book of Tấn* 晉書

²⁰⁰ Members of the Trần lineage adopted names such as *kình* (whale), *chép* and *trắm* (species of carp), *dưa* (pike conger), *nheo* (catfish), *ngạnh* (armor-head catfish), *ngừ* (tuna), and *lành canh* (glass fish). During rituals performed today at the Trần Ancestral Shrine (Nam Định), speaking these fish names is still taboo. Trần Xuân Sinh, *Thuyết Trần: Sử Nhà Trần* (Hải Phòng: NXB Hải Phòng, 2003), 46.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 137.

²⁰² “Turtle and fish amulet-seals” 龜魚符印 are described in a poem by Nguyễn Sĩ Cố 阮士固 (?–1312) titled “Following as a Royal Escort to the West on a Punitive Campaign and Paying Homage to the Shrine of Hiến Uy Vương on Bạch Hạc River” 從駕西征謁白鶴江顯威王祠. Nguyễn Huệ Chi, ed., *Thơ văn Lý Trần* (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 1988), tập 2, 559. Recension VHv.1473 of the *Lĩnh Nam chí quái liệt truyện* has “dragon and fish amulet-seals” 龍魚符印.

(648), in his youth, Đào Khản was fishing at Thunder Marsh 雷澤, when the shuttle of a loom got caught in his net. He brought it home and hung it on his wall. Soon afterwards, a storm ensued, and the shuttle transformed into a dragon, who took off.²⁰³

In light of this story, when Trần Khâm instructed his son to receive the “dragon shuttle” tattoo, he meant that the young king should adorn his thigh as Đào Khản decorated his wall and, through this rite of passage, transform from downriver fishing folk to ruler of Ascending Dragon (Thăng Long)—from lower delta crocodile to regal dragon.²⁰⁴ We do not know whether Khâm had given his son a fish name, but clearly Khâm wanted his recalcitrant twenty-three-year-old son, who ultimately demurred, to grow up and act more like a dragon.²⁰⁵

Thus, although Trần Khâm spoke his fatherly words in both vernacular and classical tones, he ultimately conveyed a localized message specific to his time and place. However, an anonymous historian’s comments to the episode reveal murmurs of additional peripheral voices. The historian (Phan Phu Tiên?) accounted for the tattooing:

又：國初軍士皆渾刺龍文於腹背及兩髀，謂之采龍。盖宋商客見我越民刺龍文於身，謂海蛟畏龍文，遭風舟沉交不敢犯，故目曰采龍也。

Also, at our kingdom’s beginning, soldiers all smeared and pierced dragon designs on their arms, backs, and two thighs. [The designs] were called “colored dragons.” Basically, Tống (Song) merchant travelers saw our Việt people tattoo dragon designs on their bodies. [The merchants] thought that ocean flood dragons feared the dragon designs, (so) if [people with the tattoos] encountered a tempest that

²⁰³ *Jin shu* 晉書 (648), 66.18a, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=79614&page=70>.

²⁰⁴ Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 139.

²⁰⁵ In 1299, Trần Khâm repeatedly disciplined his successor, whom Khâm felt behaved irresponsibly. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ 6.6a–8b. Apparently, Khâm’s efforts were not in vain, and his son like his predecessors recognized the value “of discipline, of consensus, and of delegating authority” as well as the “importance of family solidarity.” Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 138.

sank their boat, [the sea dragons] would not dare to attack. Hence, [the merchants] dubbed [the tattoos] “colored dragons.”²⁰⁶

The commentator tells us that the name of the dragon tattoos that Trần Khâm hoped to pass on resulted from the interaction of northern and southern cultures during the latter half of the tenth-century, when the Tống (Song) Dynasty (960–1279) was founded and autonomous local rulers controlled the south in succession.²⁰⁷ Presumably, tenth-century southerners ascribed martial attributes to people with dragon tattoos as did Khâm three centuries later, since soldiers were specified as having practiced the tattooing. However, northern sojourners interpreted the tattoos according to the Sinographic literary tradition. For example, Hán (Han) period (206 B.C.–220 C.E.) texts spoke of “Việt” people, who “lived along river and ocean shores with giant soft-shell turtles, sturgeons, fish, and [smaller] soft-shell turtles as companions, and tattooed their bodies.”²⁰⁸ Northern merchants apparently thought that tattooed people of the lower Red River Delta resembled those who lived among aquatic creatures in Sinographic texts. Like the words of the Dragon Lord, the “Việt” were water clans. As a result, northerner visitors interpreted local tattooing according to textual tradition, and they attributed to tattoos the apotropaic powers that appeared in early texts.²⁰⁹ By conflating people of the lower delta with those “Việt” in Sinographic texts, the northern merchants ascribed new meaning to local tattooing practices. Whereas Trần Khâm stressed the native significance of dragon tattoos, the northerners literally colored them.

²⁰⁶ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 6.7b.

²⁰⁷ Fifteenth-century Đại Việt historians began their kingdom’s core annals (as opposed to peripheral annals) with either the reigns of Ngô Quyền 吳權 (r.939–944), who predated the Song Dynasty, or Đinh Bộ Lĩnh 丁部領 (r.968–979). Here, “the beginning of our kingdom,” apparently referred to the reign of the latter.

²⁰⁸ 處江海之陂，與魴鱸魚鰲為伍，文身翦髮。 I omitted translation of the last two Sinographs, “trimmed their hair.” Han Ying 韓嬰 (fl. 2nd C.), *Han shi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳, fascicle 8, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/han-shi-wai-zhuan?searchu=%E5%A4%AB%E8%B6%8A>; c.f. fuller translation by Erica Fox Brindley in *Ancient China and the Yue*, 165–166.

²⁰⁹ For examples in the Sinographic tradition, see Erica Fox Brindley, *Ancient China and the Yue*, 164–168.

Therefore, tattooing like Văn Lang was a locus where northern and southern cultures, remembrances, and narrative traditions intermingled. Storytelling about tattoos allowed native and Sinographic narratives to coexist and transform one another. More broadly speaking, “Việt” storytelling became a medium through which cultures and identities could be negotiated, severed, and conjoined. Since this storytelling was multivocal, various overlapping native and Sinographic meanings could be summoned to evoke continuity and/or assert difference. Indeed, Trần Khâm embodied such a case. Although he clearly identified with his native delta homeland, his forebears were Mân Việt people, who hailed from the coastal southeast of modern China.²¹⁰ As such, Khâm, who was well-versed in the Sinographic literary tradition, certainly understood the multivalence of his lineage’s tattooing tradition. Recognizing this, he spoke both to connect to the past and adapt to the exigencies of the present; that is to perpetuate his family and situate his kin relative to upriver and northern peoples.

This is the very narrative strategy that Nguyễn Trãi would harness in composing the *Bình Ngô đại cáo*. Trãi tapped into the multivocal storytelling traditions of the fourteenth century and adapted them to conditions at the beginning of the Lê Dynasty. Stories like that of the Dragon Lord and the White Pheasant, another tale about tattooing in the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái*, can be considered “anomaly accounts” and “transmitted wonders.”²¹¹ This “corpus” consisted of what Sarah M. Allen has described as “shifting stories” that were coproduced through the interaction of oral and textual storytellers and

²¹⁰ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 5.1a. On the Mân Việt (Min-Yue) or “Eastern Yue,” see Erica Fox Brindley, *Ancient China and the Yue*, 101–111.

²¹¹ Engelbert Thomas, “Mythic History: Representations of the Vietnamese Past in the Collection ‘Lĩnh Nam chích quái’” in *Southeast Asian Historiography, Unravelling the Myths: Essays in Honour of Barend Jan Terwiel*, ed. Volker Grabowsky (Bangkok: River Books, 2011), 273.

their audience to create fluid texts of fungible composition.²¹² For these stories, innovation was represented not so much by invention (“fiction”) as by the reconfiguring of intertwining narrative threads already current in social storytelling.²¹³ Thus, these stories spoke to the present by reimagining alternative, sometimes aberrant pasts.²¹⁴

At the same time, these stories were social. Whether textually or orally, they perpetuated through social interaction.²¹⁵ As mentioned above, storytellers were unconcerned about original authorship and textual fidelity. Instead, what mattered was the human relations through which the stories replicated. Therefore, what is vital to understanding them is the relationships among various storytellers and their audience(s) and how they rearticulated the past to speak to the present.

Where then were the people behind stories like that of the Dragon Lord and the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*, in which it was found? How were storytellers and their audience(s) oriented relative to one another?

By exploring classically trained scholars’ accretions to the core twenty-two accounts of the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*—prefaces, postscripts, and covers—I hope to answer these questions to uncover the relative orientations of the tales’ textual transmitters and infer their social counterpoints. Furthermore, I attempt to understand these scholars’ attitude towards the strange. Robert F. Campany has shown how anomaly accounts familiarize the weird. They acculturate storytellers and their audience to remote, unconventional circumstances.²¹⁶ Therefore, spatially, the conceptual movement between

²¹² Sarah M. Allen, *Shifting Stories: History, Gossip, and Lore in Narratives from Tang Dynasty China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), 19, 22–23, 25–69.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 4–11.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3, 70–118.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

²¹⁶ Robert Ford Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 1–20.

partakers of the stories and their bizarre subject matter can be envisioned either as centrifugal—emanating from an elite core to the frontier of a textual universe—or the reverse as peripheral actors spying a remote, uncanny, and, perhaps, intimidating center.

This is why such inquiry pertains to Nguyễn Văn Đạt's story. For Nguyễn Trãi and fifteenth-century literati, their dynasty's founder was strange. The scholars' embrace of Lê Lợi and southern members of his entourage necessarily drew them uncomfortably close to distant, unfamiliar ways of being. This apprehensive movement paralleled scholars' engagement with anomalies and wonders through storytelling. In other words, Lê Dynasty scholars' relationship to the storytelling of unconventional alternatives and discomfiting oddities spoke to Đạt's *xuất xứ* question.

Therefore, we must ask, "Were the scholars projecting an authoritative voice from the center to subordinate margins? Or were they merely on the outside, peering in?"

In order to answer these questions, we must study the interplay of oral and textual storytelling—auditory experience and silent reading. This inquiry, I argue, reveals that scholars participated in accounting for anomalies and transmitting wonders as members of a minority. They cultivated social cohesion amongst themselves within their own sense of elite culture, but nevertheless did so largely amongst themselves without pushing their narratives outwards through the larger storytelling nexus. To see how, let us first consider a preface to the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* attributed to Vũ Quỳnh 武瓊 (1452-1516) and dated 1492:

去古未遠，南俗猶尚簡易，未有國史，以紀其事，故其事率多遺忘。其幸存而不泯者，特民間口傳耳。²¹⁷

Not too far from antiquity, the customs of the south were still simple. The kingdom's histories did not yet exist to record affairs, so they were mostly lost and

²¹⁷ In the last phrase (特民間口傳耳), *đặc* 特 appears to be a mistake for *đãi* 待.

forgotten. That which luckily survived and did not fall into oblivion did so owing to oral transmission among the people.²¹⁸

Here, Vũ Quỳnh credited oral storytelling with preserving stories such as that of the Dragon Lord during a remote, primordial past without textual records. He then elaborated on the stories' development:

然其國始於雄王，為文明之漸，濫觴於趙，吳，丁，黎，李，陳，迄今則尾閭矣。故國史之載，特祥焉。斯傳之作，其傳中之史歟？不知始於何時，成於何人，姓氏而不見錄。蓋其草創於李，陳之鴻生碩儒而潤色於今日好古博雅之君子者矣。

Thereupon the kingdom, beginning with the Hùng-Lạc kings, gradually became culturally resplendent with a trickle in the Triệu, Ngô, Đinh, Lê, Lý, and Trần until today, when [resplendent culture] now gushes forth like waters from the sea.²¹⁹ Thus, in what is carried in the kingdom's history, [these stories] are especially examined. As for the creation of these accounts, could there be history in their stories? [I] do not know from when they originated nor who completed them. [Regarding the author's] clan name, [I] find no record. Apparently, [the accounts] were drafted by great scholars and erudite Nho (i.e., scholars studied in the Confucian classics) of the Lý and Trần dynasties, and [they] are now being refined by contemporary cultivated men with broad learning and a fondness for antiquity.²²⁰

Vũ Quỳnh's comments agree with Sarah Allen's findings about transmitted wonders' oral and textual transmission from the mid-Đường (Tang) to early Tống (Song) dynasties, namely that the stories replicated and transformed freely through oral and

²¹⁸ Vũ Quỳnh, "Tựa," in *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*, modern reproduction of Sinographic text (A.33) in Sun Xun, Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, and Chen Yiyuan, ed., *Yuenan Hanwen xiaoshuo jicheng* 越南漢文小說集成 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), vol. 1, 14. For *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*, I am using the recension A.33, which according to Đinh Gia Khánh, represents the text as copied in 1695. Đinh Gia Khánh, ed., *Lĩnh Nam chích quái: truyện cổ dân gian sưu tập biên soạn thế kỷ XV* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn học Hà Nội, 2001), 12, 188–189.

²¹⁹ Vũ Quỳnh listed the names of successive dynasties: Triệu 趙 (550–571), Ngô 吳 (939–967), Đinh 丁 (968–979), Lê 黎 (980–1009), Lý 李 (1010–1224), and Trần 陳 (1225–1400). Here, Triệu is somewhat ambiguous, since both Triệu Đà 趙佗, founder of Nam Việt 南越 (204–111 B.C.E.), and Triệu Quang Phục 趙光復 (r.550–571) were known as Triệu Việt Vương 趙越王 and appear in the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* as well as the dynastic history that was initiated in 1479.

²²⁰ Vũ Quỳnh, "Tựa," 14.

textual storytelling without expectations about authorship or authenticity. Each retelling was an invitation to personalize a better story. This began to change in the early Tống, when the profound loss of Đường era texts and a trend towards anthologizing led to the attribution of fixed authorship to transmitted wonders.²²¹ The south was an integral province of the Đường, while the Tống was coterminous with the Lý Dynasty in the south, so it is within reason that Quỳnh was correct in conjecturing that the stories were first culled into a compilation sometime during the Lý and Trần dynasties. Hence, narratives about the mutual ambivalence between highland and lowland peoples like the Dragon Lord's may have begun with stories inspired by the interplay of the bronze drum cultures of mountain "people between the rivers" (c.200–750) and the people of the Red River and Pearl River deltas, who bracketed them.²²² Indeed, there is some linguistic evidence of this.²²³ When the "people between the rivers" were incorporated into the Đường empire, literary men then culled local lore about mountain peoples and their interactions with people from the lowland deltas and grafted the stories into the Sinographic tradition as anomaly accounts and transmitted wonders. Later, as Vũ Quỳnh surmised, Lý and Trần men began gathering the tales into compilations.

Indeed, this appears to be the case in light of another collection by Hồ Tông Thốc 胡宗簇 (fl. 14th C.), who, in the latter half of the fourteenth-century, created the earliest known compilation of lore about the Hùng-Lạc kings in the form of genealogical records,

²²¹ Sarah M. Allen, *Shifting Stories*, 241–271.

²²² Catherine Churchman, *The People between the Rivers: The Rise and Fall of a Bronze Drum Culture, 200-750 C.E.* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

²²³ For example, "Lạc" may come from a proto-Tai word for "bird," a common motif on the bronze drums; *trống*, the Vietnamese word for "drum" derived from a Tai word; Phù Đổng, a spirit once thought to be a reincarnation of the Lạc Dragon Lord may refer to a Tai terrene spirit. Tai speakers lived (and live) along the Thao portion of the Red River (west of Bạch Hạc) and the mountainous regions from Thái Nguyên to beyond the Chinese border. Erica F. Brindley, *Ancient China and the Yue*, 34; Catherine Churchman, *The People between the Rivers*, 33; Liam C. Kelley, "Tai Words and the Place of the Tai in the Vietnamese Past," *Journal of the Siam Society* 101 (2013): 55-84; Tạ Chí Đại Trường, *Thần, người và đất Việt Nam*, 34.

the *Việt Nam thế chí* 越南世志 (*Accounts of Generations in the Việt South*).²²⁴

Comparing Thóc's preface with that of Vũ Quỳnh's not only confirms the orality of the earliest layers of stories about the Hùng-Lạc kings, but it also reveals sharp contrast between the preface writers' attitudes towards the stories' consumption and dissemination.

In his preface, Hồ Tông Thốc wrote:

自亘古以來，總關俗蹟，詢載於已往，斷憑耆耄之傳，檢驗於相誓現廟堂之奉。

Since antiquity, for all traces about customs and inquiry of years gone by, [one] could only rely on what elders passed down and examine divinatory manifestations through offerings at temple halls.²²⁵

Thóc's statement suggests that, in the second half of the fourteenth century, when the *Lĩnh Nam chính quái liệt truyện* is also thought to have been compiled, storytelling about the Hùng-Lạc kings was predominantly oracular. In addition, Thóc gives us a sense of the lived culture around Hùng-Lạc lore by invoking worship and tangible structures associated with it. Indeed, the relationship between people's actual worship and lore about venerated spirits was evidenced in an earlier fourteenth-century compilation.²²⁶ Therefore, lore about the Hùng-Lạc kings was the subject of social practices that involved oracular storytelling and ritual performance.

In addition, in his preface, Hồ Tông Thốc expressed reservations about scribing Hùng-Lạc lore, which he clearly associated with anomaly accounts and transmitted

²²⁴ Hồ Tông Thốc's genealogy included the lineages of the Hùng-Lạc kings and the Triệu clan, who ruled Nam Việt (206 B.C.E.–111 B.C.E.). It survived until the nineteenth-century, but it is now believed to be lost. Tạ Chí Đại Trường dated the text to c.1372. Tạ Chí Đại Trường, *Thần, người và đất Việt Nam*, 137–139.

²²⁵ Hồ Tông Thốc, "Tựa," cited in Phan Huy Chú 潘輝注 (1782–1840), *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí* (1819), original Sinographic text in *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, ed. and trans. Viện Sử học Việt Nam (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 1992), 45.89a.

²²⁶ The text(s)'s title shifted considerably, but it is generally known as the *Việt điện u linh tập* 粵甸幽靈輯 compiled by Lý Tế Xuyên 李濟川 in 1329. Keith W. Taylor, "Notes on the *Việt Điện U Linh Tập*."

wonders. Although he valued hearsay about odd stories from the past, he also felt the need to justify his engagement with them. In response to potential critics, Thúc wrote:

故捨遺餘響得之傳言，採摭其顛以格世記耳。其奇怪之迹，寮然難瞽，姑存之以俟後之君子，豈敢有穿鑿傲言以惑世誣民者乎？讀者須留心，細認，刻抑，推驗，則玉石彰然着明其形声影響，不攻自潰矣。

Thus, [I] merely picked the residual echoes [I] got from transmitted speech, and [I] plucked and gathered up their roots in order to investigate generational records. As for their traces of wonders and anomalies, which are obscure and difficult to examine, for the time being [I] retained them to await cultivated men. How could [I] dare to penetrate and chisel [i.e. push a farfetched narrative] with excitable speech to confuse the world and deceive the people? The reader should pay attention, carefully determine, firmly grasp, and examine, and then [the distinction between] jade and stone will become evidently clear, and the shadows and echoes of [the weird stories'] shape and sound will collapse of themselves without assault.²²⁷

Once again, we see that Hồ Tông Thúc sourced oral tales. Hence, bereft of textual reference, his apologetic for relying perforce on hearsay countered the appearance of fraud in his conjuring of farfetched stories about weird, unbelievable, and unverifiable anomalies. In defense, he asserted his fondness for antiquity, saying that he tentatively included the wilder aspects of the stories as an act of preservation, lamenting as would Vũ Quỳnh that textual records of the past were otherwise scant.

As for the stories' veracity, Hồ Tông Thúc deferred this question to his discerning readers. He concluded:

倘若正諸其錄上諸筆端，削剝研精，刊行于世，使人人洞察古今，默會玄微，其亦傳中之史記歟？

Should perhaps [someone] correct the extreme writings in the records, prune them and grind down their essence, and publish them to circulate them in the world so

²²⁷ Hồ Tông Thúc, "Tựa," 45.88b.

that everyone could see clearly past and present and inwardly fathom mysterious subtleties, then might that record the history within the stories?²²⁸

By proposing that future readers publish the text, Thốc revealed his interest in promulgation. Moreover, he frames the value of spreading hearsay in written form by suggesting that the seemingly outrageous stories convey aspects of an authentic past that, once filtered, may serve historical writing.

In fact, Hồ Tông Thốc was both fruitlessly wishful and remarkably prescient. Around 1479, the court historian Ngô Sĩ Liên incorporated the Dragon Lord and Hùng-Lạc kings into his compilation of “Peripheral Annals” 外紀 for the new dynastic history. The purport of their inclusion, as mentioned above, was to create a grander imperial history complete with a mythical ancestry of empire in the south. Early in the last decade of the fifteenth century, Kiều Phú, after recounting the orality of the tales, made this explicit in his remarks about the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*:

至於山川之靈，人物之異，則雖史筆不錄，而口碑不誣。後來博洽，編之為傳，凡若干篇，掇捨零碎條件，以足其所未備。卓詭之中關係者存。嗚呼！天命玄鳥降而生商，則百卵生兒，分治南國，鴻臚之傳，不可泯也。

As for the numina of the mountains and rivers and the extraordinary among humankind and beasts, although the scribe’s brush did not record them, their inscription through orality was without falsehood. Later, they were broadly amassed and compiled into accounts, overall several chapters. These gathered enough shattered fragments to make up for what was incomplete, and, among the incredible, pertinent things remained.

Alas! If Heaven destined a tenebrous bird to descend and beget Thương (Shang), then that one hundred eggs birthed sons to divide and govern the southern kingdom—the story of Hồng Bàng [the Hùng-Lạc kings’ clan]—must not fall into oblivion.²²⁹

²²⁸ Ibid., 89a

²²⁹ Kiều Phú, “Hậu tự,” 1112–1113.

In such a manner, the genealogical tales that Thốc valued eventually made history. The Dragon Lord's spawning of the "Hundred Viêts" and the Hùng-Lạc king's Hồng Bàng lineage constituted a parallel to the legendary genesis of King Thương of Thang 湯商, founder of the northern Thương (Shang) Dynasty (c. 1600–1046 B.C.E.). Now history, however peripheral, knowledge of the Hùng-Lạc kings spread across Đại Việt with official sanction.²³⁰ In fact, Emperor Lê Tư Thành himself ordered the observation of rites for the Hùng-Lạc kings, for which he specially commissioned an official genealogy.²³¹

At the same time, despite Hồ Tông Thốc's wishes, extraordinary stories about the Hùng-Lạc kings were never anthologized for print until the modern era. The same is true for the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*, which carried the Dragon Lord tale. Possibly, these stories' inclusion in the dynastic histories may have precluded the need to publish them independently. However, a further look at the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*'s content, prefatory matter, and extent recessions suggest that partakers of the collection preferred manuscripts and oral storytelling as more personalized and social vehicles of transmission. As I hope to show, studying this individual and social construction of texts makes it possible for us to infer how the storytellers' positioned themselves within their social milieu, namely as elite (and therefore by definition minority) participants in what they saw as an otherwise bizarre, sometimes perverse storytelling environment.

In contrast to Hồ Tông Thốc's interest in print publication, Vũ Quỳnh celebrated the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*'s widespread oral circulation among common folk. He wrote:

²³⁰ *Thần tích* or "spirit registers" reveal that by the sixteenth-century, a cult of Hùng-Lạc kings emerged across Đại Việt. Tạ Chí Đại Tùong, *Thần, người và đất Việt Nam*, 153–155.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

嗚呼！《嶺南列傳》之作，豈特刻之石，編之簡而貴於口碑歟？童之黃，叟之白，率皆稱道而愛慕之，懲艾之，則其有係於綱常，關於風化，夫豈小補哉！

Alas! As for the creation of the *Lĩnh Nam liệt truyện* (*Arrayed Accounts from South of the Passes*), how could it have [had to] wait to be carved on stone or compiled into bamboo slips [before] becoming valued through oral inscription?²³² If blonde [i.e. young] children and grey old men all consider [its] Đạo, admire it, and caution by it, then does that not relate to the cardinal relations and cultural transformation? That is no minor supplement!²³³

What is remarkable about Quỳnh's statement is not only that the stories continued to be primarily perpetuated orally at the end of the fifteenth century, but also that Quỳnh felt no need to circulate them in print or enshrine them in stone. He recognized the stories' potential for Confucian-oriented cultural transformation, but he made no outward effort to shape their transmission among common folk. Young and old alike already spoke of them, so there was simply no need.²³⁴

Vũ Quỳnh further revealed his attitude toward the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* in his concluding remarks:

²³² In the phrase 豈特刻之石 ("how could it have [possibly] waited to be carved on stone"), *đặc* 特 appears to be a mistake for *đãi* 待.

²³³ Vũ Quỳnh, "Tựa," 15. Here, this recension's (A.33) language is somewhat problematic and contains at least one erroneous Sinograph. The language of another recension (VHv.1473) is more straightforward: "As for the numerous wonderous events south of the passes, the creation of arranged tales, without waiting to be carved in stone or compiled for [printing] with catalpa, has been written in people's hearts and inscribed in their mouths. Blonde (young) children and grey old men consider its Đạo, admire it, and caution by way of it, so its stories relate to the cardinal relations and cultural transformation. That is not trivial!" 嶺南奇事之多，列傳之作不待刻之石，編之梓而著於民心，碑於人口，黃童白叟率能稱道而愛慕之，懲艾之，則其事係於綱常，關於風化，夫豈小哉。Vũ Quỳnh, "Tựa," in *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*, modern reproduction of Sinographic text (VHv.1473) in Sun Xun, Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, and Chen Yiyuan, ed., *Yuenan Hanwen xiaoshuo jicheng* 越南漢文小說集成 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), vol. 1, 151.

²³⁴ Vũ Quỳnh elaborated on the stories' potential for encouraging morality, "Although the stories are uncanny, they stop short of preposterousness; although [their] language is about spirits, it does not touch upon demons; although [the stories] tread upon the fantastic, their traces can be grasped. Are they not simply about encouraging goodness and warning about evil, doing away with deceit and approaching truth in order to motivate mores and customs?" 事雖異而不至於誕，文雖神而不至於妖；雖涉於荒唐而蹤跡亦有可據。豈非勸善懲惡，去偽就真，以激動風俗而已。"Tựa," 15.

洪德王子仲春，愚始抄得舊傳，披而閱之，不能無魯魚陰陶之外。於是忘其固陋，校而正之，厘為二卷，目為《嶺南摭怪列傳》，藏於家以便觀覽。若夫考證之，潤色之，祥其事，備其文，志其詞，精其旨，後來好古君子，豈無其人歟？於是為之序。

In the spring of Nhâm Tý (1492), during the Hồng Đức era (1470–1497), this simpleton began copying the old accounts and opened and read them. They could not be without scriptural mistakes. Thus, forgetting my boorishness, I collated and corrected them. I then arranged them into two fascicles with the title *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*. I kept it at home for convenient reading. As for studying its veracity, polishing its aesthetics, examining its events, completing its language, giving its words purport, and refining its message—in the future, how could there be no [thus inclined] cultivated men who are fond of antiquity?²³⁵

Evidently, Quỳnh made no effort to engage the oral nor folkish dimensions of the storytelling milieu. Instead, he put away, literally “hid” (*tàng* 藏) the collection of stories, now clarified in his personally chosen wordage, in the privacy of his home for quiet perusal. He imagined a potential readership of “cultivated men,” the scholars who were his social counterparts, and invited them to join in his project, but all throughout he never attempted to project his reading of the stories onto less literary-minded (and apparently more vocal) folks. In other words, Quỳnh’s project narrowed rather than expanded; it focused inward to create social exclusivity and cohesion among erudite likeminded readers. By distinguishing an aesthetic favored by scholars, Quỳnh effectively sequestered his compilation and its (real and imaginary) readers from speakers of stranger stories.

Similarly, Kiêu Phú narrowed and personalized his reading of the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* in his own compilation. Although he produced his version in 1493, just one year after Vũ Quỳnh did, he was apparently unaware of his contemporary’s project.

²³⁵ Ibid.

This further suggests that editors like Phú worked in relative isolation as individuals or perhaps among a circle of trusted confidants. Indeed, extraneous content of one extant recension of the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* suggests that connoisseurs of the collection attached special value to personalized manuscripts even as late as the early nineteenth century.²³⁶ In his postface, Phú made this clear in his concluding remarks:

故愚旁記他書，隨附己意，改而正之，辯誣於既往，解嘲於將來，又刪其煩，從其簡，得便笥中觀覽，博雅君子，幸恕其僭云。

Thus, [I], this simpleton, [took] marginal records and alternative writings, attached my own ideas, and modified and corrected them, discerning lies about the past and freeing [my understanding of the stories] from future ridicule. [I] then cut down their complexity and went along with their simplicity so that they could be conveniently [placed] in a chest for perusal. With luck, erudite and elegant cultivated men will forgive my presumptuousness.²³⁷

By his own account, Kiêu Phú “presumptuously” modified the stories and even added to them according to his own tastes. Hence, his rendition was unmistakably individual and personally gratifying. Moreover, like Vũ Quỳnh, he tucked his version away in a chest for silent reading. Hence, his version was catered and limited to himself and a select circle of readers without impulse to reach outward and impact alternative oral and textual storytellers. He did not intend to extend or impose his version of authentic stories outward, but rather drew his readers inward toward an aesthetic shared among his social coterie.

²³⁶ This is implied by the title page of recension R.6, which indicates that certain value was attached to proprietary possession of the manuscript by recording the name of its owner. *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*, manuscript (Hanoi: National Library of Vietnam), accession no. R.6, 1a, available at Digital Collection of the Nom Preservation Foundation, http://lib.nomfoundation.org/site_media/nom/nlvnpf-0652/large/nlvnpf-0652-001.jpg. Taboo Sinographs in the text indicate that it was copied sometime after 1847. I am indebted to the participants and mentor of Cornell University seminar Asian 6660 for guiding me to this observation.

²³⁷ Kiêu Phú, “Hậu tự,” 1111–1112.

Although Kiều Phú never attempted to engage the people behind the stranger tales, he did express aversion to what he saw as aberrant alternative narratives.²³⁸ Here, we should pause to consider the scope of storytelling outside of erudite circles, especially oracular tales. Aside from the prefatory comments above, evidence of the prevalence of oral storytelling over the scholars' curated texts is clearest within the stories themselves. For example, for the Hùng-Lạc Dragon Lord story, the compilers used *bố*, the vernacular word for "father," instead of its Sinographic equivalent. Its inclusion was most likely meaningful because its vernacular usage conjured something in oracular storytelling that could only be captured in the literary language.²³⁹ Moreover, another story in the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* about Hà Ô Lôi was interspersed by vernacular poetry, suggesting a literary Sinographic rendition of a predominantly oracular vernacular tale.²⁴⁰

The latter story hints at how marginal the scholars' preferred reading of the *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* may have been vis-à-vis the larger storytelling milieu. As previously mentioned, the story is laced with the vernacular. Furthermore, the tale's hero, Hà Ô Lôi, despite Kiều Phú and Vũ Quỳnh's commentaries, was so overtly malapert that it was quite impossible for them to give the tale a moral spin, and so they could only rationalize the story as a counter example of how not to behave. In the story, Hà Ô Lôi, a prodigious philander, went untrammelled on successive amorous adventures that proceeded even to palace women. The feckless king was unwilling to discipline him. Hà Ô Lôi does eventually suffer a violent death at the hands of the father of a woman, whose favors he had enjoyed. However, the story is difficult to reconcile with the commentators'

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ "Hồng Bàng thi," 17.

²⁴⁰ "Hà Ô Lôi truyện" 何烏雷傳, in *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*, modern reproduction of Sinographic text (A.33) in Sun Xun, Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, and Chen Yiyuan, ed., *Yuenan Hanwen xiaoshuo jicheng* 越南漢文小說集成 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), vol. 1, 62–65.

moral twist, considering that with his dying words, Hà Ô Lôi exclaimed in the vernacular, “Why fret over life and death, which are matters of Heaven?—as long as a man gets to be a ‘hero.’ I willfully die a death for song and beauty. Why die because of food and sickness?”²⁴¹

In light of the vibrancy and scope of the oral and less disciplined narratives that circulated alongside the above compilers’ curated texts, I tend to see the classically trained scholars and their circle as minority storytellers, a small community of likeminded readers who distinguished themselves within a larger tradition of stories told by more numerous common folk. This is not to say that scholars and commoners occupied separate storytelling spheres sealed off from one another, but rather that the scholars’ preface matter as social statements through which they communicated with their audience reflected their sense of imagined readership. By curating personalized texts catered to literati sentiments and engaging readers in their prefaces, Vũ Quỳnh and Kiều Phú created the sense of belonging within a group of likeminded scholars organized around a common aesthetic congruous to their similar educational backgrounds, social relationships, and literati tastes.

However, the scholars’ reading coterie (or more likely coterie) constituted just one segment of participants in a much broader multivalent storytelling tradition, in which various storytellers transmitted intertwining divergent narratives that formed clusters of related tales circumscribed by “core” narratives. Each individual textual and/or oracular storyteller could imbue these core narratives with their own particular ideological spin and aesthetic texture within a storytelling nexus. As this pertained to scholars like Vũ Quỳnh and Kiều Phú, this meant that they could participate in the larger universe of stories by

²⁴¹ *Sinh tử do trời có quân bao? Nam nhi miễn đã được anh hào; chết vì thanh sắc cam là chết; chết việc ốm đau cơm gạo nào?* “Hà Ô Lôi truyện,” 65.

reconstituting aberrant tales in refined language and rationalize the stories' sensational, unsavory aspects with a moral interpretive spin. In short, storytellers like Quỳnh and Phú adopted strange tales to both solidify their sense of elite belongingness and situate themselves in relation to stranger folks, who preferred seemingly weird, alternative narratives.

Thus, with their compilations, the literati storytellers made the seemingly noisome more palatable. In doing so they brought themselves closer to the aberrant ways of articulating the world that many others talked about, but for which the scholars had little textual memory. To reconstitute this lacuna, the scholars tasked themselves with culling “shattered fragments to make up for what was incomplete” just as Kiều Phú described. Hence, when embracing weird stories, scholars creatively wove together contemporary vernacular tales and fragments of Sinographic texts, and they freely drew from both. Reliance on the former was clearly attested to by the compilers' comments about orality above. As for the latter, storytellers' yoking of narratives, characters, and even wording from Sinographic texts was so prodigious that one eighteenth-century scholar, who was probably influenced by his era's trend towards “inquiry and verification” 考證, decried, “Alas! How could the ‘Peripheral Annals’ pass down such ridiculous stories? (...) Therefore, I say that most of the accounts in the ‘Peripheral Annals’ are perverse!”²⁴²

Naturally, inspiration from the Sinographic heritage most frequently involved texts about the “south,” broadly referring to things south of the Yangzi River and its lower delta.²⁴³ Thus, stories like the Dragon Lord tale saw the confluence of Sinographic lore

²⁴² Ngô Thì Sĩ's commentary in Ngô Thì Sĩ 吳時士 and Ngô Thì Nhậm 吳時任, *Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên* 大越史記前編 (1800), ed. and trans. Lê Văn By, *et. al.* (Hà Nội: Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm và NXB Văn hóa thông tin, 2011), 54/1.12a–b.

²⁴³ Liam C. Kelley, “The Biography of the Hồng Bàng Clan as a Medieval Vietnamese Invented Tradition;” , “Constructing Local Narratives: Spirits, Dreams, and Prophecies in the Medieval Red River Delta”; Nguyễn Phương, *Ancient History of Vietnam: A New Study*, 53–61.

about Động Đình Lake, Vực River, etc. and non-Sinographic narrative elements endemic to maritime, lowland, and highland peoples of various ethnicities in the Vietnamese south. Such multivalent stories could simultaneously evoke continuity across distinct places and peoples and tolerate their differences.

Nguyễn Trãi understood this. From the beginning of the Lê Dynasty, he harnessed the multivocal storytelling tradition that he experienced late in the fifteenth century to bridge the gulf between delta scholars and the seemingly less elegant, “strange” people of the Cả–Mã river basins. In doing so, knowingly or not, Trãi placed himself at the pivot of history as a man whose life spanned the Trần, Hồ, Minh, and Lê periods and whose narrative about the Lê Dynasty founder, *Bình Ngô đại cáo*, positioned the storytelling orientation that would ultimately be inscribed at the periphery of Emperor Lê Tư Thành’s imperial history.

Bình Ngô đại cáo: Great Proclamation on Pacifying Ngô

When Lê Lợi led his forces from the southern Cả–Mã basins to wrestle the north and its capital from Minh control at the end of 1427, he was an outsider to the delta. To delta men, especially its scholars, Lê Lợi’s seizure of the delta felt like an invasion. He looked strange to them, a highland guerilla leader from the peripheral basin. Therefore, for many in the delta, Lợi’s arrival was met with trepidation.

How was Lê Lợi to enlist delta folks’ allegiance and support? One way was goodwill through amnesty and meted recompense. Another was to project the intolerable alternative to his rule. Yet another was to pose as their patron. With the *Bình Ngô đại cáo*, Lợi performed all these gestures. But these aside, the *Bình Ngô đại cáo*’s author, Nguyễn Trãi, drew delta scholars closer to his unfamiliar master foremost by appealing to their respect for Sinographic texts about conflicted peoples, their continuities, and their

heroes. Namely, he recalled the story of the ancient state of Việt (?–334 B.C.E.) and recast Lê Lợi as the former Ancient Việt hero Câu Tiễn 勾踐 (r.496–464 B.C.E.).²⁴⁴ In this way, Trãi spoke to delta folks in a familiar tongue.

Nguyễn Trãi also chose to allude to Ancient Việt for another reason. The story of Câu Tiễn resonated with delta scholars, because the Việt king was described in Sinographic texts as a downriver hero who partook of customs associated with the “Hundred Viêts,” including tattooing, boating, and cohabiting with watery creatures.²⁴⁵ Hence, invoking Câu Tiễn called to mind the multivocal storytelling tradition about the fluidly defined “Hundred Viêts,” continuity across north and south distinctions, and consanguinity between highland and lowland peoples that we saw in the tale of Hùng-Lạc Dragon Lord. Cognoscente of fourteenth–fifteenth century storytelling, Nguyễn Trãi realized that alluding to Câu Tiễn had the potential to evoke unity across disparities, acknowledge distinctiveness, and countenance differences among peoples and territories. Thus, Trãi saw that crafting Lê Lợi in Câu Tiễn’s likeness could extricate Đại Việt from Minh territory while asserting inclusiveness in a shared cultural sphere and, simultaneously, draw distinct northern and southern, highland and lowland peoples together within Đại Việt. Thus, by conjuring Câu Tiễn, Trãi turned Lê Lợi into a multidimensional, but more familiar hero whom delta scholars could approach and whom Minh imperialists feared.

²⁴⁴ Hereafter, by “Ancient Việt” I refer to the state of Yue 越國 (?–334 B.C.E.) in the lower Yangzi delta, which came to prominence early in the fifth-century B.E. and centered around modern Shaoxing in China’s Zhejiang Province. Esta Ungar discussed the representation of Lê Lợi as Gou Jian (Câu Tiễn) in “Vietnamese Leadership and Order: Dai Viet under the Le Dynasty,” 123–132. See also Stephen O’Harrow, “Nguyen Trai’s *Binh Ngo Dai Cao* 平吳大誥 of 1428: The Development of Vietnamese National Identity,” 166–167.

²⁴⁵ Han Ying 韓嬰 (fl. 2nd C.), *Han shi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳, fascicle 8; Erica F. Brindley, *Ancient China and the Yue*, 149.

By formulating the foundational statement of Lê Dynasty legitimacy and purpose with the *Bình Ngô đại cáo*, Nguyễn Trãi set the tone for all the dynasty's participants. Trãi's impact on Lê period historical storytelling and dynastic actors' imagining of their regional and social place in Đại Việt can hardly be overestimated. In fact, interpretations of Câu Tiễn's (and, therefore, Lê Lợi's) legacy and significance became grounds for political contention among Lê Dynasty ideologues.²⁴⁶ Furthermore, Trãi's tacit allusion to tales like the Dragon Lord's evoked themes that preceded such stories' incorporation into Lê Tư Thành's imperial history. Indeed, the impact of Trãi's proclamation was such that, by 1449, the story Trãi told about Lê Lợi's defeat of the Minh even entered the realms of music and theatre.²⁴⁷

Moreover, Nguyễn Trãi's invocation of Ngô established the very language with which Lê dynasty figures imagined and discussed their place in Đại Việt history. To see how, we must first ask, "Who were the Ngô 吳?" and "What does it mean to pacify Ngô?" In all but one instance that Ngô appears in the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (*Complete Book of Đại Việt Historical Records*, 1697), which preserved accretions of Lê Tư Thành's 1479 history, Ngô is evoked in the context of Lê Lợi's defeat of the Minh in 1427–1428.²⁴⁸ This usage is even more apparent in the *Lam Sơn thực lục* (*Veritable Records of Lam Sơn*), which Trãi is thought to have completed in 1431.²⁴⁹ The same is also true in later times for a nineteenth-century dynastic history.²⁵⁰ As for two outstanding cases, in which

²⁴⁶ Esta Ungar, "Vietnamese Leadership and Order: Dai Viet under the Le Dynasty," 125–132.

²⁴⁷ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản ký, 11.76a, 91b.

²⁴⁸ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, *passim*.

²⁴⁹ Lê Lợi (and Nguyễn Trãi), *Trùng san Lam Sơn thực lục*, photocopy of Sinographic text in *Nguyễn Trãi toàn tập tân biên*, ed. Mai Quốc Liên (Hà Nội: NXB Văn học, 2001), 217–310, *passim*.

²⁵⁰ *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* 欽定越史通鑑綱目, xylographic compilation, (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, 1881), accession no. A.1/1–9, *passim*.

Ngô does not specifically refer to Lê Lợi's defeat of the Minh, they are nevertheless extensions of the *Bình Ngô đại cáo*'s description of the event.²⁵¹

Considering this, we must consider the possibility that Trãi evoked Ngô not as a contemporary exonym for Minh or “Chinese” people in fifteenth-century Đại Việt as sometimes thought, but rather as a rhetorical literary device that was rooted in the Sinographic tradition and resonated with local storytelling.²⁵² In other words, all subsequent uses of “Ngô” in Vietnamese historiography derived from Trãi's *Bình Ngô đại cáo*. Thus, the invocation of “Ngô” for Đại Việt historians and Lê period men recalled a specific event as well as Trãi's literary conceptualization of the dynasty's place in history and space. In short, “Ngô” stood for an episode and its remembrance, not a people or polity.

Therefore, the dynastic histories' repeated recollection of “Ngô” bespoke its significance. But if all uses of “Ngô” in Vietnamese historiography, literature, and performative arts ultimately derived from the *Bình Ngô đại cáo*, then what did Nguyễn Trãi mean by it? I opine that, in the proclamation, Trãi alluded to what I will call Ancient Ngô (11th C.?–473 B.C.E.) and its historical rival Ancient Việt. Furthermore, I argue that Trãi chose to speak about “Ngô” as a deflected, multivalent placeholder that juxtaposed

²⁵¹ The *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* records an event in the summer of 1407, when Bùi Úng Đẩu and his followers rejected Ming recruitment efforts and absconded to the “mountains and forests.” The dynastic history records a ditty from that time that predicted doom for anyone who served the Ming. The history then emphasized that the ditty came true when Lê Lợi defeated the Ming, thereby alluding to the events of 1427–1428. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 9.6a. Nguyễn Trãi appeared to use “Ngô” as an ethnonym for Ming people in his *Dư địa chí* (1434). However, his contemporary's commentary to the gazetteer explained this usage of Ngô by citing the Ming's forced acculturation of Việt people to Ming ways during the 1407–1427 occupation; that is the very evils that Nguyễn Trãi graphically described in the *Bình Ngô đại cáo*. In both cases, novel uses of Ngô can be interpreted as derivative of the *Bình Ngô đại cáo*.

²⁵² Ngô has generally been annotated as an exonym for Ming or Chinese people. E.g., Mai Quốc Liên, *et. al.*, *Nguyễn Trãi toàn tập tân biên* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn học, 2001), vol. 2, 586; Trương Bửu Lâm, *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention* (New Haven: Southeast Asia Studies, Yale University, 1967), 61. John K. Whitmore proposed a more nuanced understanding of Ngô as an exonym for Chinese people within Vietnam and, perhaps, sympathetic Vietnamese. John K. Whitmore, “Ngo (Chinese) Communities and Montane–Littoral Conflict in Dai Viet, Ca. 1400–1600,” *Asia Major* 27, no. 2 (2014): 53–85.

two norths and two souths—Minh and Đại Việt, the delta and basins. Domestically, the effect of this multivalence was to tacitly reconcile internal delta-basin differences and, simultaneously, project the threat of an intolerable Minh alternative from which Đại Việt assertively diverged. Trãi's proclamation, therefore, was an invitation for delta scholars to join Lê Lợi with the attendant warning that failure to do so and remaining embroiled in regional conflict was to tempt further Minh incursion and suffer the fate of Man and Xúc just as Trãi had forewarned in his vernacular poetry.

Nguyễn Trãi saw that Ngô was particularly conducive to his message for several reasons. In the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., Ancient Ngô and Ancient Việt were enmeshed in internecine conflict. Nevertheless, they were portrayed in Sinographic texts as culturally continuous with similar “Việt” attributes like tattooing and a way of life along rivers and seas.²⁵³ In other words, the ancient Ngô and Việt resembled peoples in Đại Việt and mirrored the cultural consanguinity suggested by the Dragon Lord story. Moreover, Câu Tiễn brought the generations-long fighting between the two states to an end when the indignant Ancient Việt king defeated his rival in 473 B.C.E. Afterwards, Ancient Việt became a predominant power in the fifth century B.C.E. However, it was ultimately conquered by the hegemonic state of Sở (Chu) in 333 B.C.E.²⁵⁴ Hence, by invoking Câu Tiễn, Trãi projected Đại Việt's potential ascendancy, while he also cautioned about its demise at the hands of a bigger power like the Minh. Finally, Câu Tiễn was indebted to his two scholar advisors Văn Chung 文種 (?–472) and Phạm Lãi 范蠡 (536–448 B.C.E.) for his success in vanquishing Ancient Ngô. Trãi recognized that this coordination between the martial (võ 武) and the scholarly (văn 文), especially as

²⁵³ Erica F. Brindley, *Ancient China and the Yue*, 86–87.

²⁵⁴ After the Chu conquest, the state of Yue, or at least its elites, continued to exert considerable semi-autonomous power for some time. *Ibid.*, 85–92.

portrayed in exuberant literary works like *Springs and Autumns of Ngô and Việt*, in which the Việt king repeatedly solicits the wisdom of his two sagely advisors, could appeal to delta scholars and, perhaps, win their support for Lê Lợi.²⁵⁵

To see how Nguyễn Trãi delivered his message on Lê Lợi's behalf, let us now study the proclamation itself. The *Bình Ngô đại cáo* begins:

蓋聞：²⁵⁶

仁義之舉，要在安民；
弔伐之師，莫先去暴。
惟我大越之國，
實為文獻之邦。
山川之封域既殊，
南北之風俗亦異。
自趙、丁、李、陳之肇造我國；
與漢、唐、宋、元而各帝一方。
雖強弱時有不同，
而豪傑世未常乏。

We hear:

“Upholding humanness and righteousness is necessarily about bringing peace to the people;

Among generals who console [the people] and fell [the wicked], none first abandon violence.”

Ah, our kingdom of Đại Việt,²⁵⁷

Is truly a land of cultured heritage!

The terrain of mountains and rivers are distinct;

The manners and customs from north to south differ, too.

Since the Triệu, Đinh, Lý, Trần [dynasties] established our kingdom—

²⁵⁵ Zhao Ye 趙曄 (c.40–100), *Xinyi Wu Yue chunqiu* 新譯吳越春秋, ed. Li Zhenxing, trans. Huang Rensheng (Taipei: Sanmin chubanshe, 1996), 277–371.

²⁵⁶ The opening Sinographs 蓋聞 do not appear in the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*. Here, I supplement them as found in the *Hoàng Việt văn tuyển*. Bùi Huy Bích, *Hoàng Việt thi tuyển*, 5.3a.

²⁵⁷ Here, I am interpreting 惟 as a grammatical particle that indicates the switch in voice from common truism to personal perspective (蓋..., 惟...) instead of the possible alternative reading “only.”

Along with the Hán, Đường, Tống, Nguyên (Yuan) [dynasties]—each emperor had his place.

Although [we] have been variously strong and weak at times,
No generation is ever without heroes.²⁵⁸

First, we notice that *văn hiến chi bang* 文獻之邦, which I have translated “land of cultured heritage,” has nothing to do with writings. Instead, in Nguyễn Trãi’s proclamation, Đại Việt’s cultural legacy was marked by martial prowess. Trãi recalled that, since the Triệu Dynasty in the third century B.C.E., from generation to generation warrior heroes emerged from the Vietnamese south.²⁵⁹ Proceeding from this passage, Trãi then cited former warriors from the Vietnamese south like Lý Thường Kiệt and Ngô Quyền, who defeated northern attackers. In this way, Trãi portrayed Lê Lợi as the next in Đại Việt’s succession of heroes, describing at length Lợi’s battlefield achievements.²⁶⁰ With his opening words and detailed account of martial prowess, Trãi hoped to impress on delta scholars that for peace, humaneness, and righteousness to endure, they cannot forsake violence and its imposing champions.

Second, Nguyễn Trãi’s “land of cultured heritage” was multivalent. Was he distinguishing between northern and southern kingdoms and civilizations? Or did he simply acknowledge the different lands and cultures that spanned Đại Việt’s north and south and order them within the neat parallelism of his verse? I contend that he did both. By using “Ngô” as his point of reference, Trãi’s “north” and “south” were indistinct.

²⁵⁸ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản ký, 10.47b–48a.

²⁵⁹ Here, in contrast to Vũ Quỳnh’s preface above, Nguyễn Trãi was clearly referring to Emperor Triệu Đà of Nam Việt (204–111 B.C.E.) rather than Triệu Quang Phục. A later seventeenth-century commentary on the *Bình Ngô đại cáo* explained that Triệu Đà, the former Qin general, was alluded to by Trãi as “the master of heroes.” Nguyễn Trãi, *Lam Sơn thực lục*, 306.

²⁶⁰ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, 10.48b–51b.

Through his fluid use of Ngô, Trãi could speak to both dimensions of Lê Dynasty Đại Việt's geopolitical conceptualization.

Regarding the Minh, Nguyễn Trãi's assertion of cultural distinctiveness divided south from north. In doing so, Trãi followed precedents from early Sinographic texts. For example, a passage in the *Sử ký* 史記 (c.109–91 B.C.E.) described the tattooing, blackened teeth, fish caps, and other cultural attributes of the “Việt” people of the “great state of Ngô.”²⁶¹ It then explained, “Thus, none of their manners and attire are the same [as those of the central plains]. They are similar only in their expedience [relative to their respective regions]. With different localities, uses [for things] vary. With different affairs, manners change.”²⁶² Trãi then argued that these differences in the south substantiated the natural existence of a parallel dynastic tradition separate from the north's.²⁶³

At the same time, as the *Sử ký* passage demonstrates, Nguyễn Trãi's evocation of “Ngô” could refer to differences among “Việt” peoples, too. In the winter of 1427–1428, people in the delta witnessed southern outsiders come north to become their overlords through violence. To delta folks, the southerners' native terrain, customs, and manners were palpably foreign. Many from the delta, including those partial to the Minh, forcibly resisted the southerners' intrusion. Mutual apprehension among peoples was real. For this reason, Trãi's validation of differences north and south resonated with people's lived experiences by speaking implicitly to the conditions of the moment. Indeed, I attest that it

²⁶¹ More specifically the “Việt” were referred to as “Âu Việt” 歐越. I am following Erica F. Brindley's observation that an erroneous Sinograph probably referred to some form of fish cap. Erica F. Brindley, *Ancient China and the Yue*, 167.

²⁶² 夫翦發文身，錯臂左衽，甌越之民也。黑齒雕題，卻冠絺紵，大吳之國也。故禮服莫同，其便一也。鄉異而用變，事異而禮易。Sima Qian, *Shiji* 史記, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/shiji?searchu=%E9%BB%91%E9%BD%92>.

²⁶³ Stephen O'Harrow, "Nguyen Trai's *Binh Ngo Dai Cao* 平吳大誥 of 1428: The Development of Vietnamese National Identity," 171–172.

is this sublimated resonance with conflicted northern and southern peoples that perpetuate the poignancy of Trãi's proclamation for Vietnamese to this day.²⁶⁴

Moreover, Trãi's deflected domestic message would have been conspicuous to classically educated delta men, who were familiar with the history of Ancient Ngô and Ancient Việt, and, perhaps to an attenuated degree, less bookish delta folk, who knew something of the lore and performance traditions derived from exuberance retellings such as the first-century *Springs and Autumns of Ngô and Việt*.²⁶⁵ This is because the geography of the ancient states mirrored that of Đại Việt's basins and delta. The movement of Câu Tiễn's forces from Hangzhou Bay in the lower Yangzi northwards to conquer Ancient Ngô was the story of southerners prevailing over northern peoples of shared cultural stock.²⁶⁶ In effect, Trãi reoriented the upriver-downriver storytelling tradition about cultural divergence and consanguinity into a heroic south-north tale.

However, Nguyễn Trãi needed to do more than acknowledge differences among northern and southern peoples. He had to draw delta peoples, especially the scholars, closer to their new southern ruler. His approach was twofold. First, Trãi cast Lê Lợi as a tested hero who triumphed over wickedness, thereby validating the new king and projecting an intolerable alternative to his rule. Second, Trãi presented Lợi as a ruler who appreciated literary men. In short, Trãi made the king both guardian and patron of delta peoples. As for the former, Trãi spoke for the king:

予：
奮跡藍山，

²⁶⁴ As a diasporic "Amerasian" living in the shadow of prolonged Vietnamese warring, I have always found Nguyễn Trãi's deflected acknowledgment of fundamental differences among Vietnamese north and south and his catholic validation of all their heroes viscerally powerful. In this, I think that I am not alone.

²⁶⁵ Stephen O'Harrow, "Nguyen Trai's Binh Ngo Dai Cao 平吳大誥 of 1428: The Development of Vietnamese National Identity," 166.

²⁶⁶ Ancient Việt was centered at modern China's Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province. Ancient Ngô was centered at Suzhou, Jiangsu Province. Erica F. Brindley, *Ancient China and the Yue*, 85–86.

棲身荒野。

念世讎，豈可共戴；

誓逆賊，難與俱生。

痛心疾首者，垂十餘年；

嘗膽臥薪者，蓋非一日。

發憤忘食，每研談韜略之書；

即古驗今，細推究興亡之理。

圖回之志，

寤寐不忘。

I [Lê Lợi],

My footsteps took off from Lam Son;

I perched myself in wild fields.

I ruminated about the world's nemesis, "How could [I] bear to share [the same sky
with them]?"

I swore to oppose the bandits, "Impossible for both [they and I] to live!"

The pain in my heart and fury in my head lingered for over ten years;

My tasting gall and lying on bramble-wood was not [just] for a single day.

Erupting with anger, forgetting to eat, I always investigated and discussed books about
the Sheathings and Stratagems;²⁶⁷

Seeking the past, examining the present, I carefully probed and investigated the
principles of rise and fall.

Intent on striving to return,

Whether awake or asleep, I never forgot.²⁶⁸

Here, Nguyễn Trãi acknowledged Lê Lợi's peripheral origins "perched in the wild fields" of his native Lam Son. In this remote place, Lợi like Câu Tiễn was indignant, his resoluteness fortified through self-inflicted austerities. Lợi's liability as an outsider thus became his strength as a character hardened by adversity. At the same time, Trãi portrayed Lợi's travails as vouchsafed from heaven. Voicing Lê Lợi's perspective, Trãi

²⁶⁷ The [Six] Sheathings and [Three] Stratagems refer to military classics.

²⁶⁸ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 10.49a.

wrote “Seemingly, heaven wanted to besiege me to bestow its mission, so I further whet my resolve to overcome adversity.”²⁶⁹ Here, Trãi showed that Lê Lợi recognized the need to earn heaven’s support. Rhetorically, Trãi thus had heaven pose the reservations felt by delta scholars, who were uncertain about their new ruler. Heaven’s decade-long testing of Lê Lợi validated him as he emerged in the north from the southern “wild fields” of Lam Son.

In addition, Nguyễn Trãi vilified the Minh. The Minh had enlisted and empowered many scholars during their two-decade rule over the delta.²⁷⁰ Thus, Trãi tried to distinguish Lê Lợi as a more worthy ruler and discredit the Minh by highlighting the (ostensible) intolerability of their rule. He detailed purported Minh evils, including exploitation, cruelty, and forced acculturation.²⁷¹ Notably, Trãi stressed that, whether in the highlands or lowlands, nobody in Đại Việt escaped suffering under the Minh, who inflicted on people the worst miseries of both worlds, forcibly exposing them to mountain miasma and estuarine crocodile-dragons. Indeed, Trãi bemoaned that even insects among the grasses and trees were not safe.²⁷² Trãi then declaimed, “Letting all the waters of the Eastern Sea burst through would not be sufficient to wash away their defilement; exhausting the bamboo of the Southern Mountains would not be enough to record all their evils.”²⁷³ In summary, Trãi conveyed that the Minh were common nemeses to both highland and lowland peoples; by expelling the Minh, Lê Lợi was everyone’s hero.

However, winning over delta scholars was no easy task. In the above excerpt, Nguyễn Trãi intimated that Lê Lợi valued scholars’ wisdom. He told of the would-be

²⁶⁹ 蓋天欲困我以降厥任，故予益勵志以濟于難。 Ibid., 10.49b.

²⁷⁰ John K. Whitmore, *Vietnam, Ho Quy Ly, and the Ming (1371-1421)*, 91, 114–116.

²⁷¹ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 10.48b–49a.

²⁷² Ibid., 10.48b.

²⁷³ 決東海之水不足以濯其污，罄南山之竹不足以書其惡。 Ibid., 10.48b–49a.

king's earnest discussions, presumably with learned men, about military treatises. Trãi had Lợi pose as the would-be patron of educated men. Yet, Trãi had Lợi confess that, despite his overtures, "The effort to win people over seemed as immense as looking out to the vast sea."²⁷⁴ Indeed, the new king must have felt that recruiting doubtful delta scholars formidably difficult. Trãi elaborated on Lợi's challenge:

人才秋葉，
俊傑晨星。
奔走先後者，既乏其人，
謀謨帷幄者，又寡其助。
特以救民之念，每鬱鬱而欲東；
故於待賢之車，常汲汲已虛左。²⁷⁵

Human talents [were falling away like] leaves in autumn;
Exceptional heroes [were diminishing like] stars at dawning.
Those who galloped ahead [of me] and walked behind [me], [I] lacked such men;
Those who strategized and planned [with me] in [my] tent, [I] was also bereft of their
assistance.
Especially ruminating about rescuing the people, always saturnine, [I] wanted to
[head] east,²⁷⁶
So in the vehicle that awaited those who are worthy, constantly anxious, [I kept my]
left side unoccupied.²⁷⁷

In this passage, Trãi depicted talented men eluding Lợi like leaves spirited away by the wind and vanishing matinal stars. Lợi could only repine about his inability to inspire scholars' support, leaving his left, the place of worthy advisors, vacant and waiting. As he approached victory, Lợi's invitation was open but largely unanswered.

²⁷⁴ 得人之效，茫若望洋. Ibid., 10.49a–b.

²⁷⁵ The Sinographs 故於 are missing in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*. To complete the parallelism of the couplet, I supplement them as found in *Hoàng Việt văn tuyển*. Bùi Huy Bích, *Hoàng Việt thi tuyển*, 5.4a.

²⁷⁶ Going east meant questing to Đông Kinh or "Eastern Capital," that is Thăng Long (Hà Nội).

²⁷⁷ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 10.49a.

Lê Lợi's "constant anxiety" in this regard spoke to scholars' struggle with the *xuất xứ* question at the start of a new dynastic era. In early 1428, delta scholars were faced with the decision to embrace their unfamiliar ruler or renounce him. In choosing, scholars weighed high stakes. For instance, in 1407, when the Minh just came to power in the Vietnamese south, they issued a call for talented men to enter their service. Many responded.²⁷⁸ But also at that time, the Minh used the same tactic to draw out Đại Việt's best into the open and then executed them.²⁷⁹ Sensing such danger and, perhaps, bound by probity, others renounced the Minh and absconded. For example, one scholar and his students were said to have fled, leaving behind a ditty that exclaimed, "If you want to live, then hide in the mountains and forests!"²⁸⁰

As we have seen, Nguyễn Trãi addressed delta scholars' apprehensions about Lê Lợi by likening the king to Câu Tiễn and reorienting the longstanding anxiety between highland and lowlands peoples along the Red River to speak to the northern scholars' decisions regarding their new southern master. In doing so, Trãi created unintended consequences. By invoking Câu Tiễn, Trãi wanted to present Lợi as a warrior who appreciated erudite advisors just as Câu Tiễn had sought the wisdom of his strategists Phạm Lãi and Văn Chủng. However, after Trãi was killed in the aftermath of the Lychee Garden affair, his message skewed sharply. This is because after Câu Tiễn defeated Ancient Ngô, Phạm Lãi and Văn Chủng followed very different life trajectories. Phạm Lãi, sensing trouble, absconded, vanishing out on the lakes of the lower Yangzi, while

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 9.6a.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 9.5b.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 9.6a. The ditty continued, "If you want to die, become a Ngô official." Considering a retrospective comment immediately after the ditty in the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, the ditty may be apocryphal. See also note above about the "Ngô."

Văn Chung, failing to heed Phạm Lãi's prescient advice, remained in officialdom, only to be meted death due to the violent Việt king's suspicions.²⁸¹

Nguyễn Trãi vouched for Lê Lợi but ended up executed. The appearance of betrayal would have been obvious for delta scholars familiar with Trãi's messaging on behalf of the dynasty's founder. Moreover, as for their treatment of learned worthies, the Lê Lợi's dynasty turned out more like Câu Tiễn's than Trãi anticipated in 1428. In fact, by 1437, when he withdrew from court and returned to his family retreat, Trãi himself may have harbored apprehensions about the danger posed by Cà-Mã basin men, who resented him.²⁸² After Trãi died, the spectacle and mystery of the Lychee Garden affair only accentuated the suspicions among delta scholars about southern men that Trãi had endeavored to attenuate. Delta scholars understood that they had to choose between the divergent paths of Phạm Lãi and Văn Chung.

Emperor Lê Tư Thành, too, understood this. Starting in 1464, he officially rehabilitated Nguyễn Trãi and promoted him posthumously.²⁸³ The king owed his life to Trãi, and he surely expressed gratitude with this gesture.²⁸⁴ At the same time, Lê Tư Thành realized that he needed to steer the narrative about Lychee Garden. He had to reassure his first crop of scholars, whom he acquired the previous year, that he would not repeat the apparent betrayal of Lychee Garden. Moreover, the king wanted to restore Trãi's message about reconciling delta and basin men and perpetuate the storied feeling of consanguinity among highland and lowland peoples. Therefore, he ordered the recovery and circulation of Trãi's writings with commentary that emphasized Trãi's integrity and

²⁸¹ Sima Qian, *Shiji*, "Yue wang Gou Jian shijia" 越王句踐世家, <https://ctext.org/shiji/yue-wang-ju-jian-shi-jia#n6557>, <https://ctext.org/shiji/yue-wang-ju-jian-shi-jia#n6562>; Zhao Ye, *Xinyi Wu Yue chunqiu*, 353–361.

²⁸² Esta Ungar, "Vietnamese Leadership and Order: Dai Viet under the Le Dynasty," 204–206.

²⁸³ *Dại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 12.15b, 12.31a; Lê Quý Đôn, *Toàn Việt thi lục*, 2a.

²⁸⁴ Dương Bá Cung, ed., "Sự trạng," 5.13b–14a.

loyalty, and he commissioned his imperial history, the multivocal myth-laden periphery of which was preceded by Trãi's rhetorical genius.²⁸⁵

Nevertheless, alternative storylines persisted. Storytellers told unofficial narratives about Nguyễn Trãi and Lychee Garden. Some depicted Trãi not as a resolute scholar and moral paragon, but rather as the scion of a bumbling geomancer. Furthermore, they told that Trãi had fallen victim to the fatal seduction of an alluring serpent. Whereas contrasting stories spoke of vernacular poetry exchanges that celebrated Nguyễn Thị Lộ's uncompromising fidelity, others made her a salacious snake spirit.²⁸⁶ The snake, the storytellers said, assumed Lộ's sexy form to ruin Trãi through the Lychee Garden affair as revenge for her nest's destruction due to a clumsy geomantic move by Trãi's grandfather. Ultimately, she delivered Trãi his ending. But Lộ escaped—as a snake, her river-bound death turned out to be her release.²⁸⁷

What kindled such fantastic tales? In addition to want of a good story, the confusion of Lychee Garden along with the ambiguity of Nguyễn Trãi's ongoing entanglement with dynastic intrigue even after he retreated from the capital invited speculation and pondering. In 1437, frustrated and humiliated by the machinations of rival factions of mostly southern men, Trãi retired to his family retreat.²⁸⁸ However, two years later, he was recalled back into officialdom with a post he was to fulfill at his retreat east of the capital. Describing himself a "sixty-year-old withering body," Trãi accepted with reluctance (or perhaps measured humility).²⁸⁹ Meanwhile, Nguyễn Thị Lộ had won

²⁸⁵ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 12.30a, 13.17a.

²⁸⁶ For the story of the couple's expression of fidelity through poetry, see Kiều Thu Hoạch, *Giai thoại văn học Việt Nam* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn học, 2010), 42–44.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.12b–13a.

²⁸⁸ Esta Ungar, "Vietnamese Leadership and Order: Dai Viet under the Le Dynasty," 230.

²⁸⁹ 六十殘軀, read figuratively, can mean "the remainder of my life at sixty." Nguyễn Trãi, "Gián nghị đại phu kiêm tri tam quán sự tạ biểu" 諫議大夫兼知三館事謝表, *Ức Trai di tập*, 3.37b.

favor with the king, and she held sway over the women's chambers. In fact, for a time, she may have exerted more influence than her husband.²⁹⁰ By contrast, Trãi was removed from the center of power but unable (or unwilling) to detach himself from dynasty politics. Then three years later, in 1442, Trãi was dragged from his retreat and brought to the capital to die.

In 1437, did Nguyễn Trãi intend to take the path of Phạm Lãi or Văn Chủng? Did Trãi stubbornly resuscitate his career from the peripheral east? Or was he haplessly drawn back into a political whirlwind from which he was never allowed to exit in peace? Did Trãi intractably pull strings at court from afar through his daring wife's cunning and charm? Or was he just an old cuckold fecklessly caught in the wake of a desirous woman's scheming? Or did Trãi, perhaps, simply succumb to destiny's whim, which can be rendered meaningful only through the language of anomaly and wonder?

What was the meaning of Lychee Garden? After Nguyễn Trãi's death, scholars of the Lê Dynasty brooded over this question. One way that they made sense of their feelings about it was through storytelling. This was especially true for delta scholars, who participated in storytelling about Trãi to express anxiety about serving a dynasty in which southern men held considerable sway. For delta scholars, Trãi's legacy became a foil by which they contemplated their career possibilities and life trajectories. Such persons continued to rethink stories about Trãi into the sixteenth century, when they accented them with thoughts about the rise of Mạc Đăng Dung, a hero from the delta's littoral east, a century after Trãi had brushed his proclamation.

²⁹⁰ Esta Ungar, "Vietnamese Leadership and Order: Dai Viet under the Le Dynasty," 234.

Nguyễn Văn Đát was such a person.²⁹¹ Đát heard tales about Nguyễn Trãi, perused his writings, paid homage to his retreat, and perpended the meaning of his legacy. Moreover, by the 1520s, Đát found particular significance in Trãi's story as the Lê Dynasty frayed under troubled rule, and Mạc Đăng Dung, a kingly hero whom Đát's mother favored, ascended the throne of a new dynasty founded by delta men. Đát participated in Dung's experiment. However, tensions between delta and basin peoples persisted throughout Đát's lifetime. When fighting erupted that severed people closest to Đát and tore at his allegiances, Đát absconded. At over fifty years of age, he retired to his village in the lower delta and assumed the sobriquet *Bạch Vân am cư sĩ* or Abiding Scholar of White Cloud Hermitage after the name of Trãi's former haven.

How Nguyễn Trãi's legacy colored Nguyễn Văn Đát's thinking about *xuất xứ* as he came to Đại Việt's capital and, eventually, Emperor Mạc Đăng Dung's court is the story of the next chapter.

²⁹¹ Although the only direct evident of Nguyễn Văn Đát's participation in telling Nguyễn Trãi's story consist of his editing of the *Truyền kỳ mạn lục*, in which Trãi is a peripheral figure, Đát was almost certainly familiar with iterations of Trãi's tale like those I described here. Nguyễn Dữ, *Truyền kỳ mạn lục*, 1.61a, 4.52b.

CHAPTER THREE

NGUYỄN VĂN ĐẠT'S CAREER AT THĂNG LONG

Introduction

In this chapter, I try to understand the personal context of Nguyễn Văn Đạt's decision in 1542, when he withdrew from officialdom at the Thăng Long court and returned to his birthplace in Đại Việt's littoral east, to cast himself in the likeness of Nguyễn Trãi by adopting the name of Trãi's former hermitage at Côn Mountain—*Bạch Vân am* or White Cloud Hermitage—for his own abode and eponymous sobriquet in (ostensible) retirement. I proceed from the previous chapter, in which I contextualized the significance of Đạt's evocation of Nguyễn Trãi by describing Trãi's place in Lê Dynasty (1428–1527) politics, literature, and historiography through his life, writings, and remembrances. As we saw, Trãi became a pivotal figure for the Lê Dynasty because of his literary conceptualization of the reconfigured fifteenth-century political landscape between the military clans of Thanh Hoa south of the capital and delta men more oriented towards scholarship around and to the east of Thăng Long. Trãi achieved this through his brushing of the dynasty's inaugural proclamation about pacifying “Ngô,” which harnessed the preexisting literary, historical, and cultural allusions embedded in “transmitted wonders” literature and reoriented them to propose cooperation and integration of martial and literary heroes and the regions associated with them. After Trãi's death, Emperor Lê Tư Thành then selectively curated Trãi's remembrance in his dynastic history and reconstruction of Trãi's literary works to portray Trãi as the quintessential literary

exemplar and counterpart to the martially proficient Lê Lợi, the dynasty's Thanh Hoa founder.

Whereas, in the previous chapter, I described the general significance of Nguyễn Trãi for generations of scholars during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in this chapter, I seek to understand the specific circumstances of Nguyễn Văn Đạt's life experiences that accented Trãi's remembrance with such personal meaning for Đạt. I find two reasons that Đạt felt Trãi's life resonated with his own. The first is Đạt's training under the mentorship of Lương Ngạn Ích 梁彦益 (1475–1526?). As Đạt's teacher, Ích embodied for his student the moral probity becoming of a scholar through his writings and activities. More importantly, Ích's life trajectory presented for Đạt an exemplary foil against which Đạt would orient his own career path. As we shall see, the course of decisions Lương Ngạn Ích made during the end of the Lê Dynasty (1428-1526) closely paralleled those of Đạt during the Mạc Dynasty (1527-1592). Ích dutifully served the Lê until he felt that the dissipated rule of a teenaged emperor too pernicious and morally debased to serve, at which point he withdrew to his coastal village south of the capital in Thanh Hoa Province. Thereafter, Ích felt inclined to cultivate the impoverished life of a remote scholar. However, he could not entirely remove himself from the political vicissitudes of the day. When political factions gathered in his home province of Thanh Hoa and resolved to rise up in arms against the wicked rule of the young emperor, whom Ích had abandoned, Ích joined their ranks and composed the war declaration that justified their actions. After a new (child) ruler was installed, Ích again retired to his home village, where he established his school at the mouth of Mã River. However, Ích was soon summoned back into service and, despite his attempt to turn down court promotions with the hope of remaining in his native place, Ích continued to be enmeshed in official duties until late in his life.

Although Ích's experience of being torn between his obligation to the state and his desire to stay in his home village was not necessarily exceptional or unique, Đạt himself would traverse a similar life path, and Đạt's having personally accompanied Ích on his travels in and out of officialdom textured Đạt's own response to negotiating the beckons of the imperial court with his later conviction to remain aloof of power and politics as a teacher at his own native village in the littoral east.

In addition to exemplifying personal character for his student, Lương Ngạn Ích transmitted to Nguyễn Văn Đạt the idiom with which Đạt would express his journey through officialdom and reclusion, namely the language of the *Changes* 易 and *Thái Ất* 太乙 divination. As we will see in the Chapter Five, Đạt would voice his sentiments about *xuất xử*, the back-and-forth movement of going out towards officialdom and returning to his native place, through poetry laden with imagery and allusions culled in the classical idiom of transformation. During his retirement, Đạt would reinvent the meanings Nguyễn Trãi associated with the namesake of Đạt's literary style, White Cloud Hermitage, to cultivate a new literary mode endemic to Đạt's native abode. Although Đạt evoked the ethos that Trãi created at the latter's former abode in retirement, Đạt distinguished himself from Trãi in part by writing about White Cloud Hermitage in language associated with the *Changes* that he learned from his teacher Lương Ngạn Ích. Later, Đạt's contemporaries would adopt this language in their communications with him, honoring him by writing in his distinctive style of the "Abiding Scholar of White Cloud Hermitage." Similarly, after Đạt's lifetime, travelers to his village continued to write poems about White Cloud Hermitage in Đạt's literary voice as they reminisced about him as a former worthy. In the chapters to come, we shall see that this posthumous literary construction of the "Abiding Scholar of White Cloud Hermitage" through poetry and transmitted tales developed from

the literary persona that Đạt cultivated during his lifetime to create the hagiographic image of an aloof sage that appears in eighteenth-century storytelling traditions, including Đạt's genealogical record.

The second reason that Nguyễn Văn Đạt associated himself with the former recluse at White Cloud Hermitage was Nguyễn Trãi's existential questioning through literature of the scholar's path. By choosing White Cloud Hermitage as his own style, Đạt conjured Trãi's introspective writings during the final years of Trãi's life. Effectively exiled to his family retreat at Côn Mountain, Trãi reminisced about the sad fates of his maternal grandfather, who lived to rue the declining days of his family's dynastic legacy, and his father, a non-royal who was whisked away to die in Minh (Ming) China. At the same time, Trãi expressed his own frustrations with humiliation and life failures. Despite having played a pivotal role in the Lê Dynasty's founding, he was expelled from the center of power. Adding to his angst (if it was indeed angst—as we will see Trãi's mindset towards the end of his life was the stuff of inspiration precisely because of its ambivalence), he was later called back into service with an honorary post at his Côn Mountain abode. At the periphery, he was neither able to participate directly in court politics nor fully renounce them in pursuit of idyllic retirement. To express his disquietude, Trãi evoked the language of dreams that both his father and grandfather had once used in reference to themselves when they withdrew to Côn Mountain. Namely, Trãi alluded to a “transmitted wonder” tale about *Nam Kha mộng* 南柯夢, the dream of a ghost tree's Southern Branch. Trãi recognized that his own career path closely matched that of the protagonist of the *Nam Kha mộng* tale, which questioned the meaningfulness of officialdom by likening it to a phantasmal dream. As seen through his poetry, towards the end of his life, Trãi looked back and saw a crestfallen dreamscape. He consigned himself

to the dreary dream that both his father and grandfather had shared, and, in this common lull, some measure of solace.

Nguyễn Trãi's poetry of dreams was the fodder from which Nguyễn Văn Dật kindled his own literary style. Like Trãi, Dật repeatedly summoned dreams in his poetry, but whereas Trãi saw in dreams a gloomy escape, Dật took interest not only in dreams but also their awakening. In Dật's usage, sudden awakening from slumber suggested the purity of immaculate forgetfulness during the first moments of wakefulness by allusion to Đào Tiềm 陶潛 (365?–427), who had written about being bewildered when he, while reclining, was abruptly aroused by a chilly wind.²⁹² Dật, taking inspiration from Trãi's imagery of dreams at Côn Mountain and Đào Tiềm's stirring breeze, wrote about his own dreamscape stirred by the chilly winds of his homeland's Cold River.

By culling the classical idiom of the *Changes*, Nguyễn Trãi's poetry of dreams, and established literary allusions to recluses like Đào Tiềm, Nguyễn Văn Dật expressed his back-and-forth journey through officialdom and reclusion, portraying himself as an aloof recluse dispassionate about dynastic politics. However, as we saw in the case of Vũ Dật Trai in Chapter One, the state had ways of appropriating scholars who renounced the emperor's beckons. As we will see in the next chapter, the very persona that Dật cultivated as a recluse intensified the court's desire for his employment. Thăng Long's rulers sought out Dật not only because of his learning, wisdom, and tactical knowhow, but also because the act of summoning a recluse of detached, high-principled bearing into service lent his moral character and, therefore, authenticity to the dynasty's adventures. Thus, Dật was repeatedly compelled to emerge out of retirement. After performing the

²⁹² Tao Qian 陶潛, "Yu zi Yan deng shu 與子儼等疏" (Letter to My Sons Yan and Others) in *Tao Yuanming ji* 陶淵明集 (Anthology of Tao Yuanming), Qinding Sikuquanshu edition (1790), available at *Chinese Text Project*, ed. Donald Sturgeon, 7.2b, <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=54760&page=96>.

tasks that had called for his service, Đạt returned again to the life of a village recluse with high honors that the dynasty's rulers then bestowed upon him both to make public his service and bind him to the state's graces.

Therefore, even in reclusion, Nguyễn Văn Đạt was repeatedly vexed by the pull of the state. He had abandoned the Thăng Long court along with its exuberances and renounced officialdom in favor of a simpler life at his littoral home. But the irony of Đạt's principled recalcitrance to participate in the affairs of dynastic power only enriched him with honors. Đạt's retirement was always provisional and, thus, his detached moral purity suspect. In short, Đạt's character as a recluse seemed tenuous. Indeed, as the final chapter will elucidate, Đạt's contemporaries took note of Đạt's apparent hypocrisy and called him out for it in missive poems. It was in Đạt's struggle to reconcile his ambivalence about officialdom and reclusion and defend himself against his critics that he developed the characteristic "White Cloud Hermitage" poetry that would be associated with his name for generations to come.

Tutelage of Lương Ngạn Ích, circa 1508–1516

Since 1493, Nguyễn Văn Đạt lived in his mother's native village of Lower Yên Tử on the left bank of Hàn River (*sông Hàn*, lit. "Cold River"), where he studied at home with his mother and, starting in 1503, grandfather. By the end of the first decade of the sixteenth century, Đạt left Lower Yên Tử to seek out the instruction of a new teacher, Lương Ngạn Ích 梁彦益 (1475–1526?). When Đạt began learning from Ích is unclear. In the terse autobiographical preface to his poetry collection, Đạt only mentions the role of his family in passing comments about his education.²⁹³ The earliest accounts of Đạt's

²⁹³ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm 阮秉謙 (a.k.a. Nguyễn Văn Đạt), "Preface for the White Cloud Hermitage Poetry Collection 白雲庵詩集序" in *White Cloud Hermitage Poetry Collection* 白雲庵詩集, originally compiled

study with Ích, the genealogical record by Vũ Khâm Thận in the winter of 1743–1744 and a local gazetteer a few decades later, both say vaguely “once [Đạt] grew up.”²⁹⁴ If Đạt followed his grandfather’s precedent, then Đạt would have left to apprentice himself to a teacher around the age of seventeen or *circa* 1507–1508.²⁹⁵ At that time, Ích served at the court of Emperor Lê Tuấn 黎濬 (1488–1509, r.1504–1509) as left-deputy minister of the Department of Rites and attendant-reader of the Hàn Lâm Academy in charge of Hàn Lâm Academy affairs.²⁹⁶ Ích’s role as attendant-reader, an imperial lecturer, at the Hàn Lâm Academy implies that Đạt like his father before him had demonstrated enough promise as a scholar to be selected for study at the capital’s centers for classical learning.²⁹⁷ Đạt may

by Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, ed. Trần Công Hiến 陳公憲 (?–1817), *et. al.* (Hải Dương: Hải Học Đường, 1814), xylographic text, Hanoi, National Library of Vietnam, accession no. R.2017, 1.1a.

²⁹⁴ 既長. Vũ Khâm Thận 武欽慎 (1703–? t.s. 1727, a.k.a Vũ Khâm Lân), “Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đạt” 白雲庵居士阮公文達譜記 (1743–1744) appended to Vũ Phương Đề 武方堤 (1698–?, t.s.1736), *Công dư tiếp ký* 公餘捷記 (*Quick Jottings When Idle from Work*), manuscript (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), accession no. A.44, 56b; Ngô Thì Nhậm 吳時壬 (1746–1803), *Hải Đông chí lược* 海東志畧 (*Concise Gazetteer of the Coastal East*, comp. ca.1772), Sinographic manuscript in *Địa phương chí tỉnh Hải Dương qua tư liệu Hán Nôm*, ed. Đinh Khắc Thuân (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2008), 567. The latter source, like virtually all biographical material about Nguyễn Văn Đạt after 1744, appears to be based largely on Vũ Khâm Thận’s genealogical record. In *circa* 1755, Vũ Phương Đề mentioned Nguyễn Văn Đạt’s study with Lương Ngạn Ích, perhaps independently of Vũ Khâm Thận, in Đề’s portion of the *Công dư tiếp ký* (prefaced 1755), but he made no indication of when. Vũ Phương Đề 武方堤 (1698–?, t.s.1736), *Công dư tiếp ký* 公餘捷記 (*Quick Jottings When Idle from Work*), manuscript (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), accession no. A.44, 28a.

²⁹⁵ According to a genealogy of the Nhữ clan of Hoạch Trạch, Nhữ Văn Lan, Nguyễn Văn Đạt’s maternal grandfather and early mentor, sought out a teacher at the age of seventeen. Nhữ Đình Văn, “Tiền sĩ Nhữ Văn Lan, vị khoa bảng đầu tiên của huyện Tiên Minh, Ông tổ khai khoa họ Nhữ Việt Nam,” *Nhữ Đình Văn* (blog), 16 October, 2015, <https://nhudinhvan.blogspot.com/2014/08/tien-si-nhu-van-lan-vi-khoa-bang-au.html>. Nhữ Đình Văn based his biography of Nhữ Văn Lan on *Hoạch Trạch Nhữ tộc phả* 穫澤汝族譜, manuscript (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), accession no. A677.

²⁹⁶ That would be his rank on February 7, 1510. Presumably, he had held this position earlier in 1507–1508. Lê Văn Hưu 黎文休, Phan Phu Tiên 潘孚先, Ngô Sĩ Liên 吳士連 et al, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 大越史記全書 (printed in 1697, accession number PD.2310), original Sinographic text with translation in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, ed. Phan Huy Lê, Ngô Đức Thọ, and Hà Văn Tấn, 4 vols. (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1998), bản ký, 14.55a. Lương Mến Đức, who has dedicated himself to studying his family’s genealogies, thinks that Lương Ngạn Ích held these positions since September 18, 1500, after he responded to the emperor’s poem to the latter’s liking. Lương Đức Mến, “Về bảng nhãn Lương Đắc Bằng,” *Họ Lương Đức ở Lào Cai* (blog), 19 October 2014, <https://holuongduclaocai.blogspot.com/2014/10/ve-bang-nhan-luong-ac-bang.html>. C.f., *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản ký, 14.23a.

²⁹⁷ Nguyễn Văn Đạt’s father, Nguyễn Văn Định, had been a “student of utmost learning” (*Thái học sinh*), meaning a student at the imperial academy, Quốc tử giám (Directorate of the Sons of the State). Vũ Khâm Thận 武欽慎 (1703–? t.s. 1727, a.k.a Vũ Khâm Lân), “Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đạt,” 55b. See also chapter one.

have sought Ích's mentorship because of the latter's expertise in numerology and the study of *Changes*, in which Đạt inherited a keen interest from his mother. For his part, Ích most likely recognized the potential of the precocious teenager owing to Đạt's prior family training with the Nhữ clan, which had come to prominence with Đạt's grandfather during the previous century.

Like his pupil, Lương Ngạn Ích owed his education to his family's scholar tradition. Ích hailed from the Lương clan of Hội Trào Village in Thanh Hoa.²⁹⁸ Ancestors of the Lương clan formerly hailed from Chiết Giang 浙江 in the Chinese north, but then traveled to Đại Việt during the decline of the Tống (Song) Dynasty 宋朝 (960–1276).²⁹⁹ The Lương clan settled first in Cao Hương Village (modern Vụ Bản District, Nam Định Province), then during the fourteenth century some of its members branched off to live further south at Hới Estuary beside the confluence of the Cung and Mã rivers.³⁰⁰ The place's location where the two rivers met the coastal waters would inspire the village's name, Hội Trào 會潮 or "Tidal Confluence."³⁰¹ In migrating to Hới Estuary, the Lương clan was part of a larger trend of peoples with heritage from the Chinese southeastern coast seeking their livelihoods in Thanh Hoa's littoral lands, which flourished as a major center for maritime trade from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries and attracted a sizeable population of Chinese descent.³⁰² One such clansman to emerge from Hội Trào was

²⁹⁸ At the time of his birth, Lương Ngạn Ích's village was called Trác Vĩnh in Cỗ Đằng hamlet. Today, Ích's village is in Hoàng Phong Village in Hoàng Hóa District of Thanh Hóa Province. Lê Văn Toàn, "Lương Đắc Bổng, danh nho đạo nghĩa thanh liêm," *Tạp chí nghiên cứu Hán Nôm* 3, no. 106 (2011): 24–28, <http://www.hannom.org.vn/detail.asp?param=2017&Catid=33>.

²⁹⁹ Hoàng Đình Khâm, "Tìm về cội nguồn họ Lương, tam chi làng Hội Triều, *Họ Lương Đức ở Lào Cai* (blog), January 2011, <https://holuongduclaocai.blogspot.com/2011/02/bai-khao-luan-ve-nguon-goc-ho-luong.html>.

³⁰⁰ Trịnh Nhu, ed., *Danh nhân văn hóa Hoàng Hóa*, tập 1 (Hà Nội: NXB Giáo dục Việt Nam, 2009), 132.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 129–132.

³⁰² Li Tana, "A Tale of Two Waterways: Integration in Vietnamese History and Thanh Hóa in Central Vietnam," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 12, no. 4 (2017): 15.

Lương Nhữ Hốt 梁汝笏 (?–1429).³⁰³ Indeed, Hốt is credited with establishing the village of Hội Trào from the former Trào Hải Trang (“Tidal Sea Village) and giving it the name by which it is now known.³⁰⁴ Hốt’s role in rebuilding his home village signaled the emerging preeminence of the Lương clan at Hội Trào.

Ironically, however, the Lương clan’s ascendancy with Lương Nhữ Hốt came at a time when the fortunes of the once prosperous coastal lands of Thanh Hoa, after briefly reaching the apogee of its success as the Hồ Dynasty’s 胡朝 (1400–1407) center of power, declined to a state from which it has yet to truly recover. Waterworks and deforestation over the previous centuries permanently altered Thanh Hoa’s landscape; rivers changed their courses and coastal waters shallowed. By the end of the fourteenth century, Thanh Hoa’s environmental deterioration was both palpable and irreversible.³⁰⁵ Aside from the human and economic losses from these environmental changes, in 1407, the Hồ Dynasty capital collapsed and Thanh Hoa along with the rest of Đại Việt fell under the control of the Minh Dynasty 明朝.³⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Lương Nhữ Hốt flourished for two decades as the prefect of Thanh Hoa and, starting in 1416, regional (i.e. local) deputy commissioner in the Minh commandery of Giao Chỉ 交趾 (northern Vietnam).³⁰⁷ The Lương family benefited greatly from Hốt’s efforts during this period, especially during the time he

³⁰³ Lê Quý Đôn 黎貴惇 (1726–1784), *Đại Việt thông sử* 大越通史 (1749), reproduction of Sinographic manuscript at Viện Khảo Cổ, accession no. VS-15 in *Đại Việt thông sử*, trans. and ed. Lê Mạnh Liêu ([Sài Gòn?]: Bộ Văn hóa Giáo dục và Thanh niên, 1973), 3.10b.

³⁰⁴ Trịnh Nhu, ed., *Danh nhân văn hóa Hoàng Hóa*, 131. Lương Nhữ Hốt apparently returned to reestablish his home village *circa* 1407–1408 after the collapse of the Hồ Dynasty, which he formerly served, as prefect of Thanh Hoa in service of the Minh.

³⁰⁵ Li Tana, “A Tale of Two Waterways: Integration in Vietnamese History and Thanh Hóa in Central Vietnam,” 15–17.

³⁰⁶ During the Hồ Dynasty, the state in present day northern Vietnam was called Đại Ngu, but I use Đại Việt for convenience and consistency, since that is what the Vietnamese state was called during the Lý and Trần dynasties (1009–1224; 1225–1400) before the Hồ Dynasty and, later with the Minh departure, during the Lê and Mạc dynasties (1428–1777; 1527–1677).

³⁰⁷ Lương Nhữ Hốt was prefect of Thanh Hoa from 1407 to 1416 and then regional–deputy commissioner until his death in 1428. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 9.27a.

served as Thanh Hoa's prefect. Although Hốt was ultimately executed after the Minh were defeated, as a Minh loyalist during the last twenty years of his life, he settled members of the Lương clan in southern China who remained intimate with their Thanh Hoa brethren for generations to come.³⁰⁸

Thus, by the mid-fifteenth century, the Lương figured among Đại Việt's great scholar clans with established branches in Cao Hương south of Thăng Long, Hội Trào and Tào Sơn in Thanh Hoa, and Vân Nam Province 雲南省 in the Minh south.³⁰⁹ That the Lương family persevered through Thanh Hoa's environmental and economic decline, two decades of Minh cultural and political transformation, and the waves of warring that ripped across Đại Việt with the rise and fall of the Trần, Hồ, and Minh regimes demonstrated both their dedicated investment in classical learning and strong, broad familial ties that undergirded their ongoing prominence as a scholar clan during the fifteenth and, later, sixteenth centuries. As Lương Ngạn Ích's student, Nguyễn Văn Đát would have experienced the depth of the Lương tradition for learning as well as breadth of resources that a family with such far-spread connections could provide. Indeed, Đát would honor his indebtedness to the Lương's scholar tradition by educating Ích's son and, later, during the second half of the sixteenth century, relocating Lương clansmen from Hoằng Hóa on the banks of the Hàn River in Đát's native region.³¹⁰

³⁰⁸ Vũ Khâm Thân, "Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đát," 56b; Vũ Phương Đề, *Công dư tiếp ký*, 26a. Lương Nhữ Hốt was executed by Lê Lợi on January 08, 1429. Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, 2.53b.

³⁰⁹ Vũ Khâm Thân, "Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đát," 56b; Vũ Phương Đề, *Công dư tiếp ký*, 26a. Tào Sơn Village is in today's Tĩnh Gia District of Thanh Hoa Province.

³¹⁰ Vũ Khâm Thân, "Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đát," 56b–57a; Vũ Phương Đề, *Công dư tiếp ký*, 26b. Some Lương families in An Lão and Tiên Lãng (Hải Phòng) claim descent from the Hoằng Hóa branch of the Lương clan. In stories about their lineage, Nguyễn Văn Đát was responsible for relocating a certain Lương Đắc Cam in Tiên Lãng. The veracity of this story rests on the historicity of Lương Đắc Cam, who is not mentioned in any of the Hoằng Hóa Lương genealogies. Lương Đức Mến believes that Cam was a distant cousin or nephew of Lương Khiêm Hanh, who was the grandson of Lương Ngạn Ích, and Cam travelled to beseech Đát to find refuge for his family in

Born in Thanh Hoa's shallowed coast in 1475, Nguyễn Văn Đạt's teacher, Lương Ngạn Ích, embraced the scholar tradition that had sustained his family since at least the fourteenth century. Both of Ích's parents attained a classical education. His mother hailed from a scholar clan of the Lê lineage, and she likely played a key role in Ích's early education.³¹¹ As for Ích's father, Lương Hay 梁哈 (1401?–1484?),³¹² after passing the provincial exams in 1460, Hay became a student at the Hàn Lâm Academy and served as a sacrificial aide for the Court of Sacrifices around the same time that Nguyễn Văn Đạt's grandfather worked in the capital.³¹³ Another member of the Lương clan, Ích's distant uncle Lương Thế Vinh 梁世榮 (1441–1496?), whose examination responses we saw in the first chapter, was also active at Thăng Long at that time. Vinh excelled at the study of numbers, an art that for him entailed the *Changes*, numerology, astrology, and prognostication as well as general mathematics.³¹⁴ Vinh would assume responsibility for Ích's education from the time that Ích was twelve years old at his father's request.³¹⁵

the east to avoid Mạc attacks on Thanh Hoa, perhaps *circa* 1583. Lương Đức Mến, “Viết về gia sử của dòng họ,” *Gia phả Lương Đức tại Lào Cai*, online publication, http://www.vietnamgiapha.com/XemPhaKy/2624/pha_ky_gia_su.html. It is also possible that families with the Lương surname in An Lão and Tiên Lãng supposed linkage with the Hoàng Hóa lineage based on the well-known story of Đạt's study with Ích and education of Ích's son.

³¹¹ Lương Ngạn Ích's mother, Lê Thị Sứ, hailed from Vĩnh Trị (now in Hoàng Quang Hamlet, Thanh Hóa). Nguyễn Quốc Tín, Nguyễn Như Mai, and Nguyễn Huy Thắng, *Những người thầy trong sử Việt* (Hà Nội: NXB Kim Đồng, 2017), 105.

³¹² Writings about Lương Ngạn Ích's father in today's *quốc ngữ* typically render his name “Hay,” which is based on the demotic reading of the Sinograph 哈. This Sinograph can also be read “Hai,” which would suggest that Ích's father's given name was unknown to compilers of Lương genealogies, so he was referred to as “Second [born], i.e. eldest born.”

³¹³ Lê Văn Toàn, “Lương Đắc Bằng, danh nho đạo nghĩa thanh liêm.”

³¹⁴ Alexei Volkov, “State Mathematics Education in Traditional China and Vietnam: Formation of ‘Mathematical Hagiography’ of Lương Thế Vinh (1441–1496)” in *Nho giáo ở Việt Nam*, ed. Tu Weiming, Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, Phan Văn Các, *et al* (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã học, 2006), 276, 292–293. Although Volkov shows that historical sources for Lương Thế Vinh's expertise in mathematics are tenuous, he demonstrates that literati of his learning and profession would likely have studied numbers.

³¹⁵ Lê Văn Toàn, “Lương Đắc Bằng, danh nho đạo nghĩa thanh liêm.” Lương Đức Mến conjectures that Lương Hay's request for Lương Ngạn Ích to study with Lương Thế Vinh was Hay's dying wish. Lương Đức Mến, “Về bảng nhân Lương Đắc Bằng.”

One of the most important lessons that Lương Ngạn Ích imparted to Nguyễn Văn Đạt was Ích's conviction that moral probity accompanies extensive learning. In this regard, Ích was most likely influenced by his avuncular teacher Lương Thế Vinh. As mentioned in Chapter One, Vinh ranked foremost among Emperor Lê Tư Thành's first generation of "advanced scholars" (*tiến sỹ*) from the 1463 palace examinations.³¹⁶ As such, Vinh played a lead role in constructing Lê Tư Thành's bureaucracy of scholar-officials. In doing so, Vinh helped establish the moral and scholastic standards that approached the emperor's idealized vision for the official-scholar. For instance, by 1467, Vinh had assumed the responsibility of court censor as auxiliary scholar of the Hàn Lâm Academy with authority of supervising secretary in the Office of Scrutiny for Works. In that year, Vinh repeatedly censored officials whom he felt violated moral norms and lacked demonstrable merit and ability.³¹⁷ Vinh himself was afforded little slack in his effort to exemplify and establish the emperor's elevated norms, and he appears to have proceeded with austere discipline.³¹⁸ In the summer of 1486, the year that he began teaching Ích, Vinh initiated reforms of the civil examinations system.³¹⁹ He later served as an examiner for the highest round of examinations as well.³²⁰ Thus, during his thirty years at the capital, Vinh served as censor, examiner, and exemplar of the heightened standards expected of a scholar-official during a period of unprecedented literati ascendance with Lê Tư Thành's reign.

³¹⁶ "Văn bia đề danh tiến sỹ khoa Quý Mùi niên hiệu Quang Thuận năm thứ 4 (1463)" 光順四年癸未科進士題名碑記, "Bia văn miếu Hà Nội," bia số 3, *Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm* (institute website), <http://www.hannom.org.vn/detail.asp?param=1197&Catid=564>.

³¹⁷ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản ký, 12.32b–33a.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, bản ký, 12.46b.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, bản ký, 13.53b–54a.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, bản ký, 13.70a.

Moreover, for a decade later in his career, Lương Thế Vinh served as an instructor for three of Đại Việt's most esteemed centers of learning: Forest of Brushes Institute (*Hàn Lâm viện*), Institute for Veneration of Literature (*Sùng Văn quán*), and Forest of Excellence Bureau (*Tú Lâm cục*).³²¹ By 1486, when Lương Ngạn Ích began taking instruction from his uncle, presumably accompanying him at the capital, Vinh ranked among the most esteemed teachers in Đại Việt. As Ích's mentor, he would have invested in his nephew the depth of learning and personal integrity that Vinh had promoted and enforced for three decades. Ích appears to have taken his uncle's lessons to heart. However, whereas Vinh conjured them to burgeon for a period of dynastic prosperity, his pupil, Ích, would appeal to them during the dynasty's precipitous decline.

Lương Thế Vinh passed away *circa* 1496. In that year, his nephew Lương Ngạn Ích returned to Thanh Hoa to participate in the provincial exams. He passed with highest honors.³²² Three years later, Ích returned to the capital and proceeded to the palace exams. In the summer of 1499, Ích graduated from the palace examination with the second highest honors (*bảng nhãn*).³²³ According to one story, Emperor Lê Tranh (1461–1504, r.1497–1504), who succeeded his father Emperor Lê Tư Thành, deemed Ích's essay superior to that of the eventual prime laureate (*trạng nguyên*), but Ích willingly yielded the highest honor to an elder scholar in part due to the latter's seniority.³²⁴ This story exemplifies the degree of humility and dispassion for *danh lợi*, "fame and fortune," that Ích would have impressed upon Nguyễn Văn Đạt. For his part, Lê Tranh apparently admired Ích's character as much as his talent. The emperor's esteem for Ích was again

³²¹ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* records that Lương Thế Vinh held these posts at least from 1484 to 1493. Ibid., 13.41b, 71a.

³²² Lê Văn Toan, "Lương Đắc Bằng, danh nho đạo nghĩa thanh liêm."

³²³ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 14.12b.

³²⁴ Nguyễn Quốc Tín, Nguyễn Như Mai, and Nguyễn Huy Thắng, *Những người thầy trong sử Việt*, 105–106.

piqued three months later, when Ích exceeded his peers in response to the emperor's prompt for literary composition.³²⁵ At that time, Lê Tranh honored Ích by bestowing on him the name Đắc Bằng 得朋, by which he earned renown and is best known today.³²⁶

Lương Ngạn Ích's early success at the capital rose on the tailwind of Emperor Lê Tư Thành's empowerment of literati that still held sway during his successor's reign. However, by the time Nguyễn Văn Đạt came to learn with Ích in *circa* 1507–1508, the situation had changed noticeably. Lê Tranh died in 1504, apparently as a consequence of his sexual indulgences.³²⁷ However his exuberances presaged events to come, these adventures left him with six sons, the third of whom he chose to succeed him.³²⁸ This sixteen-year-old successor, who suffered grave illness, died less than a year after his enthronement.³²⁹ Lê Tranh's second son Lê Tuấn 黎濬 (1488–1509, r.1504–1509) then assumed rule of the kingdom. Although the former sickly emperor held his older brother in high esteem, Tuấn would fail to uphold the legacy left to him by his father and grandfather. Instead, he became known as the Devil King.³³⁰

Whereas emperors Lê Tư Thành and Lê Tranh along with scholar-officials like Lương Thế Vinh had endeavored to establish a governing apparatus built on men of learning, ability, and moral integrity, Emperor Lê Tuấn felt spited by such men when he was previously overlooked in favor of his late brother. To counteract the legacy of forces that had initially denied him the throne, he brought relatives external to the royal family to the capital and empowered them with his favor. Lê Tuấn and his kinfolk of relatively

³²⁵ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản ký, 14.15b.

³²⁶ Lê Văn Toan, “Lương Đắc Bằng, danh nho đạo nghĩa thanh liêm.”

³²⁷ E.g., Lê Tranh built an artificial moat that led into his boudoir, which he called Stream Into The Chalice Palace (*Lưu Bôi điện*). He apparently died of venereal disease. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản ký, 14.34b.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, bản ký, 14.34b–35a.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, bản ký, 14.37b.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, bản ký, 14.37b–39a.

humble origins did not value the elite literati establishment to the same degree as the his predecessors.³³¹ Lê Tuấn did, however, understand violence. He set the tone of his rule early in his reign by killing two well-reputed scholar-officials, including the minister of the Department of Rites, and his grandmother, the senior queen.³³² Later, he escalated his violence by killing over two dozen potential royal contenders to his rule, executing detractors among his officials, and massacring the Chăm population in Đại Việt. The one thing that Lê Tuấn did share with his father was his vices for sexual and material exuberance; these Lê Tuấn took to new extremes by nightly imbibition and cavorting with women, whom he is said to have murdered in fits of drunkenness.³³³

As Lương Ngạn Ích's student during Lê Tuấn's rapacious reign, Nguyễn Văn Đát witnessed the precipitous dissipation of the Lê family's imperial project. A vernacular history of Đại Việt composed during the mid-sixteenth century affords insight into how Đát and his contemporaries may have regarded Lê Tuấn's rule:

令鬪泣歇每尼，傳朱端慶綏茂治民。
 遑毳折役聖君，法用暴虎饒分傷台。
 折馭扒撩遑櫟，我齷朱折課尼困牢。
 吏固脅古枷喉，𠂇朱天下兜兜秩悉。
 藍山坦渚祖宗，拯群塊典信用外親。
 底禮例法先人，招歇女子賒斯每尼。
 仍忙耽色制排，腰酉扶軫仍馭邪奸。
 補秩神劒茹官，𦵏辭民毆淋炭傷悉。³³⁴

³³¹ Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 225–227.

³³² *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản ký, 14.40a–42a.

³³³ *Ibid.*, bản ký, 14.47a–48a.

³³⁴ Modern Vietnamese: *Lệnh ra khắp hết mọi nơi/ Truyền cho Đoàn Khánh nói đời trị dân/ Lên ngôi sửa việc thánh quân/ Phép cùng bạo hổ nhiều phần thương thay/ Giết người bắt treo lên cây/ Ngã xuống cho chết thuở này thương sao/ Lại có hiệp cổ gia hầu/ Làm cho thiên hạ đầu đầu mất lòng/ Lam Sơn đất nước tổ tông/ Chẳng còn coi đến tin dùng ngoại thân/ Để trễ lẽ phép tiên nhân/ Chiêu hết nữ tử xa gần mọi nơi/ Những màng đầm sặc chơi bời/ Yêu dẫu Phù Chấn những người tà gian/ Bỏ mất thần kiếm nhà quan/ Sáu năm dân chịu lắm than thương lòng.*

The order was proclaimed everywhere,
 Passing on to Đoàn Khánh the succession to govern the people.³³⁵
 [Lê Tuấn] ascended the throne to manage the affairs of a sage ruler;
 [But his] way was to collude with violent tigers, much lamentably.
 [He] killed people, seizing them to hang from trees,
 And let them fall to their deaths—how woeful were those times!
 Furthermore, [he] strangled necks and cangued throats,
 Making all under heaven everywhere lose heart.
 Lam Sơn, the land and waters of the dynastic patriarchs,³³⁶
 [He] no longer looked upon them, relying [instead] on external relatives.
 [He] was remiss about the principles of [his] predecessors;
 [He] summoned all young women everywhere near and far,
 With his desires to submerge himself in beauty and wanton disport,
 Favoring Phù Chấn [Village's] villainous people.³³⁷
 [He] discarded the divine sword and [his] officials,³³⁸
 For six years, the people suffered ashen toil with grief.³³⁹

Similarly, the “odes of history” poems of Hà Nhậm Đại 何任大 (1527–?, 1574 *t.s.*), whose brother would graduate from Mạc Dynasty palace exams the same year as Đát, further suggest that Đát was probably disquieted by Lê Tuấn’s stewardship of the kingdom:³⁴⁰

骨肉相殘正士消， Bones and flesh laid to waste, upright men extinguished,
 內家寵妒外家驕。 [His] inner family was indulgent and jealous, [his] maternal
 clan haughty.³⁴¹

³³⁵ Đoàn Khánh was Lê Tuấn’s reign title.

³³⁶ Lam Sơn in Thanh Hoa was the Lê emperor’s ancestral land.

³³⁷ Lê Tuấn’s mother Nguyễn Thị Cận was born a commoner of Phù Chấn Village, which is now in Từ Sơn Urban District of Bắc Ninh Province.

³³⁸ Lê Lợi, founder of the Lê Dynasty, was fabled to have established the dynasty with the help of the turtle spirit of Hoàn Kiếm Lake, who bestowed on him a divine sword.

³³⁹ *Việt sử diễn âm* (ca.1548–1553), Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. AB.110, edited and translated by Nguyễn Tá Nhì with original Sinographic text, *Việt sử diễn âm* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa thông tin, 1997), 177–178/107–108.

³⁴⁰ Hà Nhậm Đại’s *Lê triều khiêu vịnh thi tập* 黎朝嘯詠詩集 was prefaced 1590. His brother was Hà Nhậm Vọng 何任望 (1535 *t.s.*). Vương Thị Hường, “*Khiêu vịnh thi tập*,” in *Tuyển tập thơ phú thời Mạc*, ed. Đinh Khắc Thuân (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2016), 256. Some premodern sources like the *Đại Việt lịch triều đăng khoa lục* (comp.1779) give Sĩ 仕 as the middle name of the brothers rather than Nhậm 任.

³⁴¹ Hà Nhậm Đại’s use of “inner family” 內家 may have been based on a note in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* that says that Hoa Lãng Village was the native village of Lê Tuấn’s foster father. Nothing is known about this

刑苛政慘民離苦， Punishments were harsh, government was pitiful, and people
 又是黎朝一臥朝。 were displaced and miserable;
 [Tuấn] was yet another lame Lê Dynasty ruler.³⁴²

Aside from the visceral horror that Lê Tuấn was said to practice, with little doubt the actions of Đat's teacher Lương Ngạn Ích also shaped Đat's attitudes about the young emperor. By early 1509, when the emperor's depravity soused a new watermark with his pervasive murders of the royal family, the Chàm people, and his courtesans, Ích was so disturbed by Lê Tuấn's behavior that he left the capital, retired to his home in Thanh Hoa, and dedicated himself to teaching.³⁴³ Since Ích intentions at the time were to open a school, he probably brought his students, including Đat, in tow. If so, then Đat would have been in Thanh Hoa to witness the beginnings of the violent overthrow of Lê Tuấn's reign. Ích soon became central to this mission. In the eleventh lunar month, "when all hope had been lost," Nguyễn Văn Lang, the younger brother of the deceased senior queen (Lê Tuấn's grandmother), assembled Chàm survivors and Đại Việt men, who had fled to Thanh Hoa to evade the threat of the emperor, including Lê Oanh (1495–1516, r.1509–1516), the emperor's cousin who had bribed his way out of Thăng Long's dungeon, at Thần Phù Estuary and laid down plans for a revolt that would rid Đại Việt of her tyrant.³⁴⁴

Lương Ngạn Ích was among the men who saw in Nguyễn Văn Lang the promise to end Lê Tuấn's pernicious rule. After assembling at Thần Phù Estuary with others

foster father, but Hoa Lãng was the home village of Consort Nguyễn Kính, who raised Lê Tuấn after his mother died from childbirth. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 14.47a.

³⁴² Literally, "conducts court lying down," the term here translated "lame ruler" refers to monarchs who must recline at court due to hangover and exhaustion from excessive indulgences. Hà Nhậm Đại's lamentation "yet another" probably alludes to Lê Tư Thành's and Lê Tranh's afflictions with venereal disease toward the end of their lives. Keith Taylor suspects that they may have contracted syphilis. *A History of the Vietnamese*, 222–223. If syphilis had indeed contaminated the imperial harem, then it might explain in part the increasingly mad, erratic, and destructive behavior of emperors Lê Tuấn and Lê Oanh as their reigns progressed.

³⁴³ Nguyễn Quốc Tín, Nguyễn Như Mai, and Nguyễn Huy Thắng, *Những người thầy trong sử Việt*, 106.

³⁴⁴ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 14.49b–50b, quote at 50a: 天下失望. Thần Phù Estuary, where Chính Đại River once flowed out to sea, has since been covered over by alluvium. Its vestiges are now in Tam Điệp, Ninh Bình Province just north of Thanh Hóa.

supportive of Lang's cause, Ích composed the declarations of war that damned the emperor for his wantonness and malice and set the military campaign against him in motion.³⁴⁵ Ích's words provide direct insight into how he regarded the emperor and, moreover, reflect his notion of a noble scholar's role in subduing a tyrant that Ích would have conveyed and exemplified for Đạt as his mentor. Speaking on behalf of Lê Oanh and Lang's army, Ích cursed Lê Tuấn for his greed and murderousness as well as the favor he bestowed upon relatives outside the royal line. He criticized the emperor's profligate expenditures in the pursuit of pleasure and their concomitant exploitation of the people. Ích concluded that because of Lê Tuấn, "[All within] the four seas suffer from exhaustion, and ten thousand people are sorrowful with indignation."³⁴⁶ Ích's words related to his student that in the face of such grievous rule, righteous action was incumbent upon the scholar.

Nguyễn Văn Lang's revolt was successful. Lê Tuấn took poison, and Lê Oanh became emperor at the age of fifteen.³⁴⁷ Lê Oanh's first act as presumptive emperor was to execute the man, a bodyguard of Lê Tuấn, who had captured and turned in his former master.³⁴⁸ Lê Oanh likely saw a dangerous precedent in the man's betrayal, but also a chance to uphold propriety and signal a return to normalcy anchored on a common sense of moral right. Indeed, Lê Oanh's ascension was greeted with relief.³⁴⁹ What lesson then did Nguyễn Văn Đạt draw from this episode? Perhaps strikingly to his nineteen-year-old student, Lương Ngạn Ích did not ride the fortunes of the winning side to personal enrichment, but rather Ích soon withdrew back to Thanh Hoa and his fledgling

³⁴⁵ Lương Ngạn Ích wrote at least two war declarations (*hịch*), which are paraphrased in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản ký, 14.50b–51b.

³⁴⁶ 四海困窮，萬民愁怨。Ibid., bản ký, 14.50b–51b.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., bản ký, 14.51b–53b.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., bản ký, 14.53a.

³⁴⁹ Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 227.

schoolhouse at Hói Estuary, which he had abandoned to join Lang's forces. When Ích composed a eulogy for the new emperor's deceased mother after Lê Oanh's enthronement in early 1510, Ích still held his post as left-deputy minister for the Ministry of Rites.³⁵⁰ Within weeks, the emperor transferred him to the same position in the Ministry of Personnel.³⁵¹ However, Ích soon resigned from his new assignment when his mother died months later. Ích then returned to Hói Estuary and settled back into life as a local teacher, probably bringing Đạt along a second time. But, ironically, threatening to quit officialdom for the life of a recluse could sometimes advance a scholar's career.³⁵² Indeed, come winter the same year, Lê Oanh sought to restore Ích to his old position in the Ministry of Personnel and further promoted him as an academician of the Eastern Pavilion (*Đông các*) and "attending lecturer who enters the mat for colloquiums on the classics" (*nhập thị kinh diên*); that is imperial tutor. Ích adamantly denied the emperor's summons. Instead, he submitted fourteen policies that reviewed the undergirding principles of Lê Tu Thành's prosperous reign as substitute for his service. In effect, by insisting on retirement, Ích traded elevated rank for the augmented voice of heightened moral authority. For a time, at least, the emperor listened.³⁵³

Why did Lương Ngạn Ích turn away from his official career at Thăng Long so soon after his success in establishing Lê Oanh and forsake not only the grateful emperor's beckons, but promotion as well? Ích's immediate consideration was the passing of his mother Lê Thị Sử 黎氏史 (?–1510), who had been his teacher during his childhood. Formerly, Ích's uncle, Lương Thế Vinh, had admonished and demoted an official for

³⁵⁰ Lương Ngạn Ích submitted the eulogy on February 17, 1510. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản ký, 14.55a.

³⁵¹ Ibid., bản ký, 15.2a.

³⁵² Alan J. Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement: The Practice and Portrayal of Reclusion in Early Medieval China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 138–139.

³⁵³ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản ký, 15.4a–6a.

neglecting funerary obligations.³⁵⁴ As one of Ích's mentors, Vinh probably had instilled in Ích a powerful sense of filial duty. Furthermore, Ích had reached his mid-thirties, and he had yet to father a son.³⁵⁵ After a decade at court, Ích may have felt that the time had come for him to return to Hội Trào and fulfill his role as patriarch of the Lương clan.³⁵⁶ In addition, Ích's native place had an established tradition of traveling teachers and local schoolmasters, and he probably intended to found his own school at Hói Estuary now that he had established his reputation as a high ranking palace examination graduate, official, and imperial lecturer.³⁵⁷

Meanwhile, a tenebrous uncertainty had permeated the kingdom after Lê Tuấn's disastrous reign. Months earlier, a foreboding comet and an ethereal half-meter sword appeared in the sky.³⁵⁸ Later in the emperor's short reign, his plow split during a symbolically potent agricultural groundbreaking ceremony.³⁵⁹ Venus then appeared at midday.³⁶⁰ While the failure of the springtime ritual augured lost harvests, the astral phenomenon portended violence and usurpation.³⁶¹ Moreover, waves of snakes inundated the Red River floodplains along with the rising waters from summer rains. The menacing

³⁵⁴ Ibid., bản ký, 12.32b.

³⁵⁵ Vũ Phương Đề, *Công dư tiếp ký*, 76a.

³⁵⁶ Lương Ngạn Ích had three wives, two of whom were sisters, an arrangement that, ironically, Ích's uncle Lương Thế Vinh had opposed. The younger of the sisters gave birth to Ích's only son, Lương Hữu Khánh in 1526 after Ích had already passed away.

³⁵⁷ This tradition is reflected in a proverb among the people of Hoàng Hóa, "Advance by becoming an official; succeed by becoming a teacher" (*tiến vì quan, đạt vì sư*). Mai Phương Ngọc, "Suy nghĩ về nghề dạy học ở vùng đất khoa bảng Hoàng Lộc (Hoàng Hóa, Thanh Hóa) dưới thời trung đại," *Tạp chí khoa học Trường Đại học Văn hóa, Thể thao và Du lịch Thanh Hóa* 1, no. 1 (8/2017): 60. See also Bùi Khắc Việt, Nguyễn Đức Huệ, et. al., *Hoàng Lộc: đất hiếu học* (Hoàng Lộc: NXB Thanh Hóa, 1996); Trần Văn Thức and Nguyễn Hữu Tâm, "Truyền thống hiếu học, một trong những tính cách đặc sắc của người Thanh Hóa qua các thư tịch cổ," *Tạp chí khoa học Trường Đại học Văn hóa, Thể thao và Du lịch Thanh Hóa* 1, no.1 (8/2017): 111–118.

³⁵⁸ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản ký, 14.49b.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., bản ký, 15.23b.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., bản ký, 15.24b

³⁶¹ Comets and other sword-like celestial phenomenon boded doom and violence. Venus, the white "metal star," was also regarded as a portend of violence because of its association with metal, from which weapons were made. Moreover, the appearance of Venus in broad daylight was a sign that a subordinate was about to usurp the "son of heaven" as the planet had infringed upon the sun. Edward H. Schafer, *Pacing the Void: T'ang Approaches to the Stars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 109, 148, 214.

water serpents even breached the walls of the capital after emerging in Thăng Long's inner lakes and ponds.³⁶² For those like Lương Ngạn Ích who longed to see in the present the kind of leadership, inspiration, and discipline that Lê Tư Thành had provided twenty years earlier, clearly "the serpents of chaos had been awakened and were testing the currents of change."³⁶³ Ích as an expert of numerology, *Book of Changes*, and Thái Ất divination was a keen observer of the forces of change. Certainly, he took notice.

Whatever Lương Ngạn Ích's thinking when he left the capital in 1510, the course of events that ensued in the coming years would lead his contemporaries to view his departure as prudent withdrawal owing to learned prescience. Despite Lê Oanh's presumably genuine attempts to reassemble the fragile dynastic order that had frayed in the dozen years since Lê Tư Thành's death, including the regular implementation of civil service examinations and a flurry of imperially sanctioned publications on history and good governance, Lê Oanh proved too inexperienced and asinine and too easily distracted to reconstruct what Lê Tuấn had diminished.³⁶⁴ Instead, Lê Oanh was concerned about gratuitous projects like the building of pleasure palaces and digging of canals that connected one site for his indulgences with the next. If the dynastic chroniclers are to be believed, then the teenaged emperor literally transformed the capital into a carnivalesque playland for him to tour by boat with nude female accompaniment.³⁶⁵ Even when these offensive waterways were not plagued by snakes, they presignified the stormy times that Lê Oanh would summon through his brash and witless leadership, which created great toil, exhausted resources, and sapped people's faith in him. To many observers, the dispatch of

³⁶² *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 15.24b.

³⁶³ Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 228.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 227–229.

³⁶⁵ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 15.26a–27b.

the wicked former king had simply made way for a pig; Lê Oanh became the notorious “hog king.”³⁶⁶

Against the backdrop of tumultuous events that transpired from the time Lương Ngạn Ích withdrew from officialdom in 1510 to the mutinous abortion of Lê Oanh’s reign six years later, when, after the emperor was killed by a former guardian, rebel factions and unhinged generals took turns churning through bloody melee, and the capital was left in ruins, Ích emerged as a symbol of constancy by embodying the vestigial continence of a more stable past. In other words, for his contemporaries, including Nguyễn Văn Đật, Ích came to be seen as what Alan Berkowitz categorized as a “moral hero.” Modeled on teachings attributed to Confucius, the “moral hero” is one who understands the crests and troughs of time’s moral fabric. Probing the tides of change, he feels compelled to appear before a sagacious ruler, but then evades the unenlightened once virtue dissipates from the throne. The “moral hero” thus follows along currents of change that, once greater than his power to divert, he drifts upon to obscurity rather than lash against. Critically, in his refusal to relinquish his sense of personal integrity, “[the ‘moral hero’] is also a fatalist and will not attempt to bend the world to his will.”³⁶⁷

The arc of Lương Ngạn Ích’s career exemplified the path of such a “moral hero.” Ích participated in the civil service examinations during Lê Tư Thành’s exceptional reign, and he entered officialdom under his competent successor Lê Tranh. When Lê Tuấn disrupted the former order buttressed by scholars like Ích and squandered their talents, Ích retreated to his provincial home. He did assist in the overthrow of Lê Tuấn in the hope

³⁶⁶ Ibid., bản ký, 15.19b, 15.29a

³⁶⁷ Alan J. Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement: The Practice and Portrayal of Reclusion in Early Medieval China*, 20–21, quote on 21.

that his successor would return to good rule, but, once Lê Oanh, too, proved mean and inept, Ích, recognizing the futility of his efforts, consigned himself to final retirement.

Therefore, the lesson of Lương Ngạn Ích's example to Nguyễn Văn Đát was the nobility of official service for worthy rulers with the caveat that to embrace moral integrity during degenerate times necessitated withdrawal. That this was how Đát and his contemporaries reflected on Ích's career is borne out by Hà Nhâm Đại's aforementioned "odes of history." Above, we saw that Đại lamented Lê Tuấn's dissolute rule. He also reviewed a story about a Minh emissary's describing Lê Tuấn as a "devil king," revealing that this image of the emperor appeared very early (and, perhaps, contemporaneously) in the sixteenth century.³⁶⁸ Đại's poem about Lê Oanh shows that he considered Lê Oanh's reign to be an exasperated repetition of his predecessor's sad rule.

家變身逢亦可傷，	What befell him and his family was wretched;
中興事業賴文郎。	The task of revitalization was left to Văn Lang. ³⁶⁹
早知奢侈終腳蹋，	It was known early on that with his extravagance,
也是豬王亦鬼王。	ultimately, he would be trampled,
	That he was a "hog king" like the "devil king."

In his poem, Đại contrasts the nobility of efforts by Nguyễn Văn Lang and, by extension his like-minded supporters like Lương Ngạn Ích, to restore the dynasty with the incontinence of Lê Oanh's rule. With Đại's hindsight, the outcome of this condition was easily foreseeable. Hence, he wrote that for the perspicacious, "It was known early on that with [the emperor's] extravagance, ultimately, he would be trampled." By foregrounding his comments about Lê Oanh's profligacy with the futile attempts by men like Lang to salvage the dynasty, Đại created an air of inevitability that he made explicit in the final couplet. The poet saw no hope in Lê Oanh, whose doomed reign could only echo his

³⁶⁸ Vương Thị Hường, "*Khiếu vịnh thi tập*," 256.

³⁶⁹ Văn Lang refers to Nguyễn Văn Lang, whom Lương Ngạn Ích helped in overthrowing Lê Tuấn to install Lê Oanh.

predecessor's strident rule, "[Lê Oanh] was a 'hog king' like the 'devil king.'" In this predictability and defeatism lie the essential characteristics of the "moral hero." Thus, Đại's depiction of Lê Oanh implied contrasting responses to imprudent rule. Whereas Lang continued his heroic struggle to reinforce a floundering dynasty, seemingly against an obvious fate, until his death in 1513, Ích chose to abandon such vain toil and, accepting the intractable currents of change, preserve his integrity in reclusion.

The final characteristic of the "moral hero" that is absent in Hà Nhậm Đại's poem about Lê Oanh is the scholar's transition between active participation in good governance and withdrawal once such able rule dissipates. This Đại made clear in his poem about Lương Ngạn Ích, which reads:

清時及第世榮觀，	In halcyon times [Lương Ngạn Ích] attained a graduate's
議論從忠炳若丹。	rank—the world looked upon him with honor; ³⁷⁰
廿四策無從一策，	[His] discourse followed from loyalty as resplendent as
當時勿怪太平難。	cinnabar.
	Twenty-four policies without a single one followed, ³⁷¹
	At that time, no wonder great peace was impossible.

Again, we notice the sense of predictability in the final line of Đại's poem. But in contrast to the previous poem, here, Đại begins with a couplet that celebrates Ích's lustrous career under Lê Tranh, whose reign is portrayed as a halcyon era. Đại's lyrical narration of Ích's legacy transitions from a "clear and bright time" (*thanh thời*), when Ích earned honors through the palace examinations, to Lê Oanh's reign, when great peace could not be achieved, in part because the emperor failed to heed Ích's wisdom. Although Đại makes no direct mention of Ích's withdrawal from officialdom in his terse quatrain, Đại presented a chronology that agrees with the path of a "moral hero" by arcing from Ích's

³⁷⁰ In his writings, Hà Nhậm Đại referred to Lương Ngạn Ích by Lương Đắc Bằng, the name that was given him by Emperor Lê Tranh.

³⁷¹ In both his poem and biographical sketch of Lương Ngạn Ích, Hà Nhậm Đại says that Ích submitted twenty-four policies for governing peacefully. This differs from *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* and most other sources, which say that he submitted fourteen policies.

illustriousness under good rule to unheard obscurity in dark times. The effect of this transition is accentuated by Đại's compression of time; nowhere in the poem does he mention Lê Tuấn, that messy reign, nor Ích's activities in ending it. Thus, the poem allows no moment of respite or hopefulness that seems to have accompanied Lê Oanh's ascension. By this elision, Đại rendered the contrast between the good times of the beginning couplet and the lamentable times of the final couplet stark and absolute. Moreover, when we read this poem with the previous one about Lê Oanh, in which Lê Tuấn and Lê Oanh are treated with similitude, we can fill in Đại's omission with a like character, conflating them in one block of time. Therefore, when read together, Đại's poems convey to us that Lê Tranh's rule was bright, Lê Tuấn's and Lê Oanh's murk. Implied against the backdrop of this story from meritorious to bumbled rule is that Ích tread the "moral hero's" path.

As we have seen, Hà Nhậm Đại's poems about the past portray Lương Ngạn Ích as a "moral hero" who had risen to prominence under a good emperor and later endeavored to restore the dynasty when a tyrant appeared, but then ultimately felt compelled to withdraw when the new ruler he had helped install neglected Ích's advice and turned astray. Although the dynastic histories tell us that Lê Oanh respected Ích's ideas about good governance, Đại saw retrospectively that Lê Oanh was incapable of implementing them. Because of this, Đại's poems implied that Ích, too, presaged this about the emperor, and they suggested that Ích's refusal to be summoned back into service was a "moral hero's" imperative.³⁷²

Although Hà Nhậm Đại and likely many of his contemporaries, including Nguyễn Văn Đạt, found meaning in remembering Lương Ngạn Ích for his uncompromising

³⁷² Alan J. Berkowitz, "The Moral Hero: A Pattern of Reclusion in Traditional China," *Monumenta Serica* 40 (1992): 8, 30.

commitment to his sense of moral integrity despite temptation and personal profit, his life after rejecting Lê Oanh's promotion as imperial tutor was hardly so straight forward. Ích could not so simply renounce the emperor; the state had tremendous incentive to re-appropriate the recluse's virtue from the moment of his withdrawal in order to forefend the impression that he quit in frustration or worse protest (as might well be the case) and to signal that the ruler understood, valued, and upheld the virtue embodied by such an incorruptible worthy.³⁷³ Ích's retirement, even if taken purely out of consideration for his mother's passing, certainly looked like an aside against the emperor. Indeed, that is how Đại and the dynastic historians saw it in light of Ích's propitious fourteen (or twenty-four) policies for good governance, regardless of whether he submitted them with contempt or apology. Moreover, as we saw earlier in Lê Oanh's execution of the man who delivered him Lê Tuấn, despite Lê Oanh's hatred for his enemy and predecessor, Lê Oanh recognized the need in 1510 to show that his fledgling reign would restore moral balance to the kingdom.³⁷⁴ This reparation of virtue, which had cosmological as well as political undertones, necessitated the acquiescence of reluctant worthies like Ích.³⁷⁵ Thus, Lê Oanh realized that he had to make some gesture beyond moot agreement with Ích's document about governance to weave him back into his sphere of dynastic rule while also accommodating Ích's resolve to retire.

How Lê Oanh dealt with Lương Ngạn Ích's retirement and the circumstances in which Ích then found himself foreshadowed how Mạc Dynasty rulers would respond to Nguyễn Văn Đạt's principled withdrawal more than three decades later. In Ích's entry in

³⁷³ Ibid., 20–22.

³⁷⁴ Lê Oanh's feelings towards Lê Tuấn exceeded simple rivalry. Lê Oanh was so incensed by Lê Tuấn's murder of his parents and three brothers that Lê Oanh desecrated his cousin's corpse, decimating him by firing him out of a cannon. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 14.53a.

³⁷⁵ Aat Vervoorn, *Men of the Cliffs and Caves: The Development of the Chinese Eremitic Tradition to the End of the Han Dynasty* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1990), 124–125.

an eighteenth century anthology of biographies of eminent civil service examination graduates, Ích's highest rank during his life was minister of the Ministry of Personnel.³⁷⁶ Phan Huy Chú's early nineteenth century biography of Ích also cites this as Ích's most elevated positions, but adds that Ích earned it *after* having submitted his fourteen policies on good governance.³⁷⁷ The connotation of Chú's passage about Ích's elevation to minister, which immediately follows Lê Oanh's praise for Ích's fourteen policies in the biography, is that Ích rose in rank precisely because of his submission of these policies after having refused to return to Lê Oanh's service. The rank of minister (*thượng thư*, 2b) was a full grade higher than that of left-deputy minister (*tả thị lang*, 3b), the position that Lê Oanh originally invited Ích to reassume.³⁷⁸ This suggests that Lê Oanh's further promotion of Ích, after the latter "adamantly took leave and did not accept" the emperor's proposal, was Lê Oanh's way of honoring Ích as a retired official, thus granting him a semi-official status that simultaneously acknowledged the nobility of Ích's withdrawal and kept him within the scope of the emperor's dynastic machinery.³⁷⁹ That Ích's elevation to minister was emeritus is supported by the dynastic histories, which make no mention of Ích's activities after 1510. Moreover, in Hà Nhậm Đại's entry on Ích, which to my knowledge is his earliest biography, says nothing about Ích's role as minister and, instead, cites left-deputy minister as his highest position in officialdom.³⁸⁰ That Đại did not record Ích's rank as minister despite his portrayal of Ích as a "moral hero" further suggests

³⁷⁶ Nguyễn Hoàn, Võ Miên, Phan Trọng Phiên, and Uông Sĩ Lăng, *Đại Việt lịch triều đăng khoa lục* (comp.1779), trans. Tạ Khúc Khải ([Saigon?]: Bộ Quốc gia Giáo dục, 1962), 1.105.

³⁷⁷ Phan Huy Chú 潘輝注 (1782–1840), *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí* 歷朝憲章類誌 (1819), original Sinographic text in *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, ed. and trans. Viện Sử học Việt Nam (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 1992), 7.50a.

³⁷⁸ Đỗ Văn Ninh, *Từ điển chức quan Việt Nam* (Hà Nội: NXB Thanh niên, 2005), 680, 834.

³⁷⁹ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* and Phan Huy Chú's *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí* both make it clear that Lương Ngạn Ích "adamantly took leave and did not accept" 固辭不受 Lê Oanh's summons. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 14; Phan Huy Chú 潘輝注 (1782–1840), *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, 7.47b.

³⁸⁰ Vương Thị Hường, "*Khiếu vịnh thi tập*," 338.

that the position was largely honorific. I interpret this to mean that when Ích retired and returned to Hội Trào after his mother's death in 1510, Lê Oanh, faced with the exigency of his fragile, newly established reign, summoned Ích back to the capital to fill the vacuum of able men created by his predecessor's malignancy and his own chaotic ascent. The emperor invited Ích back to the capital to reclaim his former position with the added distinction of Eastern Pavilion academician and inner imperial tutor (*nhập thị kinh diên*). However, when Ích refused and made a show of submitting his fourteen policies, Lê Oanh decided that the best way to manage the scholar's recalcitrance was to honor his principledness with emeritus status of minister. Thereafter, Ích was indebted to the emperor's graces, and thus obligated to acquiesce to his beckons in his new capacity in "retirement." Hence, from 1510 to 1516, when Lê Oanh's reign came to an end, Ích remained at his Hói Estuary school, but was periodically summoned into service whenever Lê Oanh found it expedient, as was the case, for example, in 1513, when Ích was recalled to receive a northern (Chinese) emissary.³⁸¹

Although little is known about the details of Lương Ngạn Ích's official duties after 1510, it is clear that his student would experience a similar situation after Nguyễn Văn Đát withdrew from the Mạc Dynasty court in 1542, when he adopted White Cloud Hermitage as his namesake in reclusion. Luckily, as we shall see in the next chapter, more is known about Đát's activities after "retirement." Like Ích, he would be granted high emeritus status and, therefore, experience the ongoing pull of Mạc emperors' beckons for the rest of his life. Đát's preparedness for this was no doubt indebted to his mentor.

Early Poetry, ca.1508–1534

³⁸¹ Nguyễn Quốc Tín, Nguyễn Như Mai, and Nguyễn Huy Thắng, *Những người thầy trong sử Việt*, 108.

Since *circa* 1508, Nguyễn Văn Đạt trained under Lương Ngạn Ích's tutelage. Approximately eight years later in 1516, Đạt's studies with his teacher came to an end. In that year, Lê Oanh's reign came to a calamitous conclusion when an indignant general assassinated the emperor and rival forces led by Trần Cảo, a religiously motivated figure of self-proclaimed Trần royal descent, captured the Thăng Long capital for almost two weeks.³⁸² At this uncertain juncture, Ích finally unfettered himself from Thăng Long's dynastic politics and remained withdrawn at his school at Hới Estuary until his death a decade later.³⁸³ Faced with the chaos that ensued after Lê Oanh's death, Đạt, now a mature scholar at the age of twenty-five, followed his mentor's example and returned to his home village to become a local scholar and teacher himself.³⁸⁴ Đạt would remain removed from officialdom and Thăng Long's politics for nearly twenty years until 1535, when he emerged from the civil service examination system as Prime Laureate, the exam's highest honor.³⁸⁵ By then a new royal clan from Đạt's littoral east, the Mạc, had become masters of the kingdom. Once an examination graduate under the Mạc Dynasty (1527–1677), Đạt became intertwined with the vagaries of this dynasty for the rest of his life.

A look at Nguyễn Văn Đạt's early poetry during this time (1516–1534) reveals how Lương Ngạn Ích's influence in conjunction with Đạt's own life experiences contributed to his development of a literary style that would become associated with his White Cloud Hermitage after he retired from officialdom in 1542. Namely, Đạt's early poetry shows that he began contemplating the vagaries of a scholar's career and the appeal

³⁸² *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, bản kỷ, 15.27a–29a.

³⁸³ Lê Văn Toan, "Lương Đắc Bằng, danh nho đạo nghĩa thanh liêm."

³⁸⁴ Vũ Khâm Thận 武欽慎 (1703–? t.s. 1727, a.k.a Vũ Khâm Lân), "Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đạt," 57a.

³⁸⁵ It is also at that time that Nguyễn Văn Đạt probably assumed the name Bình Khiêm 秉謙, by which he is better known.

of eremitism early on in his youth and that Đat articulated his meditations on the fates of failure, success, and reclusion through the idiom of the *Changes*, which he acquired from his homeschooling and Ích's tutelage. Moreover, and this is key to the future development of Đat's poetry and reception, we will see that Đat cultivated his literary voice not simply by private reflection, but also through literary dialogue with his contemporaries. Thus, the construction of what became White Cloud Hermitage poetry was a social act.

One such poem that offers a glimpse into Nguyễn Văn Đat's early formation of his literary voice is his quatrain “‘Old Frog in a Brick Well,’ written when young.”³⁸⁶

瓮井稳栖身， 声老皮又皱。 時時蒙雨露， 重奪錦袍新。	In a brick well, settled, perching [yourself], Voice wizened and skin wrinkled, too, Time after time, [you] are covered by rain and dew, To again snatch embroidered robes anew.
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In this poem, Đat concisely conveyed his experience as a youngster confronted by established senior men, whom Đat likened to an old frog snugly settled in a well.

Whereas Đat conjured agedness via the frog's wrinkled and wizened comportment, he injected his own sense of youthful vigor through the restorative energy of rains bestowed by the methodical passage of time. With little doubt, Đat's teacher Lương Ngạn Ích kept the company of such elder scholars. By seeing renewal in these seasoned men and alluding to beneficence from above (*mông* 蒙) through the image of fortuitous rains, Đat reverently acknowledged that he owed his youthful promise to the graciousness of the elders about him.

³⁸⁶ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Văn Đat), “‘Trúu tình lão oa thi,’ thiếu thời tác” 瓮井老蛙詩·少時作, in [*Bạch Vân am thi tập* 白雲庵詩集], manuscript, Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. Hv.25, 4b; c.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập*, accession no. R.2017, 2.7a.

Similarly, in another poem “‘Prompted for Fun by an Old Rustic Scholar,’ written when young,” Nguyễn Văn Đạt expressed his youthful stature vis-à-vis that of his elders.³⁸⁷ However, whereas the previous poem was a seemingly private contemplation, this poem reveals how Đạt cultivated his literary voice in dialogue with other writers.

貧臥象乎天，	To lie in poverty, the sign is in heaven;
乾方取諸坤。	Only with <i>Càn</i> can you take <i>Khôn</i> . ³⁸⁸
月影空中見，	The translucent light of the moon is seen in the sky;
天心靜里存。	The mind of heaven exists in quietude.
潤民澤斯普，	[You] nourish the people, enrich them broadly,
瑩德玉其溫。	Polishing virtue with the warm luster of jade.
道脈淵源在，	The arteries of the Way—the abyssal source remains,
餘波及子孫。	With lasting ripples that reach children and grandchildren.

While in the previous poem, Đạt deflected his reflections on his youthfulness among elders to the image of an old frog, here, Đạt speaks directly of the aged rustic scholar’s role in transmitting a constantly accessible Way to future generations, including Đạt himself. Moreover, we notice an early example of how Đạt used the language of the *Changes* and Thái Ất Divination in a literary exchange suggestive of reclusion. Đạt described the old scholar with whom Đạt made his literary exchange as “rustic” (*dã* 冶), signaling that the scholar lived apart from officialdom and, furthermore, in apparent poverty.³⁸⁹ Đạt articulated the scholar’s lack of official career success and material wealth with two antithetical hexagrams from the *Changes*, *Càn* 乾 (the celestial) and *Khôn* (the earthly). The former hexagram, especially, presented the old scholar’s rustic indigence as principled, willful reservation. Specifically, Đạt alluded to the first line of *Càn*, “the

³⁸⁷ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Văn Đạt), “‘Dã lão nho sinh hý đề, ‘thiếu thời tác’” 冶老儒生戲題·少時作, in *Bạch Vân am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình quốc công thi tập* 白雲庵先生狀元程國公詩集, manuscript, Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. Vhv.850, 39a; c.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập*, accession no. R.2017, 1.23a.

³⁸⁸ For the first couplet, recension R.2017 reads “Roundness takes its image from *Càn*; squareness is taken from *Khôn*” 圓以象乎乾，方以取諸坤。

³⁸⁹ 冶 was a variant Sinograph for the now standard *dã* 野, here meaning “rustic.”

submerged dragon is without employ” (*càn long vật dụng* 潛龍勿用) to cast the uncelebrated scholar as a “hidden dragon” whose talents remained submerged. Indeed, the hexagram *Càn* evoked reclusion since at least the second century, when a recluse during the Eastern Hán (25–220) opined, “The Hidden Dragon (*sic.*) effectuates his virtue by remaining invisible.”³⁹⁰ Đạt implied that his elder recognized the “sign in heaven,” namely *Càn*, and so lived in obscurity, where, in quietude unperturbed by the bustle that comes with fame and repute, he tapped the abyssal source of the Way, polished his virtue, fostered the people, and bequeathed his subtle legacy to new generation scholars like Đạt.

Nguyễn Văn Đạt’s use of the idiom of the *Changes* in “Prompted for Fun by an Old Rustic Scholar” shows how Đạt, from early on in his life, imparted to his poetry the language of the *Changes* and Thái Ất divination that he learned from Lương Ngạn Ích and his domestic tutors, especially his mother. As we saw in the first chapter, Đạt’s mother Nhữ Thị Từ Thục was reputed to practice *Dịch Kinh* divination, which she taught her son. Later, Ích is said to have furthered Đạt’s understanding of the *Changes* by instructing him in Thái Ất divination. According to an oft-repeated story from at least the eighteenth century, Ích mastered Thái Ất divination after acquiring a text, *Thái Ất thần kinh* 太乙神經 (*Scripture of the Thái Ất Spirit* or, perhaps, *Divine Scripture of Thái Ất*) during an expedition to Minh China in 1510 (to announce Lê Oanh’s ascension) with the assistance of Ích’s kinsman in the north.³⁹¹ Although this story has its curiosities,³⁹² Ích’s

³⁹⁰ Alan J. Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement: The Practice and Portrayal of Reclusion in Early Medieval China*, 30.

³⁹¹ Ngô Thị Nhậm, *Hải Đông chí lược*, 567–568; Phan Huy Chú, *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, 11.11b; Vũ Khâm Thận, “Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đạt,” 56b.

³⁹² According to Vũ Khâm Thận’s genealogical record, the branch of Lương Ngạn Ích’s Lương clan, who were descended from Lương Nhữ Hốt, lived in Vân Nam (Yunnan) Province. However, Vietnamese envoys in the sixteenth century usually travelled through Commandery over the South Pass (Trấn Nam Quan) in Quảng Tây (Guangxi) Province. See Liam Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 81.

transmission of Thái Ất divination to Đạt contributed significantly to the latter's career achievements, reputation, and literary development.

In the north, from where Lương Ngạn Ích derived his knowledge of Thái Ất divination, Thái Ất studies held a prestigious place in elite astrological circles since at least the Hán Dynasty.³⁹³ This method of astral divination revolved around Thái Ất 太乙, the brightest star of *Bắc Cực* 北極 (the constellation of northern pole stars) that corresponds to β Ursae Minoris, the first star from the edge of the Little Dipper (opposite Polaris).³⁹⁴ This vital star was believed to be the visual manifestation of a celestial spirit Thái Ất, who embodied the primal pneuma and embryonic essence of the universe.³⁹⁵ Divination was achieved by tracing and projecting the path of Thái Ất through the night sky, resulting in derivative methods of astral forecasting like *Tử vi đẩu số* 紫微斗數 (Purple Rose [Northern] Dipper Numerology) with twelve zodiac positions and *Cửu cung phi tinh* 九宮飛星 (Flying Stars through Nine Palaces) with nine astral zones.³⁹⁶ Thái Ất divination developed to become an exquisitely complex and elevated form of divination. During the Đường 唐 Dynasty (618–907), it was incorporated into the “three [divinatory] boards” (*tam thức* 三式) consulted by the dynasty's Astronomical Bureau for the elite purview of emperors, high officials, and imperial astrologers.³⁹⁷ This is because, by the sixth century, Thái Ất studies had become foremostly concerned with macro-divination about the rise and fall of dynasties.³⁹⁸ In Vietnam, too, Thái Ất studies were associated with forecasting dynastic destinies. For this reason, the Lê imperial law code forbade the

³⁹³ Stephen L. Field, *Ancient Chinese Divination* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 99.

³⁹⁴ Edward H. Schafer, *Pacing the Void: Tang Approaches to the Stars*, 44–45.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁹⁶ Stephen L. Field, *Ancient Chinese Divination*, 99–102.

³⁹⁷ Ho Peng Yoke, *Chinese Mathematical Astrology: Reaching Out to the Stars* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 36, 68.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36–40.

unsanctioned practice of Thái Ất divination and possession of texts like Ích's *Thái Ất thần kinh*.³⁹⁹ Indeed, according to one story, Ích testified to the power of Thái Ất studies in forecasting the tides of the dynastic cycle by relating to his students, including Nguyễn Văn Đát, Nguyễn Trãi's purported use of Thái Ất divination in planning Lê Lợi's successful military campaign against the Minh.⁴⁰⁰ Since military violence was a perennial feature of dynastic change, in the Chinese north, Thái Ất studies were often associated with warfare.⁴⁰¹ This was true in the south as well. For instance, an eighteenth-century exegete observed that Vietnamese were particularly interested in military applications of Thái Ất divination such as those attributed to Nguyễn Trãi as well as legendary northern tacticians like Lữ Thượng 呂尚 (1156–1017 B.C.E.), a strategist for the founder of the Hán Dynasty.⁴⁰² The same commentator even claimed that Thái Ất divination could anticipate the deviant intentions of military heroes like Nguyễn Hoàng 阮潢 (1525–1613) and Bùi Văn Khuê 裴文奎 (1546–1600).⁴⁰³

Another point of convergence between northern and southern Thái Ất divination was its association with the *Changes*. In the Vietnamese south, the revelation of Thái Ất studies paralleled the mythical origins of the *Changes* and its associated images and diagrams, including the trigrams (*quái* 卦) and river maps (*Hồ đồ* 河圖 and *Lạc thư* 洛書). Whereas the trigrams and their corresponding spatial numerological arrays were attributed

³⁹⁹ Nguyễn Ngọc Huy and Tạ Văn Tài, *The Lê Code: Law in Traditional Vietnam, A Comparative Sino-Vietnamese Legal Study with Historical-Juridical Analysis and Annotations*, Vol. 1. (Athens, OH: University of Ohio Press), 139.

⁴⁰⁰ Trịnh Nhu, ed., *Danh nhân văn hóa Hoàng Hóa*, 138. For this story, see previous chapter.

⁴⁰¹ Ho Peng Yoke, *Chinese Mathematical Astrology: Reaching Out to the Star*, 64–66.

⁴⁰² Lê Quý Đôn, 黎貴惇 (1726–1784), *Thái Ất dị giản lục*, Sinographic text in *Thái Ất dị giản lục*, edited and translated by Đặng Đức Lương (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa thông tin, 1997), 133.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 142. In 1600, Nguyễn Hoàng effectively defected to establish regional rule in the south after it became clear that the Lê regime in the north was firmly under the control of the Trịnh clan. In 1592, General Bùi Văn Khuê defected from the Mạc Dynasty after the Mạc emperor attempted to seize the general's wife (the queen's younger sister). Khuê then allied his riverine navy to the Lê Trịnh forces against the Mạc, leading to the Mạc's decisive defeat.

to the mythical sovereign Phục Hy 伏羲 or the founder of the Chu 周 Dynasty (1046–256 B.C.E.)⁴⁰⁴ and often involved contributions from mythical figures like a divine turtle,⁴⁰⁵ in Vietnam, Thái Ất studies were said to have been revealed as talismans to the legendary Yellow Emperor by the Queen Mother of the West (Tây Vương Mẫu 西王母) and the northern cardinal spirit Twilight Tortoise (Huyền Quy 玄龜),⁴⁰⁶ which suggests Daoist origins.⁴⁰⁷ The semblance of the mythical genesis of the *Changes* and Thái Ất divination, especially the role of a turtle spirit and legendary sovereign, implies how practice of the latter intertwined with study of the *Changes*. Indeed, an eighteenth-century abridged manual for Thái Ất studies linked the movement of the astral deity through nine numbered spheres of the night sky and associated them with the eight trigrams (*bát quái* 八卦) of the *Changes*.⁴⁰⁸

Aside from the ability to forecast destiny and change, Nguyễn Văn Đật saw literary potential in the idiom of the *Changes* and Thái Ất studies. By incorporating the language of the *Changes*, Đật found a way to express his personal aspirations and anxieties vis-à-vis the uncertainties of change and make sense of them through learned contemplation. For example, Đật forecasted his own destiny in a poem “‘Plum Blossom in Front of the Garden,’ written when young:”⁴⁰⁹

斜斜竹外一枝橫，	Slightly askance, beyond the bamboo, a single horizontal
太極精華驗發生。	branch,
待得高魁春榜日，	The essential florescence of <i>Thái Cực</i> bears true with
便將風味入調羹。	the effusion of life.

⁴⁰⁴ Richard Smith, *The I Ching: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 19–21, 94–97.

⁴⁰⁵ Stephen L. Field, *Ancient Chinese Divination*, 24–25.

⁴⁰⁶ By Huyền Quy, Lê Quý Đôn probably referred to Twilight Tortoise of the northern (polar) sky, who is more commonly called Huyền Vũ 玄武.

⁴⁰⁷ Lê Quý Đôn, *Thái Ất dị giản lục*, 133.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 199. In this respect, this method resembles Flying Stars through Nine Palaces divination, a derivative of Thái Ất studies that remains popular today.

⁴⁰⁹ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Văn Đật), “‘Đình tiền mai,’ thiếu thời tác” 庭前梅·少時作, [*Bạch Vân am thi tập* (Hv.25)], 4a; c.f. *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017), 2.6b.

[I] await the spring day when [my] high rank in the civil service
examination is on the placard.
Then [I] shall infuse exquisite taste to balance the broth.

In this poem, Đạt anticipated examination success along with the flowering of his career by reading the signs of the plum flower's first blossoming in spring, an image accentuated in an alternative title for the poem.⁴¹⁰ First, Đạt likened his yet to be recognized talent as a youth to a solitary, obscure tree branch. Then, in the second line, Đạt alluded to Thái Ất divination to predict the burgeoning of his own seminal florescence (*tinh hoa* 精華) that he hoped would come to life like the first plum flower of spring. Đạt captured this allusion by way of the term *Thái Cực* or "Absolute Polarity." As its name suggests, *Thái Cực* was an asterism of northern pole stars that included Thái Ất as well as the true-north pole star of medieval times (*Nhũ* 紐 or "Pivot of the Sky" *Thiên chi xu* 天之樞).⁴¹¹ As Thái Ất was the most brilliant star of the asterism, *Thái Ất* and *Thái Cực* converged through synecdoche and, by Tống 宋 times (960–1276), became interchangeable in certain expositions on Thái Ất studies that circulated within Vietnam.⁴¹² At the same time, Đạt evoked Thái Ất prognostication through the poem's central image, the plum blossom, since the flower was associated with the Tống numerologist Thiệu Ung 邵雍 (1011–1077), for whom *Thái Nhất* (i.e. *Thái Ất*) and *Thái Cực* were key concepts.⁴¹³ That Đạt

⁴¹⁰ The xylographic recension R.2017/A.1350 bears the title "Early Encounter with a Plum Blossom" (*Tiền phùng mai thi* 前逢梅詩).

⁴¹¹ Edward H. Schafer, *Pacing the Void: Tang Approaches to the Stars*, 44.

⁴¹² Ho Peng Yoke, *Chinese Mathematical Astrology: Reaching Out to the Stars*, 44. The conflation of Thái Ất and Thái Cực was made, for instance, in *Thái Ất đào kim ca* 太乙淘金歌 (*Song of Thái Ất Sieving Gold*), which was one of Lê Quý Đôn's main references for his own abridged treatise on Thái Ất studies. Lê Quý Đôn, *Thái Ất dị giản lục*, 133.

⁴¹³ Thiệu Ung (Shao Yong) is credited with creating the divination method Plum Blossom Numerology of Change (*Mai hoa dịch số* 梅花易數). Anne D. Birdwhistell, *Transition to Neo-Confucianism: Shao Yung on Knowledge and Symbols of Reality* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 56–59, 175–176; Richard J. Smith, *Fathoming the Cosmos and Ordering the World: The Yijing (I Ching, or Classic of Changes) and Its Evolution in China* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 224; ———, *Fortune-tellers and Philosophers: Divination in Traditional Chinese Society* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 111.

wanted to allude to Thái Ất prognostication in the second line is further revealed by his use of the word *nhiệm* 驗, which in both literary Sinitic and vernacular Vietnamese means “to come true” or “prove true.” When an omen, dream, or prediction becomes reality, it was said to *nhiệm*. Thus, Đạt’s forecast of *Thái Cực* in the first flower of the season was to bear true with the spring’s burgeoning, which Đạt linked to his own estimation for early success in the final couplet. Đạt saw in the plum blossom the first signs of his elevation through the civil service examinations and projected them to see himself on the path of officialdom. As he alluded in the final line, Đạt yearned to become like the sagacious Thương 商 Dynasty minister Duyệt 說 of the *Book of Documents*, who was invited by King Vũ Đinh 武丁 (r.1250?–1192?) to instruct the king on harmonizing good governance “as the yeast and malt in making sweet spirits, as the salt and prunes in making agreeable soup.”⁴¹⁴

Nguyễn Văn Đạt’s poem on the plum blossom shows that early in his life Đạt harbored ambitions to pass the examinations, rise through officialdom, and serve a ruler who appreciated his talents. Thus, it is possible that Đạt participated in the civil service examinations soon after taking leave of Lương Ngạn Ích in 1516. Indeed, in 1518, two of Đạt’s fellow students, who like Đạt also studied with Ích and hailed from the eastern delta, graduated to earn the *tiến sĩ* degree.⁴¹⁵ Although it is impossible to determine for certain whether or not Đạt attempted to pass the examinations in 1518, an undated poem about

⁴¹⁴ *Shangshu* 尚書, “Charge to Yue, lower section,” Chinese Text Project, <https://ctext.org/shangshu/charge-to-yue-iii/zh?searchu=%E8%8B%A5%E4%BD%9C%E5%92%8C%E7%BE%B9%EF%BC%8C%E7%88%BE%E6%83%9F%E9%B9%BD%E6%A2%85%E3%80%82>. Translated quote from Clae Waltham, *Shu Ching: Book of History, A Modernized Edition of the Translations of James Legge* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), 94.

⁴¹⁵ The graduates were Nguyễn Mẫn Đốc 阮敏篤 (1492–?) and Lại Kim Bàng 賴金榜 (?–1527). Trịnh Nhu, ed., *Danh nhân văn hóa Hoàng Hóa*, 137.

them, “‘Literary Battle at the Examination Grounds,’ composed for fun” suggests that Đạt like his classmates may have placed his hopes in them as a budding scholar.⁴¹⁶

詞場凜凜露詞鋒，	The arena of words is chilling as words reveal their blades,
文戰雄於武戰雄。	A literary battle with heroism greater than the valor of war!
掃盡千軍歸筆力，	To sweep away a thousand troops comes down to a brush's
非儒功做是誰功。	strength;
	Whose merit is that if not a scholar's?

However, the chaos that ensued after Emperor Lê Oanh's assassination in 1516 seems to have disrupted Nguyễn Văn Đạt's hopes for finding an appreciative ruler of King Vũ Đinh's temperament and caliber. Retiring to his home village in the wake of the disturbances, Đạt returned to the image of the plum blossom to pine about his fate with a poem “Ode to the Plum Blossoms in the Old Garden Having Returned After the Chaos.”⁴¹⁷

萬紫千紅都是春，	Myriad violets and multitudinous crimsons full of spring,
等閒開謝總紛紛。	[I] await in leisure their blossoming and falling in
雪中不改堅貞操，	succession.
惟有寒梅伴主人。	In the snow, with firm integrity unchanged,
	Only the cold plum blossom is companion to [its] master.

In contrast to the confident tone of Đạt's earlier poem about the plum blossom, here, he is unable to forecast the realization of his earlier ambitions. Instead, he can only abide, passively watching the ongoing vicissitudes of time. He then turns to a sensation that becomes prominent throughout his later poetry, coldness. The chilly snow is at once white, pure and clean, but also devoid of warmth. Đạt, symbolically out in the cold remote from career success, described himself as lonely as the solitary plum blossom—the flower that emerges first but alone, with whom he finds his only source of recognition. In

⁴¹⁶ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Văn Đạt), “Thí trường văn chiến hý tác” 試場文戰戲作 in *[Bạch Vân am thi tập (Hv.25)]*, 9b.

⁴¹⁷ Nguyễn Văn Đạt, “Loạn hậu quy cố viên vịnh mai” 亂後歸故園詠梅 in *Bạch Vân am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình quốc công thi tập* 白雲庵先生狀元程國公詩集, manuscript (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), accession no. Vhv.2081, 36b.

other words, Đạm was a *hàn nho* 寒儒, a “scholar in the cold,” whom, if the stories about Nhữ Thị Thục were true, would have been looked upon with disappointment by his mother.⁴¹⁸ Nevertheless, Đạm retained a sense of optimism, for the cold snow also implied purity and unadulterated integrity, with which Đạm hinged his poem in its third “pivot” (*chuyển*) line. The flowers may come and go with the seasons, Đạm suggested, but his worthiness endured through the cold. Đạm would return to this ambivalent sensation as a key feature of his poetry in retirement after 1542.

During the turbulent years after Lê Oanh’s death, Nguyễn Văn Đạm was not the sole scholar consigned to the cold. Another was Đạm’s lifelong confidant, an obscure scholar known only as Đạm’s “friend from Cao Xá.”⁴¹⁹ More than anyone else, the friend from Cao Xá would become one with whom Đạm developed his literary style through poetic exchange. The motif of ambivalent cold vis-à-vis mercurial change is one example of how missive poetry between Đạm and his friend from Cao Xá lent textured meanings to a recurrent theme in Đạm’s literary oeuvre. Sometime during these inclement years, the Cao Xá friend confided in Đạm his despondent thoughts on life in the cold with his poem “Narrating [the Thoughts in My] Bosom.”⁴²⁰

貧賤重逢此亂離， 百年家計片時非。 魚生甑乏供厨食， 鶉結身無蔽體衣。	In base poverty, again [I] am displaced by the chaos; [My] lifetime of plans for [my] family have suddenly come to naught. [My] pot lacks raw fish to offer up in the kitchen to eat;
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⁴¹⁸ Ngô Đăng Lợi, “Một số vấn đề về thân thế và sự nghiệp Nguyễn Bình Khiêm,” in *Nguyễn Bình Khiêm trong sự phát triển văn hóa dân tộc*, ed. Trần Khuê (Hà Nội: Viện Khoa học xã hội, Trung tâm nghiên cứu Hán Nôm and NXB Đà Nẵng, 2000), 55. For Nhữ Thị Thục, see chapter one.

⁴¹⁹ One of the challenges of identifying Nguyễn Văn Đạm’s friend is that many places were named Cao Xá, which just means “Village of the Chaos,” including in Thường Tín (Hanoi), where a number of scholars passed the civil service examinations during Đạm’s lifetime (Nguyễn Chí, Nguyễn Văn Oánh, Nguyễn Như Thức), Cẩm Giang (Hải Dương), and Khoái Châu. According to the anthologist Bùi Huy Bích 裴輝壁 (1744–1818), Đạm’s friend from Cao Xá was a prefectural assistant in Khoái Châu (Hưng Yên). Bùi Huy Bích, *Hoàng Việt thi tuyển* 皇越詩選, xylographic text, Hanoi, National Library of Vietnam, accession no. R.969, 5.3b.

⁴²⁰ Friend from Cao Xá, “Thuật hoài, kỳ nhất” 述懷·其一 in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.27b; c.f., *Bạch Vân am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình quốc công thi tập* (Vhv.850), 5a.

愚婦自嫌生怨恨，
貴人誰肯顧寒微。
欲尋海上盟鷗侶，
爭奈塵心未息機。

[I] am without a speckled quail's patch-woven garment to
cover [my] body.
This simpleton's wife has become suspicious and spiteful;
Of noble men, who would deign to look [at me], cold and
puny?
[I] want to seek the companionship of gulls on the sea;
But no matter how [I] struggle, [my] dusty heart cannot put to
rest its machinations.

Here, Nguyễn Văn Đạt's friend confessed his despair among the widespread famine and vagabondage that ensued after 1516, when rival claimants to the throne, internecine warring among Lê Oanh's former generals, and Trần Cảo's ravenous armies devastated Đại Việt's peoples.⁴²¹ The Cao Xá friend saw his life turned upside-down, telling Đạt that, in the midst of the upheaval, food and even tattered clothes eluded him.⁴²² Moreover, his wife had lost confidence in him. Respected men, too, disparaged him. Downtrodden, the friend loathed his plight, describing himself as "cold and puny" (*hàn vi*). As a learned man, Đạt's friend tried to comfort himself with thoughts about the "moral hero," who disappears into obscurity in troubled times. He wanted to escape with the gulls out to sea or seek the path of the transcendents, but, his confidence shaken, even this is too much for him, and he succumbs to worry. In short, we see a broken man.

Nguyễn Văn Đạt consoled his friend in like rhyme:

憐君遭亂重流離，
生計饒他是更非。
詩杜不忘前日約，
綈袍好共故人衣。
吟供池草詩懷闊，
盃辟春寒酒力微。
貴賤窮通休說著，
白鷗河上兩忘機。

[I] feel sorry for [your] encounter with chaos, again
wandering displaced;
[As for your] life plans, forgive others for their rights and
wrongs.
With poetry, [you] have not forgotten the engagements of
former days;
With pongee robes, enjoy sharing the clothes of an old
friend.
Chant to offer pond grasses with poetry in [your] expansive
bosom;
Let [your] cup tilt with the chill of spring and the force of

⁴²¹ Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 230–235.

⁴²² The Cao Xá friend's portrayal of his distress matches closely with the events of 1517, when warring and famine had reached such a degree that corpses piled up in the lands east of the capital, including Hải Dương. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản kỷ," 15.41b.

faint wine.
Nobility and pettiness, poverty and eminence, put such talk
to rest!
White gulls on the river forget them both.

Đạt sympathized with his longtime friend and understood his message, promising to reciprocate his friend's missive by offering material support like clothes. Đạt then reminded his friend of the immaterial richness of their friendship bound through poetry that remained as replete as the sentiments of his bosom. In the sixth line, Đạt turned to coldness. Whereas Đạt's friend spoke of his degradation "cold and puny" (*hàn vi*), Đạt turned such talk of coldness around by evoking springtime's chill (*hàn*), which like the plum blossom anticipates better things to come, and the faint (*vi*) warmth of wine. In other words, Đạt spun his friend's gelid misery into hope and a pleasant buzz.

Furthermore, to reinforce his message about looking at the bright side and the promise of fortuitous change, throughout the poem, Đạt evoked relative, oscillating polarities inspired by the *Changes* and Thái Ất studies: right and wrong, nobility and pettiness, poverty and eminence. By invoking them, Đạt enjoined the friend to see his life's vicissitudes from the perspective of natural, inevitable flux and flow. With this purview, Đạt reminded his friend, white, snowy gulls soar above the tides of change regardless of ebb and flow. In this way, Đạt implored his friend to forget about the harsh extremes to which he had momentarily fallen.

The poets' missives show how their literary dialogue created an ambivalent duality when read together—cold, snow, and whiteness oscillate between the Cao Xá friend's indigent loneliness and Đạt's detached purity. Indeed, as we will see in a later chapter, this is precisely how later anthologists thought the poems should be read. The poets' exchange shows how Đạt and his friend coproduced a literary style that hinged on

the textured, overlapping meanings of coldness and expressed them in language associated with the classical study of change.

Whether Nguyễn Văn Đạt's poem succeeded in assuaging the friend's despondence is unknown. Whatever the case, there were other ways to find comfort, too. In another poetic exchange, Đạt and his Cao Xá friend, when traveling together and staying at a tavern, described their encounter with a famous courtesan. Their poems reveal how their use of language inspired by the *Changes* was not confined to musings about the profundities of the universe, but as a literary technique could be applied whimsically for amusement, too. Đạt is credited with the first of the pair of poems “Writing about Myself—When Lodging with My Cao Xá Friend, a Famous Courtesan Embraced Her Zither and Sang.”⁴²³

旅館春多對榻眠，
兩忘窮達思悠然。
休談得喪眼前事，
且作安閒世上仙。
靜算贏輸碁棋度日，
醉拋憂樂酒為年。
高山向遇知音客，
時按瑤琴到耳邊。

In a tavern in spring, [I] often sleep on a paired trestle bed,
Forgetting both poverty and success, [my] thoughts carefree.
[I] will rest from discussing gain and loss, the affairs before
[my] eyes,
And become an idyllic transcendent on earth.
With tranquility [I] calculate win and loss, playing chess to
pass the days;
Into drunkenness do [I] throw [my] joys and worries with
wine to constitute the years.
At a lofty mountain, [I] encounter a traveler who understands
[my] tune;
From time to time, [she] presses [her] jade zither to [my] ear.

Like the previous poem, Đạt let the vicissitudes of the times be as they were, including cycles of poverty and success, gain and loss. Unperturbed by worries, he sought pleasure in everyday joys like a “transcendent on earth.” Instead of laboring his mind to divine the troublesome fluctuations of the world (as Đạt previously praised the rustic old scholar for having done), Đạt employed his learning to calculate chess maneuvers. And, as in his

⁴²³ Nguyễn Văn Đạt, “‘Tự thuật,’ dữ Cao Xá hữu nhân cộng ngoạ thời hữu danh kĩ bảo cầm nhi ca” 自述與高舍友人共臥時，有名妓抱琴而歌 in *Bạch Vân am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình quốc công thi tập* (VHv.850), 5a; c.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.28a.

previous exchange with his friend, Đat took to wine to pass the time while remaining aloof of its turbulence. All of this is familiar from Đat's use of language inspired by the *Changes* in poems already discussed above. What is novel here is Đat's frivolous and sensual tone. He was not smugly preaching lofty principles, but rather alluding to very mundane, carnal pleasures. Again, Đat evoked spring, but this time with amorous intent. In the last couplet of his poem about the courtesan, Đat alluded to a courtship poem involving song and music from the *Book of Songs* (*Thi kinh* 詩經). In the classic, a wooing poet sings, "Longing for the lovely young lass, oh! I go to her. It's not that I'm hungry or thirsty, but for her fine voice do I come to embrace her."⁴²⁴ The poet then confesses his unabating love-lust with entreaties to feasting and sousing, despite the poet's abject lack of food and spirits, and enjoins to try her hand at song and dance.⁴²⁵ Coming to his final verse, the poet broaches the subject of Đat's allusion, "At a lofty mountain, looking up, a splendid road I travel. With four steeds trotting, my six reins are like your zither's strings. Upon seeing my new mate, you bring solace to my heart."⁴²⁶ By invoking "lofty mountain" as the place of their chance encounter, Đat deftly spoke to his own situation as a meagre, unaccomplished traveler stricken by a songstress of unusual beauty and skill, whom he implied, understood his intimations and nestled her jade-like talents close.

As for Nguyễn Văn Đat's fellow traveler, the Cao Xá friend was even more suggestive (no doubt to his wife's dismay). He echoed Đat's rhyme, writing:

煖入絺袍穩夜眠，	Warmth enters [my] pongee robes to soothe the night's
春風吹起語溫然。	sleep;
貧中自有孔顏樂，	The spring wind stirs [her] tender voice.

⁴²⁴ 「思嬖季女逝兮。匪饑匪渴、德音來括」。「Chexia," *Shijing*, Xiaoya, Futian zhi shi 诗经·小雅·甫田之什·车辖, *Chinese Text Project*. <https://ctext.org/book-of-poetry/che-xia/zhs>.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ 「高山仰止、景行行止。四牡騑騑、六轡如琴。覯尔新昏、以慰我心」. Ibid.

會上誰無郭李仙。
萬物靜觀知妙理，
四時佳興恰新年。
窮通得喪都忘了，
好把清吟到醉邊。

Poverty itself has the delight of Khổng and Nhan;
Upon meeting, who are not [like] the transcendents Quách
and Lý?
Myriad things when viewed with tranquility make known
[their] marvelous principles;
The four seasons titillate in accord with a year anew.
Indigence and eminence, gain and loss, [I] will forget,
Preferring to let [her] pure song come to intoxication.

Đạt's friend began his poem with erotism, the nocturnal transgression into the poet's clothing of a vernal warmth aroused by windblown whispers, which, by the final line, lulled the poet to the edge of intoxication. The friend thus likened the songstress and her melody to the calling of spring, which, in Sino-Vietnamese literature, is the moment for amorous passions. Accordingly, such titillating sentiments, the Cao Xá friend suggested, were entirely befitting of the new year, an observation he achieved through the flirtatious application of studied contemplation. In this superfluous use of learning, the Cao Xá friend mimicked Đạt's chess playing. He also imitated Đạt with his talk of finding intimacy amidst uncertain, difficult circumstances. The Cao Xá friend, while poor, likened his pleasure with having encountered the songstress with that of Confucius's beloved disciple, Nhan Hôi, who earned the master's favor because of the joy Nhan Hôi exhibited despite his impoverishment.⁴²⁷ Furthermore, the Cao Xá friend spoke about bonding at first sight in his poem about the courtesan. In the fourth line, he invoked Quách Thái 郭太(128–169) and Lý Ưng 李膺 (110–169), who, in the second century, were said to have become immediate friends after their chance encounter in Lạc Dương 洛陽 (Luoyang).⁴²⁸ In the penultimate line, the Cao Xá friend then contrasted the constancy

⁴²⁷ Lunyu, “Yong ye” 論語，雍也, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/analects/yong-ye/zh?searchu=%E4%B8%8D%E5%A0%AA%E5%85%B6%E6%86%82%EF%BC%8C%E5%9B%9E%E4%B9%9F%E4%B8%8D%E6%94%B9%E5%85%B6%E6%A8%82%E3%80%82>.

⁴²⁸ ‘Guo Fuxu liezhuan,’ “Liezhuang,” *Hou Han shu*, 後漢書·列傳·郭符許列傳, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/hou-han-shu/guo-fu-xu-lie-zhuan/zh?filter=522389>.

of such destined bonds with fate's mercurial infidelity regarding gain and loss, expectations for which he summarily abandoned in favor of the former. Thus, brought together by chance during his travels, the Cao Xá friend suggested that in his fortuitous meeting with her, the courtesan's song had struck the cords of his bosom, and the two resonated heart-to-heart.

Nguyễn Văn Đạt and his friend's poems about the courtesan again reveal how their literary interactions hinged on a creative display of ideas culled from the *Changes* and *Thái Ất* studies, including cyclical flux between relative opposites, detached contemplation of the principles of change, and the imagery of the hexagrams. The poets' exchanges also show how the poets did not relegate their use of such ideas to erudite expressions of abstract concepts, but rather they applied them liberally to speak to very personal sentiments like depression and desire. In addition, these dialogic poems hint at the role such literary banter played in shaping Đạt's thoughts about reclusion early in life. As we saw, Đạt likened the old rustic scholar whom he encountered to a recluse through the imagery of *Càn*, the submerged dragon. In the Cao Xá friend's lugubrious poem and Đạt's consoling missive, they both alluded to the escapism of the recluse with the image of seagulls in flight. Finally, in their poems about the famous courtesan, Đạt thought of himself as a "transcendent on earth," while his friend invoked Quách Thái, who, after dreaming about the hexagram *Càn*, sought to conceal himself from worldly affairs like a hidden dragon.⁴²⁹

Indeed, during the turbulent years after 1516, Nguyễn Văn Đạt appears to have thought of himself as a submerged dragon biding his time. Impacted by his teacher Lương Ngạn Ích's celebrated career and ultimate retirement, Đạt strove to make sense of his

⁴²⁹ 'Guo Fuxu liezhuan,' "Liezhuan," *Hou Han shu*.

ambivalence toward detached reclusion and conflicting worldly ambitions through literary exchanges with men like the old rustic scholar and friend from Cao Xá. As we saw, Đạt often captured this ambivalence in the image of snowy whiteness, which conveyed the unsullied integrity but also cold solitude of the recluse. He returned to this theme again in another early poem “‘The White Egret,’ written when young.”⁴³⁰

洗却塵埃半點空，	Having washed away the dust, [the white egret is] a speck in the
孤高標格似冥鴻。	sky,
雪衣曉掛松梢月，	With a manner as solitary and lofty as the abyssal goose.
絲頂晴牽蓼岸風。	Clothed in snow, lustrously suspended, is the moon amidst pine
靈沼優游陶聖化，	branches;
桐江棲息伴漁翁。	Atop a silken canopy, the sky's clearing leads the wind along a
玉溪自有清幽處，	bank of knotweed flowers.
肯把池塘入夢中。	The numinous pool is a fine place to swim and mold sagacity,
	Along Phoenix Tree River, perched, befriending fishermen.
	Jade Creek with a clear, secluded place of its own,
	Allows the pond to enter dreams.

Here, as with the snowy seagulls in his earlier poem, Nguyễn Văn Đạt depicted a white egret in flight to suggest the unfettered path of a recluse who, after cleansing himself of mundane concerns, can roam freely to see the world from the solitary, lofty purview of a distant bird traversing the sky. In doing so, Đạt likened the egret to the abyssal goose, who, in a Daoist composition at the turn of the common era, was described with the words, “The goose flies to the abyssal empyrean! How could the archer seize her?”⁴³¹ By alluding to the abyssal goose, Đạt suggested that the white egret flew off, absconding from a pernicious world like a recluse. Next, Đạt associated the egret's flight with images of whiteness, lustrous moonlight obscured by pine branches dressed in snow and a silken canopy of clouds that clears with the egret's windblown path. With this

⁴³⁰ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Văn Đạt), “Bạch lộ, thiếu thời tác” 白鷺·少辰作 in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* 白雲庵詩集, manuscript, Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. VHv.144, 45b.

⁴³¹ 「鴻飛冥冥，弋人何篡焉」. Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 B.C.E.–18 C.E.), “Wen ming” 問明, sixth fascicle of *Fayan* 法言, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/yangzi-fayan/juan-liu/zh?searchu=%E9%B4%BB%E9%A3%9B%E5%86%A5%E5%86%A5%EF%BC%8C%E5%BC%8B%E4%BA%BA%E4%BD%95%E7%AF%A1%E7%84%89%E3%80%82>.

second couplet, Đat suggested conflicted messages about the egret's flight by contrasting the veiling of the moon with the sky's clearing, the recluse's elusiveness versus his emergence into the open. Moreover, by compressing four images of whiteness into these two lines—snow, moon, silk, clouds—Đat suffused whiteness with textured, overlapping meanings through synesthesia: *cold, snowy* textiles and *wispy, silken* clouds. The haptic and visual multivalence that Đat attributed to whiteness imbued the egret-come-recluse with ambivalence—as palpably real as cold snow and white silk, yet as ethereal as wind and clouds. Thus, whereas Đat's frog in the well could confidently don new rain-christened robes, the white egret displayed more uncertain garb.

As he continued with the second half of the poem, Nguyễn Văn Đat presented similarly contrasting messages. In the third couplet, Đat invoked two classical allusions. The first was to Numinous Pool (Linh Chiếu 灵沼), where King Văn (Wen) was said to have visited in antiquity. In the *Book of Songs*, King Văn came upon Numinous Pool located in Numinous Park, a remote place inhabited by free roaming deer, herons, and fish.⁴³² The king's distant trek to Numinous Pool thus came to represent the furthest extent of imperial authority. Whereas Đat previously conjured the abyssal goose eluding an archer, here, he implied that however far the goose may fly, wherever she alights, she will still fall within the range of the ruler. In the next line, however, Đat pivoted back to the ideal of eremitic escape. He did this through his mention of befriending fisherman at Phoenix Tree River, which called to mind Nghiêm Quang 嚴光 (39 B.C.E.–41 C.E.), a childhood friend of Hán Dynasty Emperor Luu Tú 劉秀 (5 B.C.E.–57 C.E., r. 25–57 C.E.). After Luu Tú ascended the throne, he recalled his old friend and initiated a search

⁴³² “Lingtai 靈臺,” *Shijing* 詩經, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/book-of-poetry/ling-tai/zh>.

for him. Nghiêm Quang was eventually discovered fishing at Phoenix Tree River (*Đông Giang* 桐江), but after the emperor summoned him to his capital and offered him high office, Nghiêm Quang adamantly refused, choosing instead to go back and take up life as a farmer.⁴³³ By alluding to the story, Đát turned once more to suggest that the recluse could evade a king's beckons.

As was the case with these inner parallel couplets, the final lines of Nguyễn Văn Đát's poem about the white egret suggested ambivalence towards reclusion and officialdom. More than any of the previous classical allusions, that of the poem's conclusion seems to have resonated most with Đát. At first glance, Đát's mention of Jade Creek 玉溪 (Ngọc Khê) might seem to allude to Lý Thương Ẩn 李商隱 (c.813–858) and his flirtation with Daoism in his youth. This interpretation would follow from Đát's invocation of the abyssal goose, a Daoist image, and Đát's penchant to describe himself as a "transcendent on earth" as in his poem about the courtesan. If so, then Đát may even have had in mind Lý Thương Ẩn's fabled youthful tryst with Daoist priestesses and the "poetry of decadence" associated with his purported amorous adventures that were not so different from Đát's poem about the songstress.⁴³⁴ However, such appeal to Daoist inspired pleasure-seeking seems quite out of place in this poem, especially considering the earlier lines' ambivalence towards reclusion. Đát does not appear to have been leading up to such resolution in the poem. Instead, the previous line's imagery of whiteness and the concluding line's mention of dreaming suggests another allusion about a different Jade Creek, one endemic to the Vietnamese south. This Jade Creek is Nhị Khê 汭溪, the

⁴³³ "Yimin liezhuan" 逸民列傳, *Hou Han shu* 後漢書, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/hou-han-shu/yi-min-lie-zhuan>.

⁴³⁴ Fusheng Wu, *Poetics of Decadence: Chinese Poetry of the Southern Dynasties and Late Tang Periods* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 149–188; Teresa Yee-Wah Yu, "Li Shangyin: The Poetry of Allusion" (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 1990), 59–62.

hometown of Nguyễn Trãi about twenty kilometers south of Thăng Long (today, part of Thường Tín District, Hanoi). As we saw in the previous chapter, Nguyễn Trãi established a retirement retreat at Côn Mountain called White Cloud Hermitage. Not only did the name of Trãi's hermitage coincide with Đạm's imagery of whiteness in his poem about the egret, but Clear Vacuity Grotto 清虛洞 (*Thanh Hư động*), a retreat near Côn Mountain associated with Trãi's father and grandfather, also corresponded to Đạm's "clear secluded place" 清幽處 (*thanh u xứ*). Moreover, as I will discuss further below, dreaming was a key feature of Trãi's reclusion poetry at Côn Mountain late in his life.⁴³⁵ Therefore, Đạm's talk of multitextured whiteness, reclusion, and escape to dreams suggests to me his allusion not to the medieval northern poet Lý Thương Ẩn, but rather Nguyễn Trãi and his conflicted poetry of dreams.

Since Lương Ngạn Ích's retirement in 1516 and the chaos that ensued with Trần Cảo's insurrection and the slaying of Emperor Lê Oanh, Nguyễn Văn Đạm lived an inconspicuous life as a teacher at his native home in the littoral east, while volatile generals, great clans, and the remnants of Trần Cảo's armies vied for supremacy over a fractured kingdom. As Đạm described in his poems above, the storms of incessant fighting came with widespread misfortune in the forms of famine, vagabondage, and death. As Đạm revealed in the poems, he himself was subject to such unhappiness, and he apparently found himself struggling with recurrent hunger and forced travel. Nevertheless, in comparison to lands towards the west, Đạm's homeland in the east was spared the worst fighting, although famine and warring were by no means uncommon.⁴³⁶ Thus, Đạm was

⁴³⁵ Oliver W. Wolters, "A Stranger in His Own Land: Nguyễn Trãi's Sino-Vietnamese Poems Written During the Ming Occupation," *Vietnam Forum* 8 (1986): 60-90.

⁴³⁶ Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 232. E.g., 1517 was a particularly bad time for Hải Dương in the east. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản kỷ," 15.41b.

able to lay low and manage a meek living as a local teacher sheltered from the most ruinous battles that swept across the lands upriver towards Thăng Long. Moreover, Đạt's ken removed from the center of the tempest afforded him the vision and space to contemplate his place amidst the turbulence and anticipate his moment therein.

Indeed, if regions can be said to exhibit feelings, then the littoral east was permeated with an air of expectation.⁴³⁷ As a native of the east and observer of change, Nguyễn Văn Đạt would have been keen to an emergent sense that the tides of destiny were retreating from the hinterland and now coursed outwards to the east. People of the east were alerted to signs of this sea change as early as 1511, when prophecies about a king who would appear at Miry Mountain in the east were told and even reached the capital.⁴³⁸ These prophecies soon became associated with Trần Cảo, a local official and native of the east just north of Miry Mountain.⁴³⁹ During Lê Oanh's reign (Hong Thuận, 1509–1516), Cảo summoned men from the east, including Cham who had been persecuted by the emperor, with an omen that the “surging numen of a son of heaven” exuded from the east.⁴⁴⁰ By 1516, he sent his armies against Thăng Long and initiated the turmoil that precipitated with Lê Oanh's death. For five years, Cảo's forces occupied Lạng Sơn and Hải Dương in the north and east of the fragmented kingdom.⁴⁴¹ After Cảo's movement

⁴³⁷ Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 232.

⁴³⁸ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 15.9b.

⁴³⁹ Trần Cảo was an overseer (*giám*) from Thủy Đường (now Thủy Nguyên District, Hải Phòng City). Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử* (comp. 1749), translated Ngô Thế Long (Viện Sử Học, NXB Văn hóa Thông tin, 2007), 295.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 15.27a. On the interpretation of meteorological numen or ethers see On the performance of “pitch pipe divination” and “watching the ethers” (hầu khí) see Derk Bodde, “The Chinese Cosmic Magic Known As Watching the Ethers,” In *Studia Serica Bernhard Karlgren Dedicata, Sinological Studies Dedicated to Bernhard Karlgren on His Seventieth Birthday October Fifth, 1959*, ed. Soren Egerod and Else Glahn (Copenhagen: Einar Munksgaard, 1959), 14–35; Huang Yi-Long and Chang Chih-ch'eng, “The Evolution and Decline of the Ancient Chinese Practice of Watching for the Ethers,” *Chinese Science* 13 (1996): 82–106; A.F.P. von Hulsewe, “Watching the Vapours: An Ancient Chinese Technique of Prognostication,” *NOAG* 125 (1979), 40–51. For cloud divination see Michael Loewe, “The Oracles of the Clouds and the Winds,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51, no. 3 (1988): 500–520.

⁴⁴¹ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử* (2007), 304.

was ultimately quelled in 1521, the prophecies that galvanized Cáo's armies quickly gravitated to the warrior who vanquished him.

The man who decisively put an end to Trần Cáo's short-lived dynasty and captured the attention of the people in the littoral east, including Nguyễn Văn Đát, was Mạc Đăng Dung 莫登庸 (1483–1541). Dung hailed from Cỏ Trai near Miry Mountain about twenty kilometers across Văn Úc River from Đát's village. Like Trần Cáo, Dung was native to the east and could claim affinity with the former Trần Dynasty through his ancestor Mạc Đĩnh Chi 莫挺之 (1272–1346), a reportedly unattractive but highly esteemed scholar who flourished during the reign of Trần Thuyên 陳烜 (1276–1320, r. 1293–1314) two centuries earlier.⁴⁴² By allying himself with the legacy of the Trần kings, whose ancestral land rested downriver of the capital in the east, Dung positioned himself to assume the vacuum that Cáo left behind and the kingmaking geomantic numen that had abandoned him.⁴⁴³

Although his family's fortunes had fallen by the late fifteenth century, and he was raised a fisherman, Mạc Đăng Dung's star began to rise meteorically in 1508, when he entered Emperor Lê Tuấn's palace guard owing to his martial talents.⁴⁴⁴ He employed his literary acumen as well. By early 1518, Dung acquired the trust of the teenaged emperor Lê Y 黎椅 (1506–1527, r. 1516–1527), who ultimately ended up on the throne after the confusion that followed Lê Oanh's assassination, through gestures of loyalty, namely calling out the treachery of others in refined language steeped in classical allusion.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴² Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, “Nghịch thần truyện,” 3.1a.

⁴⁴³ That Mạc Đăng Dung cultivated affinity to the Trần Dynasty is evidenced, for instance, by his elevation of Mạc Đĩnh Chi as his dynasty's ancestral patriarch, despite having an equally worthy but much earlier progeniture in Mạc Hiến Tích 莫顯績 (*t.s.* 1086). Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, “Nghịch thần truyện,” 3.14a; Phan Huy Chú, *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, (Hà Nội: Viện Sử Học, NXB Khoa học xã hội, 1992), tập 3, 195.

⁴⁴⁴ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, “Nghịch thần truyện,” 3.2a.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.5a.

However, Dung would really emerge as the predominant force in Đại Việt one year later after the death of Trần Chân, the adopted son of the general who assassinated Lê Oanh and a powerful military figure in his own right. Chân had the misfortune of bearing the same surname as the Trần insurgents, and he was executed in 1518, when oracular prophecies about the appearance of a Trần king reached the emperor's ear. As a result, Chân's followers rose in armed protest against Lê Y's authority. Dung, who had cultivated an alliance with Trần Chân and become his brother-in-law through their children's marriage, managed to pacify and even win over Chân's indignant generals.⁴⁴⁶ Dung's triumph over Trần Chân's former generals not only won him valuable allies, but it also captured the esteem of the emperor, his court, and his armies. By the end of 1519, Dung won (or perhaps compelled) Lê Y's investiture as commandery duke, and he was entrusted with almost complete control over both the imperial army and navy as commander of his native Hải Dương Province in the east.⁴⁴⁷

For the next three years, Mạc Đăng Dung continued to consolidate his power over the military, capturing the first-grade military designation *Thái phó* with full control of the kingdom's calvary and even palace guard.⁴⁴⁸ Furthermore, Dung coordinated with his literati supporters from the east to hold sway over the emperor's court, and he arranged for his brother and son to assume strategic positions within the palace.⁴⁴⁹ By 1522, Dung presided over a de facto junta with the politically enervated Lê Y under close surveillance.⁴⁵⁰ Thereafter, Dung came and went with little pretense about who was Đại Việt's true master, assuming the paraphernalia ordinarily reserved for the emperor and

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 3.7a; *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 15.43a–44a.

⁴⁴⁷ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, “Nghịch thần truyện,” 3.6a–7a.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 3.7b–3.9a.

⁴⁴⁹ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, “Nghịch thần truyện,” 3.9a–b.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 3.9a; *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 15.54b.

entering the forbidden palace as if it were his own.⁴⁵¹ When Lê Y, fearing that his usefulness to Dung might soon expire, managed to evade his minders and fled the capital in the autumn of 1522, Dung simply saw to the coronation of Y's younger brother, who stood as placeholder on the throne until Dung recaptured Y and did away with both brothers in 1527.⁴⁵² In that year, Dung assumed the throne himself and declared himself the first emperor of the Mạc Dynasty (1527–1677). This interval from 1522 to 1527, when Mạc Đăng Dung commanded his junta in the name of a teenaged puppet, was the *Thống Nguyên* era.

As I suggested earlier, for observers in Nguyễn Văn Đát's littoral east and even some farther afield at the capital, Mạc Đăng Dung's meteoric ascent from fisherman to king through the *Thống Nguyên* era was understood against a larger narrative that looked forward to an emergent east. Dung had done away with the last remnants of Trần Cảo's forces in the autumn of 1521.⁴⁵³ By quelling them and then fulfilling the expectations for the east that Trần Cảo had so effectively fostered for five years as a man of the east himself, Dung positioned himself as the prevailing conduit for the heightened aspirations of the east's peoples. Later dynastic chroniclers of the following century, at least, chose to interpret Dung's rise against this prophecy, threading it through the events of the *Thống Nguyên* era, thus implying both the historians' acknowledgment of a restive east ripe to emerge and Dung's agency in cultivating such expectations. For instance, the historians foreshadowed the events of the *Thống Nguyên* era with an episode in 1511, when they tell us the Thăng Long court first grew alarmed about the kingmaking numen of Miry Mountain, Dung's birthplace. Immediately after Dung was promoted to chief military

⁴⁵¹ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, "Nghịch thần truyện," 3.9b.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, 9b–10a, 12b–13b.

⁴⁵³ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản ký," 15.52b–54a.

commissioner of the Heavenly Military Guard and invested as an earl, the historians tell us that “heroes and [their] occult specialists” warned that the “numen of a son of heaven” appeared in the east.⁴⁵⁴ In response, the court sent the high official, Duke of State Nguyễn Văn Lang 阮文郎 (1435–1513) to suppress the geomantic vitality of the east. In this episode, the historians’ insertion of the unspecified “heroes” (*hào kiệt*) emphasized the chroniclers’ sense of narrative trepidation, alerting us to signs that something unpropitious is about to transpire, apparently Dung’s ascent. After recording Lang’s mission, the historians then attached commentary about why the “heroes,” however prescient, failed to subdue the east. They explained that Dung had stolen along with the mission, presumably to undo Lang and his occult masters’ magic (although Lang was clever, too. His descendants became Vietnamese rulers for over three centuries).⁴⁵⁵

Similarly, the dynastic historians punctuated later key developments in the Lê Dynasty’s decline with omens that signaled Mạc Đăng Dung’ impending ascent, even for events that had seemingly little to do with him. For example, the dynastic history records that in the summer of 1517, when a feud between two warrior clans erupted in the capital and came to arms, the sky darkened, a five-colored cloud appeared in the east, and a golden cloud blanketed the sky.⁴⁵⁶ A commentator then remarked that the omen marked the beginning of the Lê Dynasty’s downfall.⁴⁵⁷ Although the dynasty’s troubles were caused by internecine fighting among generals and Dung (quite conscientiously) stayed out of the fray, the omen’s appearance in the east nevertheless implicated Dung as the incipient motive force behind the story of Lê decline. Five years later in 1522, the yellow-

⁴⁵⁴ 時，豪傑並術士皆云：『東方有天子氣』。 *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 15.9b.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid. Nguyễn Văn Lang’s descendants became lords of *Đàng Trong* (1558–1802) and later emperors of the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–1945). Nevertheless, Lang’s geomantic fortunes were mixed. He was unable to prevent his family’s enemies from digging up his grave and decapitating him. Ibid., 15.42a.

⁴⁵⁶ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 15.35b–36a.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 15.36b.

red aura appeared once more in the east, this time to mark general Trịnh Tuy's 鄭綏 (?–1524) sudden capture and removal of Lê Y from the capital, when “all hope [for the Lê] was lost.”⁴⁵⁸ As in the incident of 1517, Dung had no direct involvement in the royal abduction, but the historians nonetheless invoked him by way of the appearance the previous day of the strange aura emitted from the east. Thus, although the spiriting away of the emperor was Tuy's doing, the omen pointed towards Dung, punctuating a shift in narrative to the Thống Nguyên era, when Dung was firmly in control before ultimately assuming the throne himself in 1527.

The dynastic chroniclers' use of prophecy and geomancy as narrative elements of history was neither unusual nor particular to the Mạc. On the contrary, it was a conventional layer of historical narrative. In fact, the rise of the Lê Dynasty was also attributed in part to the geomantic acumen of Lê Lợi's progenitor.⁴⁵⁹ Similarly, the later Nguyễn rulers pointed to the prophetic wisdom of none other than Nguyễn Văn Đát regarding the geomantic numen of the far south in their ancestor's decision to establish his rule over Đàng Trong, the territories south of Linh River (now Gianh River in Quảng Bình Province).⁴⁶⁰ More importantly, claims of legitimacy that appealed to geomancy and prophecy were common means of bolstering leadership and valuable techniques for would-be rulers, a phenomenon evident in the Vietnamese south as early as the Đường period and certainly no later than the late tenth century in the years preceding the Lý Dynasty (1008–1200).⁴⁶¹ This last observation bears significance for understanding the relationship of Mạc Đăng Dung as well as Nguyễn Văn Đát to sixteenth century

⁴⁵⁸ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, “Nghịch thần truyện,” 3.11b; *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 15.60a.

⁴⁵⁹ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, “Thái tổ thượng,” 1.7b.

⁴⁶⁰ Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam thực lục [tiền biên]* (Hà Nội: Viện Sử học, NXB Giáo dục, 2001), tập 1, 27.

⁴⁶¹ Jason Hoai Tran, “Odes of the Unknown and *Huaxia* Poetics in Đại Việt: Buddhist Aesthetics in the Poetry of the Lý Trần Period,” M.A. thesis (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University), 8–21.

prophecies about the east. The seventeenth century dynastic historians, who were partial to the Lê legacy, do not appear to have threaded the prophecies into their history retroactively as a way to make sense of the past, but rather incorporated elements of preexisting narratives transmitted from the previous century. The seventeenth century historians are thought to have consulted Mạc Dynasty histories for the *Thống Nguyên* era.⁴⁶² The historians' mention of the omens was probably indebted to these earlier records. Thus, the seventeenth century historians inserted the omens in a way that implied their preferred lessons of history, but they did not conjure them in retrospect. The prophecies were lived narratives during the early sixteenth century and, moreover, a point of convergence for *Đạt* and his future emperor's life trajectories.

As I suggested above, *Mạc Đăng Dung* took an active role in cultivating his identity as the foretold “son of heaven from the east.” *Dung*'s agency in aligning himself with prophecies about a ruler from the littoral east is evident in a vernacular history from the mid-sixteenth century that was composed from the perspective of the Mạc regime.⁴⁶³

Thời vận đã tận nhà Lê,
Thuận điềm xuất chấn thừa quyền,
Đất thiêng cấu khí đã lâu,
Trời sinh có chúa anh hùng,
Chữ rằng ‘ứng thiên thuận nhân,’
Dựng nghiệp thánh kế thần truyền,
Rồng Càn lên ngự tòa vàng,

Có mây năm sắc châu về Đồ Sơn.
Trời cho họ Mạc thiên nhan xem châu.
Rồng vàng hùm chiểu trước sau lạ đường.
Lấy nhân đổi ngược đẹp lòng vạn dân.
Lê hoàng thiên vị xa gần đều yên.
Mùa hè tháng sáu lên đền đăng quang.
Bách quan sum họp triều đường đôi bên.

Mạc Đăng Dung hiệu Mạc

Thái tổ Minh Đức tam niên,
Đời mừng thấy có thái bình,

Trị vì thiên hạ bốn phương yên lành.
Đuốc khắp xa gần cùng phục triều đông.

The revolution of time had brought an end to the House of Lê,

⁴⁶² In particular, the seventeenth century historian *Phạm Công Trứ* 范公著 (1602-1675) used writings by the Mạc historian *Tổng Lệnh Vọng* 宋令望 (t.s. 1583) to compile *Trứ's* history for the first half of the sixteenth century. *Phan Huy Lê*, “*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*: Tác giả, văn bản, tác phẩm” in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 1993), tập 1, 31. *Lê Quý Đôn's* *Đại Việt thông sử* was also likely indebted to histories by Mạc writers.

⁴⁶³ My transcription and translation of *Việt sử diễn âm* 越史演音 (comp. 1548–1553), Sinographic manuscript in *Nguyễn Tá Nhí*, *Việt sử diễn âm* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa Thông tin, 1997), 182–183/110–111.

As five-colored clouds attended upon Miry Mountain.
 In accord with the omen, emerging from *Chấn* to assume authority,
 Heaven granted the Mạc clan the divine physiognomy to oversee the
 imperial court.
 The vitality of the numinous land had long coalesced,
 With yellow dragon and illumined tiger marveling front and back.
 Heaven let bear a heroic lord,
 Who replaced treachery with humaneness and comforted ten-thousand
 people.
 It is written: 'respond to heaven in accord with the people.'
 The Lê Emperor abdicated, and there was peace near and far.⁴⁶⁴
 Establishing the endeavor to succeed the sages and legacy of the spirits,
 In the sixth month of summer, [Mạc Đăng Dung] ascended the temple
 to rise in illumination,⁴⁶⁵
 The *Càn* dragon ascended the golden throne,
 With the hundred officials gathered at court on both sides.

Mạc Đăng Dung of the Mạc

In the third year of the Grand Ancestor's Minh Đức era,⁴⁶⁶
 [Dung] ruled all under heaven with peace and wellbeing in all four
 directions.
 The world celebrated to see absolute peace;
 Torches near and far together submitted to the dynasty of the east.

This Mạc history framed the founding of the Mạc Dynasty as a matter of fate brought about by the “revolutions of time” expressed in prophetic language about omens, physiognomy, and geomancy. For example, the history mentioned the five-colored clouds that we saw above as well as Mạc Đăng Dung’s kingly physiognomy alluded to in the story about Nguyễn Văn Đật’s mother (see chapter one). Such omens augured the rise of the Mạc, but it was through geomancy that the history most tangibly bound these portents to the “dynasty from the east.” The history presented the Mạc’s imperial destiny as a natural manifestation of Miry Mountain’s superior geomantic properties. The latent powers of Miry Mountain, where the miraculous clouds gathered, had incubated in the

⁴⁶⁴ This line describes the abdication of Lê Xuân, the younger brother of Lê Y, to Mạc Đăng Dung in 1527.

⁴⁶⁵ Mạc Đăng Dung ceremoniously assumed the throne on the fifteenth day of the sixth lunar month in 1527. “Rise in illumination” (*đăng quang*) means to ascend to illustriousness via kingship or simply assume the throne.

⁴⁶⁶ The third year of Minh Đức was 1529, when Mạc Đăng Dung abdicated to his son and became senior emperor. Dung was posthumously referred to by the imperial honorific Grand Ancestor (*Thái tổ*).

bowels of the earth, giving birth to landforms resembling a tiger and dragon, auspicious forms in the geomancer's idiom.⁴⁶⁷ This idiom overlapped with that of the *Changes*. We are told that Dung fulfilled the prophecy about the east by emerging from *Chấn* 震, the hexagram "thunder" associated with rising, dawn, and the east. Moreover, the "yellow" muddy dragons of Miry Mountain stirred to appear in the sky as *Càn* dragons, heavenly dragons associated with the hexagram *Càn* 乾 and its image of a submerged dragon soaring to the sky. Finally, the Mạc history includes a phrase derived from the *Book of Changes*, "respond to heaven in accord with the people." The saying concerned the hexagram *Cách* 革 or "transition," which is explained in the *Book of Changes* with a "judgement" (*thoán*) that reads, "Heaven and Earth transition (*cách*) with the maturation of the four seasons. The mandate of Thang [king of Thương] and Vũ [king of Chu] transitioned (*cách*) in accord with heaven and in response to the people. How great are times of transition (*cách*)!"⁴⁶⁸ The allusion to the hexagram *Cách* and dynastic changes of antiquity signaled a destined shift in the mandate of heaven from the Lê ancestral lands to the eastern coast, where Mạc Đăng Dung would establish his "Capital of the Sun" (*Dương kinh*).⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁷ E.g., for the auspicious dragon and tiger landforms of Miry Mountain, see *An Nam địa lý thảo* 安南地理稿, Sinographic manuscript, Hanoi, National Library of Vietnam, accession no. R.1921, 45a.

Since early in his career, Đạt cultivated a literary style that incorporated terms and concepts from the *Changes* and *Thái Ất* studies. By the *Thống Nguyên* era, Đạt began to apply this style to poetry concerning prophecies about the ascendance of his native land. As a man from the east and expert in divination arts, Đạt took keen interest in the prophecies. Moreover, by the *Thống Nguyên* era, when the flagging *Lê* Dynasty seemed ready to expire, and *Dung* began to assume an overt grip on authority, Đạt appears to have positioned himself as a “moral hero,” biding his time like the proverbial submerged dragon. During this time, Đạt wrote poetry with language from the *Changes* to reflect on the prophecies and place himself within their narrative as a scholar awaiting his moment in a new era. As with so much of his poetry, Đạt’s expressed his musings on fate and reclusion in conversation with his contemporaries such as in this poem to his former schoolmate, “‘Sent to My Friend,’ written in a year of the *Thống Nguyên* era:”⁴⁷⁰

河汾負笈共從師， 器業將相遠大期。 季世棄才雖暫出， 興王良佐已前知。 仁人望屬投竿日， 元聖功高釋耒時。 久速算來隨所遇， 晚成君莫恨衰遲。	Between the rivers, [we] carried [our] satchels together to follow [our] teacher; [But] the time for [our] careers is still far off. At the end of an era, [our] talents would be discarded even if [we] tentatively go forth; [I] already foresee a prosperous king with fine aides. Virtuous men are the likes of whom await the day when they may throw down the fishing pole; When a prime sage is meritorious and lofty, then cast away [your] plow. [I] have long urged [you] to assess and follow along with whatever comes your way; When [you] succeed later, [you] will have no regrets in [your] twilight years.
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⁴⁷⁰ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Văn Đạt), “‘Ký hữu nhân,’ *Thống Nguyên* niên tác” 寄友人·統元年作 in *Bạch Vân am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình quốc công thi tập* 白雲庵先生狀元程國公詩集, Sinographic manuscript, Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. Vhv.2081, 33a; c.f., *Bạch Vân am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình quốc công thi tập* (Vhv.850), 37a–37b; *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.1350), 1.35a.

Nguyễn Văn Đát began his poem by recalling the time he and his friend shared as students of Lương Ngạn Ích.⁴⁷¹ He did this by likening their teacher to Vương Thông 王通 (584–617), an esteemed scholar who attracted the attention of the founding emperor of the Túc Dynasty 隨代 (581–618), but then, when his policy recommendations went unheeded, withdrew to become a teacher “between the rivers” at the confluence of the Yellow River and one of its tributaries. Despite repeated summons by the emperor’s successor, Vương Thông remained in seclusion until he passed away just before the Túc Dynasty’s collapse.⁴⁷² Đát alluded to Vương Thông not only because Thông’s career closely resembled that of Lương Ngạn Ích, but also because by portraying his friend and himself as students of Vương Thông, Đát placed themselves at the end of a dynastic era. The implication of Đát’s allusion to Vương Thông was that just as Thông trained a generation of scholars who flourished with the founding of the Đường Dynasty, which succeeded the Túc, Đát and his friend would emerge from Lương Ngạn Ích’s tutelage during the latter days of the Lê regime to prosper with the coming of a new dynasty. After suggested dynastic transition in the first line, Đát applied divinatory rhetoric in the poem to reinforce his anticipation of dynastic change. By making prognostic calculations of what was to come (*toán lai*) and foreseeing the future (*tiên tri*), Đát predicted the end of the current dynasty and the appearance of a new flourishing regime. With this foresight, Đát determined that the most prudent thing for he and his friend to do would be to temporarily avoid official service, since to enter officialdom for a fading regime would be of little

⁴⁷¹ Nguyễn Văn Đát’s friend may have been Nguyễn Thừa Hưu 阮承休 (t.s. 1535), who is said to have joined Đát in learning *Thái Ất* studies from Lương Ngạn Ích and later graduated as a *tiến sĩ* at the same time as Đát. Lê Văn Toàn, “Lương Đắc Bằng: Danh nho đạo nghĩa thanh liêm.”

⁴⁷² *Zhong shuo*, “Wen Zhongzi shijia,” 中說·文中子世家, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=226924>.

avail and their careers (and perhaps lives) would be cut short once it inevitably failed. Instead, Đat encouraged his friend to assume the role of a waiting recluse like Lữ Thượng, who fished patiently until finally giving up his fishing pole to help found the Chu Dynasty.⁴⁷³ Only once a “prime sage” (*nguyên thánh*) or first emperor appeared, Đat advised his friend, should they “cast away the plow” and go forth under the new dynasty. In short, Đat believed that it was best to follow along with the times, living in obscurity for the remainder of the flagging Lê regime in order to succeed later during a more prosperous era.

Towards the end of the *Thống Nguyên* era, it became abundantly clear that Nguyễn Văn Đat’s foretold “prime sage” would be Mạc Đăng Dung. In the final year of *Thống Nguyên* (1527), Dung, who by then held sway over most powerbrokers in Thăng Long, had returned to his native stronghold in the east in preparation for his carefully orchestrated transition to the throne.⁴⁷⁴ In the fourth lunar month, a regal delegation from the capital followed the Hàn (Cold) River to the east and bestowed Dung the honorary title of prince. Looking for an optimal place where he might draw the most attention, Dung traveled from his home village near Miry Mountain up Văn Úc River to the busy confluence of the Hàn, Luộc, and Văn Úc Rivers to greet the emperor’s delegation at An Tháp Dock.⁴⁷⁵ An Tháp Dock was in the same district as Nguyễn Văn Đat’s maternal home village, where Đat had spent much of his childhood.⁴⁷⁶ Considering the proximity of Đat’s home village to his mother’s and that the latter was just six kilometers away from

⁴⁷³ Sima Qian, *Shiji*, “Shijia,” ‘Qi Taigong shijia’ 史記·世家·齊太公世家, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/shiji/qi-tai-gong-shi-jia/zh>.

⁴⁷⁴ Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 236.

⁴⁷⁵ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 15.66b–67a.

⁴⁷⁶ Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, “Domea (Đô- mê- a) trong hệ thống thương mại hàng ngoài thế kỷ XVII- XVIII,” *Nghiên cứu lịch sử* 10 (2007): 3–19. An Tháp Dock was located in today’s An Dụ Village in Tiên Lãng District of Hải Phòng City.

An Tháp; in addition to the fanfare of a ceremony that made the east's greatest local hero royalty and Đat's personal interest in the ascendancy of his littoral homeland; Đat almost certainly would have been present to observe the occasion. Indeed, if Đat's mother were still alive in 1527 and she had, as she is fabled, lamented failing to bear Dung's kingly sons, then it would have been then that her regret would have been most acute. It is also at this time, perhaps, that Đat composed the following poem, "'For Fun,' written in a year of the *Thống Nguyên* era:"⁴⁷⁷

休期欣覲聖賢生，	During favorable times, I am pleased to see that a sage
知是天將啟治平。	emerges;
歷數攸歸符舜讓，	I know that heaven will give rise to governance that brings
室家相慶徯湯征。	peace.
白旄西指群狙散，	The calendrical numbers return to the talisman of Thuần's
紅日東升萬國明。	abdication;
自古帝王皆有命，	Households celebrate in anticipation of Thang's punitive
笑他讐敵謾相爭。	campaign.
	White banners point west as packs of macaques scatter;
	The red sun rises in the east, illuminating ten-thousand
	kingdoms.
	Since antiquity, emperors and kings have had their fates;
	I scoff at the enemy, who struggle impudently.

In the poem, we see how Nguyễn Văn Đat's practice of applying divinatory language to his poetry intersected the prophetic narrative about Mạc Đăng Dung's rise to the throne. Đat, who earlier harbored ambition to "harmonize the broth" for the ruler of an eagerly anticipated halcyon era, began the poem by celebrating imminent dynastic change and the appearance of someone whom Đat recognized would become a sagely king. In the third line, Đat evoked numerology to support his determination that the dynastic transition from the Lê emperors to the Mạc clan was as promising as King Thuần's 虞舜 abdication to a non-relative Vũ the Great 大禹, founder of the ancient Hạ Dynasty. Đat then

⁴⁷⁷ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Văn Đat), "'Hý tác,' *Thống Nguyên* gian" in *Bạch Vân am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình quốc công thi tập* (Vhv.850), 32b; c.f. *Bạch Vân am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình quốc công thi tập* (Vhv.2081), 29a; *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.23a.

proceeded forward in time to when the Hạ was in turn succeeded by the Thương Dynasty after King Thang 湯 defeated the last of the Hạ kings, whose moral capacity to govern like that of the latter Lê rulers was said to have dissipated. After implicitly linking these two instances of dynastic change from ancient times to the present, Đat then turned to the specific circumstances of his age. Continuing from his invocation of King Thang's punitive campaign, Đat spoke of similar attempts in Đại Việt to dispel "macaques" (*thư*), a term that implied crafty guerrillas or marauding bands. By this Đat meant Dung's efforts to quell residual resistance to his seizure of the throne by militants of professed Lê loyalty in Thanh Hoa, the ancestral "western capital" of the Lê emperors.⁴⁷⁸ From Đat's perspective, the people of the east welcomed Dung's subduing of Thanh Hoa's generals, which, in 1527, when the poem was likely written, appeared to be a finished matter.⁴⁷⁹ In the next line, Đat drew attention to the victor of this campaign in language reminiscent of the Miry Mountain prophecies, "The red sun rises in the east, illuminating ten-thousand kingdoms." With this Đat crafted an unequivocal reference to Mạc Đăng Dung, who, as we saw in the vernacular Mạc history, associated himself with images of rising in illumination and would cement his likeness to the ascendant sun by transforming his homeland in the east into *Dương kinh* 陽京 or "capital of the sun."⁴⁸⁰ Finally, Đat capped his poem by encapsulating it within the lofty purview of cosmic time, thereby suggesting

⁴⁷⁸ Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 235–236; 242–245.

⁴⁷⁹ Trịnh Tuy, the chief Thanh Hoa general to lead Lê Y's resistance against Mạc Đăng Dung (who at the time still claimed allegiance to Lê Y's brother Lê Xuân) had already been quelled three years earlier. In 1524, Tuy was defeated by forces led by Dung's brother Mạc Quyết, and Tuy died of unspecified illness soon afterwards. Sizable armies led by scion of the Lê family and its Trịnh retainers erupted in 1529, but they were summarily defeated. Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, "Nghịch thần truyện," 12a, 17b–18a. A credible challenge to Mạc control of Thanh Hoa did not emerge until *circa* 1539, when Lê loyalist forces lead by Thanh Hoa's Nguyễn and Trịnh military clans succeeded in briefly retaking the western capital. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản ký," 16.3a.

⁴⁸⁰ Diệp Đình Hòa and Nguyễn Văn Sơn, "Làng thủ đô Dương kinh: nhận xét dân tộc, khảo cổ học." Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, "nghịch thần truyện," 13b–14a.

that Dung's founding of the Mạc was in accord with the natural course of change and dismissing any doomed resistance against this heavenly order as a vain endeavor.

Two months after he received the delegation at Nguyễn Văn Đát's maternal hometown and accepted royal honors, Mạc Đăng Dung compelled the abdication of the last Lê emperor, whom he promptly eliminated, and declared himself emperor. Đát would not formally enter into Dung's service for another eight years. Nevertheless, by the Thống Nguyên era, Đát had already tied himself to the prospects of the "dynasty from the east" and in doing so Đát made himself a tacit but poignant ideologue for the Mạc Dynasty after its founding. As a reputable teacher in his littoral homeland for over a decade before Dung assumed the throne, Đát had promoted the idea of an ascendant east and preached the merits of awaiting its champion. For his part, Dung masterfully orchestrated his transition to the throne, tactfully allowing servants of the former Lê Dynasty to publicly demonstrate their avowed loyalty to the previous regime while welcoming their eventual transition to employment for the Mạc.⁴⁸¹ As a result, Dung's seizure of power was among the least murderous in Vietnamese history.⁴⁸² Part of Dung's success in this regard included his deft use of the civil service examinations to win over talented scholars with connections to the previous regime. For example, in the first palace examinations under his reign in 1529, Mạc Đăng Dung awarded the exam's highest honor of prime laureate (*trạng nguyên*) to Đỗ Tông 杜綜 (1504–?), the son of an esteemed scholar-official against whom Dung had unleashed his assassin eleven years earlier.⁴⁸³ Similarly, the bestowal of

⁴⁸¹ Notable Lê officials who hesitated to serve the Mạc but were eventually converted included Nguyễn Mậu and Trương Phú Duyệt. The latter, especially, became famous for cursing and refusing to participate in Mạc Đăng Dung's coronation, but even he ultimately turned to serve Mạc Đăng Dung. Lê Quý Đôn, *Toàn Việt thi lục* 全越詩錄, Sinographic manuscript, Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. A.132, 3.46a–b.

⁴⁸² Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 236, 238.

⁴⁸³ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản ký," 15.46a–b, 15.73b.

the same honor to Đát six years later in 1535 entailed political considerations. Đát had been a reputable and influential voice in shaping the east's ambitions for the future through his crafting of a literary style steeped in augury and expectation and cast from the purview of an aloof scholar-in-waiting. Moreover, Đát recognized Dung as the east's hero. Therefore, Đát's elevation in the examination and later the echelons of the Mạc bureaucracy bolstered Dung's legitimacy as Đại Việt's master from the east as much as it acknowledged Đát as its prophet. The intersection of poetry and prophecy had bound Đát to the Mạc Dynasty's fortunes just as much as his later disentanglement from such ties would threaten the stability of the dynasty he had once keenly anticipated. For the Mạc rulers, Đát had to remain tethered to the dynasty. Đát could never fully retire. Thus, the Mạc emperor bestowed Đát with even greater rank and honors in retirement than those that he held while at Thăng Long's court. Thereafter, like Vũ Dật Trai, whom Lê Tư Thành had made indebted to the throne by acknowledging his virtue as a recluse, Đát could never renounce servitude to the Mạc. With complete disengagement impossible, Đát chose to make sense of his place suspended between officialdom and reclusion by returning to the language of chance and change as well as his signature image of snowy whiteness.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHÍ LINH MOUNTAIN RECLUSION POETRY

From the White Clouds of the Chí Linh Mountains to the Cold of Snow River.

When Nguyễn Văn Đạt entered officialdom as prime laureate through the Mạc examination of 1535, the Mạc Dynasty was firmly established, and the kingdom experienced relative peace and prosperity.⁴⁸⁴ Mạc Đăng Dung, reviving the Trần Dynasty institution for imperial succession, had yielded the role of sitting emperor in Thăng Long to his mature and capable son Mạc Đăng Doanh 莫登瀛 (1500–1540, r.) since the winter of 1529–1530, and presided as senior emperor from the heartland of Mạc power at Dương Kinh (“Capital of the Sun”), his homeland in the east.⁴⁸⁵ Although ostensibly retiring to the amusements of his youth, namely fishing, as senior emperor, Dung continued to oversee the dynasty’s affairs until his death in 1541. Before passing away, Dung succeeded in guaranteeing the ascension of Doanh’s eldest son, Mạc Phúc Hải 莫福海 (?–1546, r.1540–1546). Thus, under Dung’s disciplined hand, the Mạc Dynasty passed through the leadership of three rulers with minimal disturbance. This period from Dung’s ascension in 1527 to Phúc Hải’s death in 1546 would be remembered as a flourishing, halcyon era that became inscribed in literature as the high period of Mạc rule.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁴ Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 238.

⁴⁸⁵ Lê Văn Hưu 黎文休, Phan Phu Tiên 潘孚先, Ngô Sĩ Liên 吳士連 et al, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 大越史記全書 (printed in 1697, accession number PD.2310), original Sinographic text with translation in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, ed. Phan Huy Lê, Ngô Đức Thọ, and Hà Văn Tấn, 4 vols. (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1998), “bản kỷ,” 15.74a.

⁴⁸⁶ Keith W. Taylor, “A Vietnamese Literary Riddle from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: Hoàng Sĩ Khải’s *Tứ Thời Khúc*,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (2020), 7–9.

During this period of good governance, Nguyễn Văn Đát flourished as well. He was first assigned as editing clerk of the Eastern Pavilion and, after responding to two poems by Mạc Đăng Doanh (r. 1530–1540) to the emperor’s liking, he was promoted to left-vice minister of the Ministry of Justice and grand scholar of the Eastern Pavilion. Soon afterwards, he was reassigned with the same rank to the Ministry of Personnel, the position that he would hold at the time of his retirement.⁴⁸⁷ As grand scholar (*thái học sĩ*), Đát served as an imperial tutor along with the prime laureate of the previous palace examinations (1532), Nguyễn Thiến, whom Đát would regard as a blood brother.⁴⁸⁸ Đát was close to two other prime laureates as well, Đỗ Tông from the first Mạc examinations (1532) and Giáp Trùng 甲澂 (a.k.a. Giáp Hải 甲海, 1507–1581), Đát’s student who earned the examination’s highest honors in 1538.⁴⁸⁹ Aside from these esteemed scholar-officials, Đát cultivated relationships with a wide array of Mạc Dynasty worthies, including Nguyễn Thừa Hưu 阮承休 (1491–?), Đát’s fellow schoolmate under Lương Ngạn Ích who also passed the palace examinations in 1535; Nguyễn Mậu 阮茂 (*t.s.* 1502), a Lê Dynasty high official who was folded into the Mạc regime; Nguyễn Địch Khang 阮

⁴⁸⁷ Vũ Khâm Thận 武欽慎 (1703–? *t.s.* 1727, a.k.a. Vũ Khâm Lân), “Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đát” 白雲庵居士阮公文達譜記 (1743–1744) appended to Vũ Phương Đề 武方堤 (1698–?, *t.s.* 1736), *Công dư tiệp ký* 公餘捷記 (*Quick Jottings When Idle from Work*), manuscript (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), accession no. A.44, 57b; Lê Quý Đôn 黎貴惇 (1726–1784), *Đại Việt thông sử* 大越通史 (1749), reproduction of Sinographic manuscript at Viện Khảo Cổ, accession no. VS-15 in *Đại Việt thông sử*, trans. and ed. Lê Mạnh Liêu ([Sài Gòn?]: Bộ Văn hóa Giáo dục và Thanh niên, 1973), “Nghịch thần truyện,” 3.46b.

⁴⁸⁸ *Bạch Vân am thi tập* 白雲庵詩集, originally compiled by Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Văn Đát), ed. Trần Công Hiến 陳公憲 (?–1817), *et. al.* (Hải Dương: Hải Học Đường, 1814), xylographic text, Hanoi, National Library of Vietnam and Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession nos. R.2017 and A.2256, 1.48a–49a. Reflecting on a poem that he had written during a dynastic crisis that took place in *circa* 1551, when Nguyễn Thiến was considering switching allegiance to Lê loyalists in Thanh Hoa, Nguyễn Văn Đát noted that he had regarded Thiến as a blood brother for eighteen years, suggesting that their friendship began when Thiến became prime laureate. Đát’s poems further suggest that Đát may have already held some official post at the time before succeeding in the examinations himself.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.50b–51a, 1.62a–b. Nguyễn Văn Đát also knew Đỗ Tông’s brother Đỗ Tấn (杜縉 (1514–?), who graduated as *tiến sĩ* in 1535, the same year as Đát.

迪康(1492-?), an emissary to the Minh and Đat's predecessor at the Ministry of Personnel; and Vũ Cán 武幹 (1475-?) of the eminent Vũ clan of Mộ Trạch.⁴⁹⁰ In addition, he interacted with the imperial clan as well as those meritorious subjects who were honored with the Mạc royal name.⁴⁹¹ During his time in service of the Mạc, Đat was entrusted with several special assignments such as diplomatic missions to the Minh's southern territories. On Minh terrain north of the border, Đat received Minh emissaries and befriended local officials.⁴⁹² Đat probably performed these tasks in 1540, when he would have joined Senior Emperor Mạc Đăng Dung on a mission to the north to normalize relations and resolve border disputes with the Minh.⁴⁹³ Finally, Đat's expertise in *Thái Ất* studies, which were highly valued for their battlefield applications,⁴⁹⁴ made him a potent military asset, and Đat participated in several military campaigns to the west and south of the capital.⁴⁹⁵ Consequently, Đat acquired a reputation as a formidable military strategist, a tradition that his seven sons inherited as Mạc generals.⁴⁹⁶

However, Nguyễn Văn Đat's network of interwoven relationships also presented difficult entanglements that became increasing vexing as his career progressed. For Đat, these complications became deeply personal. In 1538, the same year that Đat's student

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., *passim*. Other notable scholar officials with whom Nguyễn Văn Đat interacted were Nguyễn Lữ 阮侶 (fl. 16th C.), Nguyễn Chuyên Mỹ 阮專美 (t.s. 1514), Vũ Ngun 武隅 (1508–?, t.s. 1529), Trần Diễm 陳琰 (1521–?), and Dương Xân 楊縝 (t.s. 1535) among others.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., *passim*. These men included Mạc Đăng Doanh, Mạc Ích Trung, Mạc Kính Điển, Nguyễn (Mạc) Khải Khang, and Nguyễn Bình Đức (Mạc Ninh Bang).

⁴⁹² Ibid., 1.45b–46a; 65a; *Bạch Vân am thi tập* VhV.144, 53a; *Bạch Vân am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình quốc công thi tập* VhV.2081, 35a.

⁴⁹³ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, “Nghịch thần truyện,” 20b–21a. For Mạc Đăng Dung's diplomatic efforts with the Minh, see Kathlene Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia* (Cambridge, UK, 2016), 77–161.

⁴⁹⁴ Lê Quý Đôn, 黎貴惇 (1726–1784), *Thái Ất dị giản lục*, Sinographic text in *Thái Ất dị giản lục*, ed. and trans. Đặng Đức Lương (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa thông tin, 1997), 133.

⁴⁹⁵ *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.34a, 45a, 49a–51b, 53a–54a.

⁴⁹⁶ Vũ Khâm Thân, “Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đat,” 61b.

Giáp Trùng became prime laureate, another student, Lương Hữu Khánh 梁有慶 (fl. 16th C.), renounced the Mạc regime and joined the ranks of Lê allied generals who sought to reclaim control of the kingdom.⁴⁹⁷ Khánh was the son of Đat's mentor Lương Ngạn Ích. In accordance with Ích's deathbed wishes, Đat had adopted and trained Khánh as his own son.⁴⁹⁸ Fostered as Đat's kin and cherished student, Khánh achieved an advanced education that included mastery of *Thái Ất* studies. Armed with this knowledge, Khánh became an effective military strategist for the forces associated with the Lê.⁴⁹⁹ In this role, it is quite possible that Khánh participated in the 1539 attacks on Thanh Hóa, and, if Đat had been sent as a military strategist for the Mạc counteroffensive as was often the case, then such an assault may have pitted Đat (and, perhaps, some of Đat's sons) against his adopted son.⁵⁰⁰ Moreover, Khánh battled with words. Whereas Đat wrote prophetically about the rise of the sun in the east, Khánh crafted poetry about the cock's call to flee to the west and take up arms in Thanh Hoa—the cock symbolizing *Dậu* 酉, the earthly branch (*địa chi*) associated with the west, where Lê sympathizers like Khánh gathered.⁵⁰¹

Other problems for Nguyễn Văn Đat emerged from the marriage of his daughter to Phạm Dao 范瑤 (fl. 16th C.), the son of the powerful Phạm Quỳnh 范瓊 (fl. 16th C.).⁵⁰² The Phams entered Thăng Long politics after Lê Bá Ly 黎伯驪 (1476–1557), a close associate and skillful general of Mạc Đăng Dung, introduced the wife of Phạm Quỳnh,

⁴⁹⁷ Vũ Phương Đề 武方堤 (1698–?, t.s. 1736), *Công dư tiếp ký* 公餘捷記 (*Quick Jottings When Idle from Work*), manuscript (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), accession no. A.44., 28a–29b.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 26a–b.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 29b.

⁵⁰⁰ Unfortunately, not all of Nguyễn Văn Đat's military poems are dated, and none mention 1539. However, Đat clearly had been sent to Thanh Hoa during his career. *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.46b.

⁵⁰¹ Vũ Phương Đề, *Công dư tiếp ký*, 29a; Trần Văn Giáp, *Lược truyện các tác gia Việt Nam* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn học, 1962, 2000), tập I, 266.

⁵⁰² Vũ Khâm Thân, "Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đat," 57b.

then a tea peddler, as a wet nurse for Dung's grandson Mạc Kính Điển 莫敬典 (?–1580).⁵⁰³ Because of this arrangement, Điển and Dao became foster brothers and, as Điển came of age and held greater sway over Mạc dynastic politics, the Phams grew in stature as well. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the Phams harbored animosity towards Dung's old-guard generals, particularly their former patron Lê Bá Ly.⁵⁰⁴ Meanwhile, Ly had formed a marriage alliance with Nguyễn Thiến, Đat's longtime foster brother.⁵⁰⁵ As tensions grew, factions developed between the Phams on the one hand and Ly and Thiến on the other. Đat was thus caught in a conflict between his foster brother and his son-in-law.

As long as Mạc Đăng Dung presided as senior emperor, he was able to bring order to the infighting among his subordinates. However, after Dung's son and successor Doanh died in 1540 and Dung followed a year later, the tenuous stability bound by Mạc kinship ties and clan cohesion began to fray. Mạc Phúc Hải ruled alone without the steady oversight of a senior patriarch, while Dung's old meritorious subjects and recently emergent outsiders like the Phams vied for supremacy. Nguyễn Văn Đat, who learned well from the experience of his mentor Lương Ngạn Ích, understood the signs of dynastic disarray and its concomitant dangers. Whereas Ích submitted his fourteen policy guidelines in the hopes of dynastic repair, Đat, in his capacity as vice minister of personnel, petitioned the throne for the elimination of eighteen wanton subjects.⁵⁰⁶ As

⁵⁰³ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, “Nghịch thần truyện,” 54a.

⁵⁰⁴ Phan Huy Chú 潘輝注 (1782–1840), *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí* 歷朝憲章類誌 (1819), original Sinographic text in *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, ed. and trans. Viện Sử học Việt Nam (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 1992), 6.46b. Lê Quý Đôn cited the profligate behavior of Lê Bá Ly's son Lê Khắc Thận (Nguyễn Thiến's son-in-law) as the source of the Phams' animosity. Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, “Nghịch thần truyện,” 57a.

⁵⁰⁵ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, “Nghịch thần truyện,” 57a.

⁵⁰⁶ Ngô Thì Nhậm 吳時王 (1746–1803), *Hải Đông chí lược* 海東志畧 (*Concise Gazetteer of the Coastal East*, comp. ca.1772), Sinographic manuscript in *Địa phương chí tỉnh Hải Dương qua tư liệu Hán Nôm*, ed. Đinh Khắc Thuân (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2008), 568. Phan Huy Chú, *Lịch triều hiến chương loại*

was the case with his mentor, Đạt's concerns went unheeded. Even more pressing, Đạt's own familial bonds were strained, although it is unknown if the Phạm's were among the eighteen selected by Đạt for execution.⁵⁰⁷ With his voice unheard and seeing that no good would come of prolonging his tenure at court, Đạt begged Phúc Hải for permission to retire to his native fields. The emperor acquiesced.⁵⁰⁸

After withdrawing to his home village, Nguyễn Văn Đạt received heightened status. Mạc leaders came to revere him as the dynasty's preceptor and lavished him with further honors, including emeritus rank as minister (*thượng thư*) of personnel and investiture as duke of state (*quốc công*). They even extended such honors to members of Đạt's family.⁵⁰⁹ Indeed, that Đạt was permitted to retire at all was a remarkable show of deference. (By comparison, the Mạc Dynasty would literally work Đạt's student, Giáp Trùng, to death).⁵¹⁰ Why was Đạt treated with such ceremony and veneration upon retiring? Why was Đạt apparently disregarded while at court, but given greater heed in retirement? As we saw, Đạt's prophetic literary voice and elevation to prime laureate effectively acknowledged him as the dynasty's augur. His retreat, therefore, signaled that something had gone awry. Đạt himself understood that his renunciation of service to the Mạc constituted a powerful denial of the dynasty's fortunes and rebuke of its leaders. Moreover, he magnified the implications of his withdrawal by selecting "Abiding Scholar of White Cloud Hermitage" as his style in retirement. By choosing this name, Đạt aligned

chí, 11.12b. Vũ Khâm Thận, "Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đạt," 57b.

⁵⁰⁷ Phạm Dao is described by both Lê Quý Đôn in *Đại Việt thông sử* and Vũ Khâm Thận in his genealogical record as an impertinent, haughty youth. But although Thận cited Nguyễn Văn Đạt's fear of being implicated by his son-in-law's misbehavior, Thận did not specifically mention Dao among the eighteen wanton subjects. Instead, in a detail found in only one recension of Thận's record (A.44), Thận names a certain "Mr. Nguyễn" as the central figure among the eighteen.

⁵⁰⁸ 乞致仕退休田里，福海許之。Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, "Nghịch thần truyện," 46b.

⁵⁰⁹ Vũ Khâm Thận, "Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đạt," 58a.

⁵¹⁰ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản ký," 17.14b–15a.

himself with historical precedents that spoke forcefully to the moment of his withdrawal by alluding to three former worthies, Chu An and Trần Nguyên Đán of the Trần Dynasty and Nguyễn Trãi. While men like Đạt's student Lương Hữu Khánh threatened the Mạc by writing about the cock's call to arms in Thanh Hoa, and others like Nguyễn Hàng (fl. 16th C.) cast the Đại Đồng territories upriver from Thăng Long as a refuge for anti-Mạc recluses (see next chapter), Đạt's sobriquet, retirement studio, and writings that centered on the ambivalence of snowy whiteness and alluded to these three men created a potent message that Mạc partisans could not easily disregard. In short, the Mạc needed to reinforce Đạt's stature within the dynasty to restore confidence in their dynastic enterprise.

Nguyễn Văn Đạt's decision to style himself "Abiding Scholar of White Cloud Hermitage" reflected his admiration for a cluster of former worthies whose legacies became inscribed through literature around the Chí Linh Mountains just northeast of the confluence of the Thiên Đức (Heavenly Virtue) and Hàn (Cold) Rivers.⁵¹¹ Like the literati heroes before him, Đạt is said to have resided in seclusion among these mountains.⁵¹² Although the time(s) Đạt spent in the Chí Linh Mountains are uncertain, considering that they lay along the main river route from Đạt's home to the capital and that the place held rich historical ties to the former Trần Dynasty, he almost certainly would have visited there by the time he left officialdom in 1542. At the very least, he would have been well versed in the Chí Linh Mountains' literary heritage. As a hermitage for Trần period kings, religious hermits, and unengaged literati, the mountain was steeped in literary allusions about remote heights, drifting clouds, and chilly peaks. As we saw, these images had long resonated with Đạt and, although, as far as allusions pertaining to seclusion were

⁵¹¹ Today they are Đuống and Thái Bình Rivers.

⁵¹² Trần Huy Phác 陳輝樸 (1754-1834), *et. al.*, *Hải Dương phong vật chí* 海防風物誌 (comp. 1811), Sinographic manuscript, Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. A.88, 11b.

concerned, they were not necessarily exceptional in themselves, their concentration at one place, where Đat himself stayed in retreat, and their association with former worthies of the Trần Dynasty, which like the Mạc Dynasty originated east of the Red River, gave them heightened meaning for Đat. Foremost among the former recluses in whom Đat found special significance were the three recluses Chu An, Trần Nguyên Đán, and Nguyễn Trãi. Đat felt that their lives and careers resonated with Đat's own. In 1542, when Đat formally withdrew from officialdom, he recalled the poetry and sites associated with these three men in the Chí Linh Mountains and, attaching himself to their legacy, established a retirement studio in his home village that he named White Cloud Hermitage, the name of Trãi's retreat at Côn Mountain in Chí Linh a century earlier. In doing so, Đat effectively grafted the heritage of the Chí Linh Mountains onto the littoral east. Thereafter, he sought to embody that tradition through the cultivation of his "White Cloud Hermitage" style of poetry as well as through his tactful but tenuous negotiation of his duty to his ruler in Thăng Long on the one hand and his desire to remain aloof and disengaged in the east on the other.

Retired Teacher of Softshell Turtle Pond

The first former luminary whom Nguyễn Văn Đat evoked by literary allusion to the Chí Linh Mountains was Chu An 朱安 (1292–1370). An was an imperial tutor remembered for exceptional probity during the latter half of the fourteenth century, when Trần Dynasty leadership was flagging. Afraid that perverse men were leading An's former student, then emperor, astray, An appealed to the deference becoming of a pupil towards his teacher to petition for the beheading of seven wanton officials. When the youthful emperor could not bring himself to do away with his favorites, An resigned to

live in reclusion among the Chí Linh Mountains.⁵¹³ There, he settled beside Softshell Turtle Pond (Miết Trì 鼈池) below Phoenix Mountain (Phụng Hoàng Sơn 鳳凰山).⁵¹⁴

Writing about the landscape of the Chí Linh mountains, An depicted himself living among the cold and clouds. For example, in a poem about a nearby river valley, An wrote, “Standing alone, looking out on Thanh Lương (Clear Cool) River, the cold wind sighs, generating tender ripples.”⁵¹⁵ Reflecting on his mountain abode and a famous old well below the mountain, An also wrote, “I and the clouds alone have long adored this mountain grotto; in my heart as in the ancient well, ripples do not stir.”⁵¹⁶ Elsewhere, however, An intimated that, despite the remoteness of the mountains, he could still be aroused and sometimes disquieted, writing, “In my mountain abode, returning from a deep noontime dream, a slight chill stirs the courtyard's plum blossoms.”⁵¹⁷

In these excerpts, we see in An's poetry not only images central to Nguyễn Văn Dật's poetry, but also a similar sense of ambivalence. Nowhere is this more apparent than in a poem that An inscribed on the literary imagination of Softshell Turtle Pond that he crafted in response to Trần Nguyên Đán 陳元旦 (1325–1390), who implored An to return to the capital.

An's interaction with Đán not only contributed to the construction of a literary eremitic tradition at the Chí Linh Mountains, but because Đán was Nguyễn Trãi's grandfather and he, too, eventually retired to the Chí Linh mountains, the exchange also constituted the

⁵¹³ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản kỷ,” 7.34a–36a.

⁵¹⁴ Phan Huy Chú, *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, 3.18b–19a.

⁵¹⁵ 獨立清涼江上望，寒風颯颯嫩潮生。Chu An, “Thanh Lương giang” 清涼江, in *Hoàng Việt thi tuyển* 皇越詩選, ed. Bùi Huy Bích 裴輝璧 (1744–1818), xylographic text (Hanoi: National Library of Vietnam), accession no. R.968, 2.12a.

⁵¹⁶ 身與孤雲長戀岫，心同古井不生瀾。Chu An, “Xuân đán” 春旦, in *Hoàng Việt thi tuyển*, 2.13a.

⁵¹⁷ 山宇寥寥晝夢回，微涼一線起庭梅。Chu An, “Sơ hạ” 初夏, in *Hoàng Việt thi tuyển*, 2.12b.

link that connected An's legacy at Softshell Turtle Pond with Trãi's White Cloud Hermitage on Côn Mountain.

Sometime after the senior emperor, Trần Mạnh 陳昉 (1300–1357, r. 1314–1329), passed away in 1357 and Chu An's petition to the young sitting emperor was denied, An withdrew to his retreat next to Softshell Turtle Pond. At that time, Trần Nguyên Đán, a forthright minister of royal pedigree and Confucian sympathies, implored An to return to the capital with a poem titled "Given to Woodcutter Recluse Chu."⁵¹⁸

黼冕桓圭心已灰，	As for [your] embroidered cap and jade tablet, [your] heart has
風霜安敢閉寒梅。	gone ashen.
白雲高壘山扉掩，	How could the wind and frost venture to close off the cold plum
紫陌多歧我馬隤。	blossoms?
蕙帳勿驚孤鶴怨，	White clouds and lofty rolling hills conceal [your] mountain
蒲輪好為下民迴。	gate,
昌期社稷天方作，	While [here] in the sprawling purple corridors, [my] horse
肯使先生老碧隈。	grows
	weary.
	Fine curtains do not stir the resentment of the solitary crane;
	The sedge cart favors returning for the people.
	In prosperous times for the land and grain, heaven moves to act;
	How could [it/you] bear to allow you/yourself to grow old in a
	green mountain recess?

In the poem, Trần Nguyên Đán hazarded the charge that Chu An's relinquishment of his duties, represented in the first line by an official's ceremonial cap and tablet, showed that An had become disillusioned and numb, thereby implicitly challenging An's loyalty and integrity. Đán then expressed his dismay at An's withdrawal with images that became ingrained in the Chí Linh Mountain's literary heritage. In the second line, Đán likened An to the noble but "cold" plum blossom, suggesting both the flower's constancy and indifference vis-à-vis the wind and frost, whom Đán chided for daring to cut An off from the world. By comparing An to plum blossoms, Đán implied that An's principled

⁵¹⁸ Trần Nguyên Đán, "Tặng Chu Tiều Ẩn" 贈朱樵隱, in *Thơ văn Lý Trần*, ed. Đào Phương Bình, Phạm Đức Duật, Trần Nghĩa, *et. al.* (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, Viện Văn học, 1978), 3.163.

steadfastness belied cold apathy. Next, Đán turned to the image that Nguyễn Văn Đát would associate with the Chí Linh Mountains. Đán depicted a landscape concealed beneath rolling white clouds, linking the image of white clouds with reclusion at the Chí Linh Mountains as well as the teacher, Chu An, who retired there.

Trần Nguyên Đán may have admonished Chu An to return to officialdom, but, at the same time, Đán could empathize with An's decision to leave. In the fourth line, Đán contrasted An's aloofness in the mountains to Đán's toil among Thăng Long's purple avenues, suggesting that An had abandoned him to face the dynasty's perils alone, but also, perhaps, that he, too, wanted to get away. Next, in the fifth line, Đán acknowledged An's conflicted sentiments about *xuất xử*, the dilemma of choosing whether to return from the mountains, by alluding to a fifth century satire about an opportunist who "took the road to Chung Mountain," posing as a recluse with the hope of elevating others' estimation of his moral caliber.⁵¹⁹ When the ruse worked and the imposter was granted high position and honors, the satirist scornfully commented, "[His] fine curtains vacated, oh, night cranes resented [him]! The man in the mountains left, oh, morning gibbons were shocked!"⁵²⁰ However, whereas the satirist was rather straightforward in his disdain, Đán took advantage of the agnostic quality of terse lyrical verse to nuance his allusion with equivocation. Because the topic of the fifth line is undeclared, the target of Đán's comment is unclear; we cannot determine whether Đán intended to speak to An, the curtains, or the cranes. Further confounding is Đán's choice of the word *vật* 勿, which can be imperative (do not), simple negation (not), or rhetorical (could it not but?). Thus, the

⁵¹⁹ Alan J. Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement: The Practice and Portrayal of Reclusion in Early Medieval China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 137.

⁵²⁰ 蕙帳空兮夜鶴怨，山人去兮曉猿驚。 Kong Dezhang 孔德璋 (a.k.a. Kong Zhigui 孔稚珪 445–501), "Beishan yiwen" 北山遺文 in *Wenxuan zhu* 文選註, *Wenyuange siku quanshu* digital edition (Hong Kong: Digital Heritage Publishing Limited, 2007), 43.34b.

line translated above as “Fine curtains do not stir the resentment of the solitary crane” could also be understood to mean that, in An’s case, the cranes (and gibbons) would not take offense if An chose to leave the mountains, since An is authentic, not a fraud (Your being absent from within your fine curtains will not provoke the solitary crane’s resentment). But it might also exhort An not to provoke the resentment of the solitary crane by acting like an opportunistic imposter (As for leaving from your fine curtains, do not make the solitary crane resentful). When this line is read in conjunction with the sixth about returning for the sake of the people, Đán’s message is ambiguous. Did he mean to say plainly that An should come down from the mountains and back to the capital? Or did he intend to juxtapose two incompatible ideals of fulfilling his duty on the one hand and remaining aloof to preserve his integrity on the other, thereby sympathizing with An regarding his moral quandary? Đán withheld any resolution of this ambiguity. Instead, in the poem’s conclusion, Đán feigned to defer the question to heaven, asking how heaven, which should be inclined towards action for the sake of prosperity, could consign An to obscurity. But once again the subject of the final line is unstated, so although Đán shifted his consternation towards heaven, his message continued to center on An, implicitly conveying dismay about how An could defy heaven’s beckons. By deflecting the question to heaven while tacitly implicating An, Đán suspended the *xuất xử* question in rhetorical ambiguity. The effect of this was that Đán could compel An to return to officialdom while simultaneously acknowledging the probity of An’s decision to stay in reclusion.

Trần Nguyên Đán’s poem conveyed the tension implicit in the literary landscape at Chí Linh. A scholar-official could disappear to the remote mountains and become a recluse, but not out of dispassion; for a recluse of genuine constancy must remain

internally devoted to his ruler. This conflicted sentiment is revealed when we read Đán's poem together with Chu An's response. Reflecting on himself at Softshell Turtle Pond, An replied:

水月橋邊弄夕暉，	The moon on the water beside the bridge titillates in evening's
荷華荷葉靜相依。	glow;
魚浮古沼龍何在，	Lotus flowers and lotus leaves are tranquil just the same.
雲滿空山鶴不歸。	Fish float in the old pool, where are the dragons?
老桂隨風香石路，	Clouds filling the empty mountains, cranes do not return.
嫩苔著水沒松扉。	Old cassia trees, following the wind, incense the stone
寸心殊未如灰土，	pathway;
聞說先皇淚暗揮。	Tender mosses moistened with water submerge the pine gate.
	My heart is not yet like ashen earth;
	When I hear words about my former emperor, I fervently wipe
	away tears. ⁵²¹

Chu An began his poem with Buddhist inspired imagery, the arousing but illusory beauty of the moon's reflection on water and unperturbed pond lotuses. With this juxtaposition of the mirage's allure and the lotuses' calm, An set a conflicted tone regarding aloofness and agitation. In the second couplet, An acknowledged the isolation of his mountain retreat that Đán had described. There, An saw fish but no dragons. Unlike King Văn's Numinous Pool, no worthy imperial dragon appeared to alight upon Softshell Turtle Pond. Away in the mountains, An was beyond the emperor's reach. An confirmed Đán's observation that An was alone with the clouds in the mountains. Furthermore, in reference to Đán's allusion about the cranes, An determined that they (and he) would not return. However, An pivoted in the third couplet, intimating that he was not as entirely shut out as Đán lamented. The wind *could* traverse along the stone pathway leading to and from An's secluded mossy gate. Thus, An conceded that the possibility of his taking the road back to the capital remained open. At the same time, his devotion to the ruler had not turned ashen cold as Đán had charged. On the contrary, in the

⁵²¹ Chu An, "Miết Trì" 鰲池, in *Hoàng Việt thi tuyển*, 2.12b.

concluding couplet, An confided that he inwardly and secretly longed to return. More than clouds attended An in reclusion. Despite the lotus-like calm of his surroundings, An was accompanied in the mountains by restless worry about the capital and its emperor.

Taken together Chu An and Trần Nguyên Đán's poems presented the rhetorical tension that tugged at the two poets. In the toilsome corridors of Thăng Long, Đán pined for the mountains, where An ostensibly found peace, while An, at Softshell Turtle Pond, remained haunted by thoughts of the capital that he had abandoned. Both poets' minds were taut with ambivalence about reclusion and found expression for this in the landscape of the Chí Linh Mountains, including their cold and clouds. Đán returned to these images elsewhere as well. Ironically, Đán, too, would spend the end of his life among the Chí Linh Mountains. There, at his family estate on Côn Mountain, he would introduce to the mountains another literary theme, that of dreams. It was with this confluence of dreaming and An's pond in the Chí Linh Mountains that Nguyễn Văn Đật could write his aforementioned line, "Jade Creek with a clear, secluded place of its own, allows the pond to enter dreams" (Chapter Three).

Daoist of Clear Vacuity Grotto

In 1385, at the age of sixty, Trần Nguyên Đán retired to the land that, thirteen years earlier, he had requested of the emperor in the traditional Trần family sanctuary in the mountains fifty kilometers east of Thăng Long overlooking the confluence of rivers at Phả Lai from the northeast. There, Đán hoped to pass his declining years and that of the dynasty from the vantage of his ancestors' bygone wartime glories and religious inspirations. He was an old man looking for refuge in the past as much as in the mountains. His land rested on Chí Linh's Côn Mountain, where he had established an estate for his lineage of the royal clan that his grandson, Nguyễn Trãi, then five years old,

would later inherit. Đán's character was such that, in 1372, when he briefly stayed at his newly acquired space in the mountains for the first time, he inspired artisans to flock to his new abode, and, in a month's time, it was completed. Because Đán chose to build his residence around a cavern at Côn Mountain, he called his retreat Clear Vacuity Grotto (*Thanh Hư động* 清虛洞). In front of the cave, Đán's clansmen had inscribed his mountain estate with a stele commissioned by the sitting Trần emperor and composed by the senior emperor himself.⁵²²

Another figure who imparted literary meaning onto Trần Nguyên Đán's retreat was Nguyễn Ứng Long 阮應龍 (1355–1428). Five months after Đán moved to the Chí Linh Mountains in 1385, Long, Đán's son-in-law and father of Nguyễn Trãi, composed "Record of Clear Vacuity Grotto."⁵²³ Long's record reads like a short treatise on *xuất xử* with Đán as paragon. Worthies like Đán, Long opined, know the proper time to go out into officialdom (*xuất*) or take pleasure (*lạc*) in staying disengaged (*xử*) by following the course of heaven. Taking advantage of the double meaning of the Sino-Vietnamese word for heaven, *thiên* 天, which also means sky, Long explained that Đán's naming of his retreat Clear Vacuity Grotto reflected his accord with heaven, since nothing is clearer and more vacuous than the sky.⁵²⁴ Long compared Đán to the Hán Dynasty 漢朝 (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) luminary Trương Lương 張良 (d.186 B.C.E.), who withdrew into obscurity after an illustrious career; while contrasting him with the powerful Tống

⁵²² They were the brothers Trần Kính 陳暉 (1337–1377, r. 1372–1377) and Trần Phủ 陳晞 (1321–1394, r. 1370–1372/1372–1394), respectively (see below). *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản kỷ," 8.7b–8a; Nguyễn Phi Khanh (Ứng Long) 阮飛卿(應龍, 1355–1428), "Thanh Hư động ký" 清虛洞記 in *Ức Trai tập* 抑齋集 (compiled 1833, printed 1868), ed. Dương Bá Cung 楊伯恭 (1794–1868), *et. al.*, xylographic text of Phúc Khê recension (A.134) reproduced in Hoàng Khôi, *Nguyễn Trãi toàn tập* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa Thông tin, 2001), 2.22a–24a.

⁵²³ Nguyễn Ứng Long, "Thanh Hư động ký," 2.22a–24a.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.22a.

Dynasty officials Âu Dương Tu 歐陽修 (1007–1072) and Tư Mã Quang 司馬光 (1019–1086), whose political entanglements frustrated their retirement and denied them peacefulness in their final years, and Mã Viện 馬援 (14–49), whose ambitions and sense of duty compelled the general to serve unrelentingly until his death on a military expedition, only to be rewarded with posthumous slander and defamation.⁵²⁵ In Long’s view, that his father-in-law succeeded in enjoying both a proud career and peace in retirement like Trương Lương without succumbing to the pitfalls of the other worthies showed that Đán had synchronized with the signs of heaven. In Long’s words, “At his start, heaven granted that he meet with merit and renown. At his end, heaven also entrusted him with the delights of streams and rocks. He did without the meanness of not retiring for the sake of succeeding in his efforts, and he did without the lamentations of being forced to retire due to difficulties. In this, his going (*xuất*) and abiding (*xử*), acting (*động*) and delighting (*lạc*) were all done by taking after heaven (*thiên*).”⁵²⁶

By portraying Trần Nguyên Đán’s harmony with heaven, Nguyễn Ứng Long may have been alluding to Đán’s expertise in calendrical studies that traced the astral movements of the skies and his purported mastery of ritual Daoist practices that gave him access to meteorological supplications, including the ability to summon rain.⁵²⁷ In

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 2.23b. After Âu Dương Tu (Ouyang Xiu) was damaged by scandalous but questionable accusations in 1067, he requested to retire, but he was denied by the emperor. Tư Mã Quang (Sima Guang) retired in 1070 to compile his dynastic history, which he submitted in 1085. He then returned to a position in government, but he died a year later. During the fifteen years that he was away from the court, he is said to have suffered insomnia, which he self-induced by sleeping on a wooden pillow. In 49 C.E., Mã Viện (Ma Yuan) died of disease that plagued his army on his final campaign. Thereafter, his subordinate blamed the campaign’s failure on Viện’s strategic miscalculation, and so the emperor relieved the deceased Viện of his title and honors.

⁵²⁶ 今我相公，其始也，天既以功名之會付之，其終也，又以泉石之趣委之，無成功不退之嫌，無退休難必之嘆，是其出與處，動與樂皆以天也。 Ibid., 2.23b–24a.

⁵²⁷ Hồ Nguyên Trừng 胡元澄 (1374–1446), *Nam Ông mộng lục* 南翁夢錄 (comp. ca.1438), available at *Chinese Text Project*, ed. Donald Sturgeon, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=896041#p80>. That Đán was remembered in the fifteenth century for rainmaking is interesting, considering that drought induced famine was a major factor in the Trần Dynasty’s decline. Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 150–152.

celebrating Đán's ability to measure the times, Nguyễn Trãi, Đán's grandson and Long's son, concurred. Trãi, too, recalled that Đán possessed illuminating foresight that led him to seek reclusion on Côn Mountain, a determination that he explained by saying, "Cultured people observe the crux of the moment and act. They do not wait until the day it is all over."⁵²⁸

However, Nguyễn Ứng Long's deferential account and Nguyễn Trãi's curated memory of Trần Nguyên Đán belied a more troubled history. As Long suggested by his mention of former worthies who encountered difficulties and even death at the end of their lives, in 1385, Đán left Thăng Long amidst ridicule and, moreover, perceived threats against his family.⁵²⁹ Đán dealt with these dangers by entrusting his son to Lê Quý Ly, who married Đán's son to his stepdaughter and, because of this, spared Đán's descendants fifteen years later, when Ly killed hundreds of Trần clansmen, extinguished the dynasty, and took over the kingdom.⁵³⁰ Long clearly recognized this, writing of Đán's decision to retire in 1385, "That was [owing to Đán's] perspicacious wisdom about his one chance to preserve himself. If he were not someone who took delight in heaven, then who else could he have been?"⁵³¹ In reality, by 1385, no special acuity was necessary to see that the imperial clan's leadership was flagging, while Ly presented a steady and competent hand. Ongoing bouts of famine and over a decade of fighting against the southern kingdom of Champa, which cost the life of the king who had commissioned Đán's stele, had enervated the dynasty in both resources and spirit.⁵³² In fact, by 1368 in the build up

⁵²⁸ 君子見幾而作，不俟終日。 Nguyễn Trãi, "Băng Hồ di sự lục," in *Ức Trai tập* 抑齋集 (compiled 1833, printed 1868), ed. Dương Bá Cung 楊伯恭 (1794-1868), *et. al.*, xylographic text of Phúc Khê recension (A.134) reproduced in Hoàng Khôi, *Nguyễn Trãi toàn tập* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa Thông tin, 2001), 3.35a.

⁵²⁹ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản ký," 8.8a-b.

⁵³⁰ Ibid.; Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 160, 168-169.

⁵³¹ 是明哲保身之一機也，非樂以天者，又能如是乎。 Nguyễn Ứng Long, "Thanh Hư động ký," 2.22b.

⁵³² Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 157-164.

to the events of 1369–1370 that precipitated the dynasty’s decline, Đán already sensed an impending crisis that seems to have sapped his confidence in his future and that of the clan. At the beginning of 1368, Đán wrote of his prospects for the new year:

三分頭白寸心丹，	A third of my hair has gone white, but my heart is still cinnabar;
世上紛紛萬事難。	In the world, everything is tangled up and calamitous.
自笑不如錢若水，	I laugh at myself for being incomparable to Tiền Nhược Thủy,
年纔四十便休官。	At just forty years of age, retiring from officialdom. ⁵³³

In the poem, Trần Nguyên Đán affirmed his devotion to his clan, but come the new year, when Đán was forty-three years old, his hair was greying, while complex and dangerous affairs confronted the state with increasing alarm. Đán felt his strength waning just as threats to the dynasty heightened. Đán’s will to endure may not have been drained entirely, but he seemed ready to call it quits, too. Đán’s wavering was evinced by his comparison to Tiền Nhược Thủy 錢若水 (960-1003). Thủy was remembered in Sinitic literary tradition as the sort of exemplar of whom Nguyễn Ứng Long would have approved. In one story, the famous Daoist Trần Đoàn 陳搏 (d. 989) and an unnamed monk (actually a transcendent in disguise) tested Thủy’s character and concluded, “He is someone who could audaciously turn back midway through a turbulent stream.” Later, Thủy demonstrated the merit of their assessment by retiring at the height of his career to become a recluse at the age of forty.⁵³⁴ At the start of 1368, Đán, who was a practitioner of Daoist cultivation, sensed the wisdom of making such a move himself, but for the time, dithered. The worries alluded to by Đán in his poem concerned the profligate behavior of the sitting emperor. At the time, Đán served as the grand censor charged with remonstrating Emperor Trần Hạo (1336–1369, r. 1342–1369), who since assuming the

⁵³³ Trần Nguyên Đán, “Mậu Thân chính nguyệt tác” 戊申正月作, in *Hoàng Việt thi tuyển*, 2.16b.

⁵³⁴ Shao Bowen 邵伯溫 (1055–1134), [*Shao shi*] *wenjian lu* 〔邵氏〕聞見錄, in *Wenyuange siku quanshu* digital edition (Hong Kong: Digital Heritage Publishing Limited, 2007), 7.13b.

throne at the age of six, pursued disport at the expense of state affairs.⁵³⁵ It was because of his antics that Chu An had felt compelled to retire a decade earlier. Đán, too, found him incorrigible. The emperor's games left him impotent and, when they finally consumed him in the fifth month of 1369, Trần Hạo died barren.⁵³⁶ Trần (Dương) Nhật Lễ 陳(楊)日禮, the adopted son of Hạo's elder brother, was raised to the throne, despite his lack for years and, moreover, the Trần bloodline, since his natal parents were theatre performers outside the royal family.⁵³⁷ This Đán could not bear. "Begging to whisk away his bones," Đán, in his own words, "took off for the horizon," by which he meant the Chí Linh Mountains, where he knew he would be interred after living out his final days.⁵³⁸

However, after leaving the distress of the capital in 1369, Trần Nguyên Đán could not find peace. Đán like Chu An just over a decade earlier remained concerned about the dynasty's fortunes, and he was disturbed to learn that Trần Nhật Lễ's dissipation rivaled his predecessor. Lễ took after a freewheeling life of entertainment embodied by his birth parents rather than the family discipline and erudition that once characterized Trần rule. When Lễ's mind did turn to affairs of state, it was to execute the senior queen, his benefactress and adoptive grandmother, and moving to terminate the Trần Dynasty by assuming the Dương name and installing his natal paternal lineage as the imperial line.⁵³⁹ Đán long admired scholars of Confucian learning, and he seems to have hoped that with their high-minded code of conduct they might curtail Lễ's dissolute instincts. He was

⁵³⁵ Hồ Nguyên Trừng 胡元澄 (1374-1446), *Nam Ông mộng lục*.

⁵³⁶ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản ký," 7.10a, 7.28b-29a.

⁵³⁷ Trần Hạo's older brother Trần Dục married Trần Nhật Lễ's mother, a talented performer of the role "Queen Mother," despite her preexisting marriage to Nhật Lễ's father Dương Khương and her pregnancy with Nhật Lễ in the womb. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản ký," 7.29a-b.

⁵³⁸ Hồ Nguyên Trừng 胡元澄 (1374-1446), *Nam Ông mộng lục*.

⁵³⁹ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản ký," 7.29b, 7.31b.

disappointed, for no principled scholar of Chu An's caliber appeared to bring discipline to Lê's rule.⁵⁴⁰ Dismayed, Đán wrote to the scholars whom he had left behind:

臺端一去便天涯，	As soon as [I] left the imperial dais for the horizon,
回首傷心事事違。	[I] looked back with a stricken heart at all things gone astray.
九陌塵埃人易老，	Among the dust of the nine corridors, a person grows old;
五湖風雨客思歸。	In the wind and rain of the five lakes, a traveler longs to return.
儒風不振回無力，	When the scholars' ethos does not stir, for [me] to go back
國勢如懸去亦非。	would have no effect;
今古興亡真可鑑，	When the state of the kingdom hangs on a thread, for [me] to
諸公何忍諫書稀。	have left was also wrong.
	Ascendance and decay past and present can truly be reflected
	upon;
	How can you bear to [submit] petitions of admonishment with
	such rarity? ⁵⁴¹

This poem by Trần Nguyên Đán may well be the most widely read among his writings. It was cited by Vietnamese dynastic historians and even registered in collections of the Chinese north.⁵⁴² As such, the literary connotations it lent to the Chí Linh Mountains bear consideration. The poem not only illustrated Đán's anxiety about the dynasty's troubles (the emphasis of the Vietnamese historians), but it also conveyed his frustration, helplessness, and guilt, (which they purposefully elided). Like Chu An earlier Đán was exhausted by the decadence and danger he encountered in the "purple corridors"

⁵⁴⁰ In the extant sources, even Chu An's celebrated students Phạm Sư Mạnh and Lê Quát were silent for this period. Mạnh appears to have been preoccupied in the northwest, while Quát may have not yet returned from Thanh Hoa, where he was sent on assignment in 1366. These and other likeminded scholars appeared to be powerless to revive the dynasty's fortunes, and like Trần Nguyên Đán expressed their frustrations in poetry. O.W. Wolters, "Assertions of Cultural Well-Being in Fourteenth-Century Vietnam: Part II," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 11, no. 1 (1980): 74–90.

⁵⁴¹ Hồ Nguyên Trừng 胡元澄 (1374-1446), *Nam Ông mộng lục*. Phan Phu Tiên, writing in ca.1455, and Phan Huy Chú in the nineteenth century both place this poem in 1385, when Trần Nguyên Đán retired to Côn Mountain for the last time. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản ký," 8.8a.; *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, 7.15b.

I am following Trừng's account, since it is earliest and, unlike the other historians, he provided the complete poem. Moreover, it is improbable that the poem was written in 1385, because correcting the emperor's behavior was not the most pressing concern of the day. Whereas Trần Hạo and Trần Nhật Lễ may have been in need of remonstrance, in 1385, Trần Hiện, the sitting king whose posthumous name would mean "Lamb Emperor," held little real power over dynasty affairs, which were decided mainly by the senior king Trần Phủ (who was absent from the capital in 1385) and Lê Quý Ly.

⁵⁴² *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản ký," 8.8a.; *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, 7.15b; Hồ Nguyên Trừng, *Nam Ông mộng lục*.

of the capital, but, after walking off into the horizon to roam through the “wind and rain of the five lakes,” a metaphor for the boundless domain of untrammelled freedom attained by relinquishing office, his mind continued to be drawn back to Thăng Long.⁵⁴³ In the third couplet, Đán revealed that he was irresolute and torn. He calculated that it would be pointless for him to return to the capital without scholars who would lend their voice to his remonstrations, but, at the same time, he felt ashamed for shirking his responsibility as grand censor to discipline the emperor and protect the Trần lineage. By placing oppositional motions of coming and going in the poem’s inner parallel couplets, Đán captured his wavering and despair. Proceeding from these couplets, in his conclusion, Đán’s desperation can be discerned from the irony of his plea that feckless scholars accept the duty that Đán himself lacked the resolution to perform. Absent this resolve, he spoke with exasperation, but without force to his words. Thus, like his exchange with Chu An, Đán’s poem associated the Chí Linh Mountains with consternation about dynastic affairs and conflicted conscience about the poet’s tenuous disentanglement from them.

Trần Nguyên Đán would return to these sentiments during the remaining twenty years of his life. In the ensuing year after writing the above poem, Đán briefly reemerged to tackle Trần (now Dương) Nhật Lễ’s challenge to the Trần Dynasty and its fallout, but throughout he continued to look towards Côn Mountain on the horizon. In the winter of 1370, Đán joined his clansmen in revolt against Lễ, who inspired little sympathy among the imperial establishment. By the end of the year, Lễ was deposed, and a senior prince, Trần Phủ 陳晞 (1321–1394, r. 1370–1372/1372–1394), reluctantly accepted leadership over the family and its kingdom. For his role in removing Lễ, Đán was elevated to the

⁵⁴³ Phạm Lãi 范蠡 (525–455) is said to have renounced service of Việt King Câu Tiễn after helping to vanquish the state of Ngô to wander the “five lakes” of the south. See Chapter Two and *Guo yu* 國語, *Chinese Text Project*, ed. Donald Sturgeon, <https://ctext.org/quo-yu/yue-yu-xia>.

clan's inner circle of power.⁵⁴⁴ He stayed on in this role for several months, but, after Cham armies from the south devastated Thăng Long and destroyed its palaces with unabated vengeance at the entreaties of the slain emperor's mother, Đán's will for politics withered. Similarly, Trần Phủ, whose labors were motivated more by a sense of clan guardianship as its senior member than personal ambition, lost heart and relinquished the throne that he never wanted along with its ponderous responsibilities to his brother Trần Kính 陳暉 (1337–1377, r. 1372–1377).⁵⁴⁵ It was then, *circa* 1371–1372, that Đán requested his place in the Chí Linh Mountains in anticipation of his final days.

Trần Nguyên Đán's writings from the time he established Clear Vacuity Grotto to his death there in 1390 betray a crestfallen man whose literary vestiges at the Chí Linh Mountains contrast sharply with the homage of his son-in-law. During this time, Đán turned to themes of dreaming and insomnia to convey his frustration and anguish. Whereas elsewhere, in happier days, Đán could evoke sound slumber as a sign of tranquility, he now felt that such rest eluded him and, when dreams did come to him, he found them hollow and illusory.⁵⁴⁶ Sometime between 1372, when he built his retreat at Côn Mountain, and 1385, when he relinquished his duties and retired there, Đán fell ill and, pining for the horizon—his favorite metaphor for the Chí Linh Mountains east of the capital—wrote in his poem “Sleepless:”⁵⁴⁷

官舍秋霜漏轉遲，	In my official's lodging, the autumn frost leaks in late;
故園松菊在天涯。	My old garden of pines and chrysanthemums is off in the
目前盡是關心事，	horizon.
	Everything before my eyes troubles my heart;

⁵⁴⁴ Specifically, Trần Nguyên Đán earned the titles “master of disciples” (minister of education) and “manager of affairs” (grand councilor). Hồ Nguyên Trừng, *Nam Ông mộng lục*.

⁵⁴⁵ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản kỷ,” 37a–38a; Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 157.

⁵⁴⁶ For example, Trần Nguyên Đán had written pleasantly of sleep, “My heart fond of following the tranquility within song, mundane entanglements turn to slumber and rest” 心緒好隨吟裏靜，塵緣須向睡中休 and “Awaking, the incense burner had already gone out three times, while the old villager had yet to carry home his plow” 睡起爐香殘幾度，村翁未把一犁歸. *Thơ văn Lý Trần*, 3.160, 211.

⁵⁴⁷ Trần Nguyên Đán, “Bất寐” 不寐, in *Hoàng Việt thi tuyển*, 2.17a.

病愈不如猶病時。 Recovering from sickness is worse than when sick.

Đán's misery is palpable in his lament that the delirium of illness was more tolerable than the ceaseless worries that tormented him in waking life. The suggestion that he would turn towards the afflictions of disease to avoid the state's ills shows that Đán was a very troubled man indeed. Đán searched for solace in the thought of escaping to Côn Mountain, but his retreat seemed too far off. For the moment, he could only hope to travel there in dreams, but his vexed mind plagued him with sleeplessness. Thus, with this quatrain, Đán associated journeying to Côn Mountain with dreams and insomnia for the first time. These were images that would stick with Nguyễn Trãi decades later, when he returned to Côn Mountain and assembled his grandfather's writings.

In 1428, Nguyễn Trãi traveled to Clear Vacuity Grotto and composed his own reflection on his grandfather's legacy, "Record of the Vestiges of [Master] Ice Flask."⁵⁴⁸ Although Trãi celebrated Trần Nguyên Đán's erudition, morality, and eye for the future, Trãi also recalled from childhood memories and the poems his grandfather left behind at Côn Mountain the despondence Đán appears to have suffered towards the end of his life. Increasingly with old age, Đán felt the weight of his complicity in overseeing the Trần family's decline as well as his uselessness in forestalling it. In 1385, when Đán consigned himself to mull over these thoughts in retirement at Côn Mountain, among his only confidants was a fellow clansman and self-described "discarded creature," who had been deemed unworthy (or too worthy?) for the throne as Lê Quý Ly's influence grew. The poem that Đán's confidant gifted him at that time illustrates their shared long-held sense of foreboding, powerlessness, and resignation, "I am a discarded creature from those years; you are not the exceptional talent of a great house; together we got just as old and

⁵⁴⁸ Nguyễn Trãi, "Băng Hồ di sự lục," 3.34b–36b. "Master Ice Flask" (Băng Hồ tử) was Trần Nguyên Đán's sobriquet.

sick; early on we laid down our fields and gardens to return.”⁵⁴⁹ As the poem alluded, Đán was in ill-health and, even after retreating to Côn Mountain, where he had been looking to retire for over a decade, he continued to worry. For example, in 1388, when Đán learned that the senior emperor decided to remove (and kill) one son as standing emperor and replace him with another ten-year-old son under Ly’s care, Đán reportedly chided, “People say that he who entrusts his son to an old crow does not recognize that the old crow has no love or pity for him.”⁵⁵⁰

In his own account, Nguyễn Trãi concurred that his grandfather was in poor spirits. Trãi recalled that, in 1390, when his grandfather was on his deathbed, his children and grandchildren gathered around him. Although Trãi’s mother, Trần Nguyên Đán’s third child, had preceded her father in death, and Trãi was only ten years old at the time, the vividness and emotion of Trãi’s description suggests that he had firsthand memories of his grandfather’s last days. In Trãi’s recollection, whenever Đán’s progeny urged him to take medicines, he retorted, “With affairs of the times as they are, it is fortunate for me to get to die. How could I further pursue life only to witness calamity and chaos!?”⁵⁵¹ Trãi bemoaned that with Ly’s usurpation, Đán’s words proved prophetic and, by 1428, none of his descendants of the Trần name remained.⁵⁵² Trãi’s account shows that, from the early

⁵⁴⁹ The original untitled poem by Trần Ngạc 陳曠 (?–1391) is 我是當年棄物，公非大廈奇才。會取一般老病，田園早辦歸來。 After Trần Nguyên Đán left the capital, Ngạc feuded with Lê Quý Ly, but the latter got the better of him. In 1391, Ngạc fled fearing for his life, but was captured and killed by Ly’s assassin. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 8.8a., 8.20b–21a.

⁵⁵⁰ 人言寄子與老雅，不識老雅憐愛不。 Phan Huy Chú, *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, 7.16a.

⁵⁵¹ 時事如此，此余得死，幸矣，豈復求生，見禍亂耶。 Nguyễn Trãi, “Băng Hồ di sự lục,” 3.35b.

⁵⁵² Ibid., 3.35b–36a. Of course, Nguyễn Trãi neatly elided his own complicity in Lê Quý Ly’s purge of the Trần family. Trãi joined Ly’s regime almost immediately after it was founded in 1400, and his father Nguyễn Ứng Long (Trần Nguyên Đán’s son-in-law) followed one year later. Trãi was also in error regarding Đán’s descendants. Although Trãi lamented that all of his grandfather’s children and grandchildren (of the Trần surname) had completely died off (公子孫殆盡), at least one survived until early 1429. See note below about Trần Nguyên Hãn (d.1429).

age of ten, Trãi not only associated his grandfather's mountain estate with poetry and reclusion, but also despair, powerlessness, and death.

Aside from "Sleepless," another poem by Trần Nguyên Đán that helped shape Nguyễn Trãi's remembrance of his grandfather and the literary legacy he left behind at Côn Mountain was "Getting Old."⁵⁵³ Writing towards the end of his life, perhaps even during the episode Trãi recounted above, Đán again turned to the language of dreams:

老來萬事付悠然，	Come old age, [I] leave all matters idle,
待漏霜靴亦可憐。	[My] attending water-clock and frost boots evoke pity.
秋晚魚蝦思海上，	Late in autumn, fish and prawn long for the sea;
家貧兒女樂燈前。	[My] household in poverty, boys and girls amuse themselves in front of a lamp.
塵迷病眼書難讀，	Dust befogs [my] afflicted eyes, making books difficult to read,
酒滯愁腸夜不眠。	Wine stagnant in [my] rueful bowels, at night sleepless,
不學五陵年少氣，	[I] shall not vie for the spirit of the five districts' youths;
夢間勁弩響空絃。	In dreams, the cord of [my] mighty crossbow reverberates hollowly.

In "Getting Old," Đán juxtaposed the hopeful joy of youth with his misery in old age. In the first couplet, Đán depicted himself as inert and, therefore, useless. When he looked back at his younger days in Thăng Long, represented by an official's water-clock and frost boots, he felt pity rather than pride. By contrast, in the second couplet, Đán presented images of youthful hope and vigor. Fish and prawn looked towards bigger waters, while the children of Đán's family (perhaps Trãi among them) played gleefully ignorant of the poverty Đán would soon bequeath his household. Đán found no such pleasure in old age. Whereas he could once count on reading ancient books to pass restless nights, now his misty eyes made this impossible and, wine, too, only added further weight to his sleepless grief.⁵⁵⁴ As Trãi later recounted, Đán was too ill and dispirited to contend with the

⁵⁵³ Trần Nguyên Đán, "Lão lai" 老來, in *Thơ văn Lý Trần*, 3.170–171.

⁵⁵⁴ In a poem "Written when Returning [to Côn Mountain?] by Boat at Night" 夜歸舟中作, Trần Nguyên Đán wrote, "Returning by boat on the rivers and lakes, not yet dreaming sound asleep, I share a fisherman's

younger generation in the “five districts” of the capital. Đán could only muster the strength to bellow his former heroic spirit in hollow dreams. Thus, with this poem, the grandfather that Đán bequeathed to Trãi almost three decades after his death through the writings that he left behind at Côn Mountain with their imagery about sleeplessness and dreaming was a downcast hero from a bygone era.

Ghost of a Dream

Nguyễn Trãi’s thinking about Côn Mountain and his engagement with its literary heritage felt the imprint of his grandfather’s legacy, especially the latter’s language about sleeplessness and dreaming. Trãi’s father Nguyễn Ứng Long, too, repeatedly evoked these ideas, but whereas Long consistently pined for Nhị Khê, where he had moved from his ancestral lands in Chí Linh, Trãi’s dreams always led back to Côn Mountain.⁵⁵⁵ Trãi felt a strong connection to Côn Mountain that he harbored from the time he was a child until his final days. As we already saw, Trãi was probably at Côn Mountain at the age of ten to attend to his grandfather’s passing. He returned there as a young adult a decade later after the fall of the Trần Dynasty, when he may have composed his well-known “Song of Côn Mountain”—a signature piece about Côn Mountain’s natural marvels and enclaves for reclusion that placed the mountain of Trãi’s ancestral land as the natal point from which he would emerge from obscurity to take off on a nascent career with Lê Quý

lamp to illuminate ancient books” 歸舟未穩江湖夢，分取魚燈照古書. Bùi Huy Bích, *Hoàng Việt thi tuyển*, 2.16b–17a.

⁵⁵⁵ For example, Nguyễn Ứng Long wrote “I return in dreams north to Nhị Khê, while an old friend is beside his official’s mansion” 歸夢藥溪北，故人槐府邊 and “To where the songs of mountain birds alight, to my Nhị Khê garden alone do my dreams return” 山鳥數聲啼觸處，夢回只是藥溪園. Nhị Khê is now in Hanoi’s Thường Tín District. Long and Nguyễn Trãi’s ancestral land was in Chi Ngại Village, Phượng Sơn District of Lạng Giang Circuit (now in Chí Linh District of Hải Dương Province). Dương Bá Cung 楊伯恭 (1794-1868), *et. al.*, ed., *Ức Trai tập* 抑齋集 (compiled 1833, printed 1868), xylographic text of Phúc Khê recension (A.134) reproduced in *Nguyễn Trãi toàn tập*, ed. Hoàng Khôi (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa Thông tin, 2001), 2.1b, 2.3a.

Ly's short-lived regime.⁵⁵⁶ In 1428, after succeeding in Lê Lợi's effort to vanquish the Minh and establish a new dynasty, Trãi travelled there again. On the boat to Côn Mountain, Trãi composed a series of poems "after ten years of chaos" that captured his feelings about his journey back to Côn Mountain and, once he arrived, jotted "Record of the Vestiges of [Master] Ice Flask" for his grandfather.⁵⁵⁷ Finally, towards the end of 1437 or early 1438, Trãi withdrew from the capital to retire at Côn Mountain, where he stayed until 1442, when he was forcibly dragged back to Thăng Long to die as a consequence of the Lychee Garden affair.⁵⁵⁸

During his time at Côn Mountain late in life, Nguyễn Trãi stayed at White Cloud Hermitage.⁵⁵⁹ This is the landmark that Nguyễn Văn Đật would assume as his namesake in 1542, exactly one century after Trãi's death. As mentioned in chapter two, it is Trãi's

⁵⁵⁶ Thanh argues reasonably that Nguyễn Trãi returned to Côn Mountain in 1400 based on several of his poems. However, she believes that he wrote "Song of Côn Mountain" when he retired at the end of his career, citing the poem's emphasis on reclusion. This is plausible, but as I showed above, Côn Mountain had a longstanding association with reclusion from at least Trần times, so any composition about it would have likely evoked its reclusive legacy regardless of what point the author was in his career. Instead, the poem reads like a poet's self-introduction in the form of an elaborate poetic description of one's place of origin similar to Li Bai's 李白 (701–762) famous "The Difficulties of the Road to Shu" 蜀道難 (Li Bai was raised in Shu, modern Sichuan). Furthermore, the editors of the 1868 *Ức Trãi tập* commented that Nguyễn Trãi had written a preface, which is now lost, and linked the poem to Trần Nguyên Đán. This suggests that it may have been written when Trãi returned nostalgically to his grandfather's retreat in 1400 as Thanh described or possibly in 1428 at the same time that Trãi wrote the "Record of the Vestiges of Băng Hồ." Trần Thị Băng Thanh, "Côn Sơn—miền ản cư trong thơ Nguyễn Trãi," *Tạp chí Hán Nôm* 2, no. 57 (2003): 9–16; *Ức Trãi tập*, 1.26b.

⁵⁵⁷ Following Đào Duy Anh, Oliver Wolters, citing a line by Trãi about having left Côn Mountain for ten years, treated these poems as compositions from early in the Minh occupation, *circa* 1416–1417 (page 60). However, Nguyễn Trãi was in Thanh Hoa as an official before the 1407 Minh invasion, and there is no evidence that he returned to Côn Mountain at that time. Moreover, the composition of the eleven poems examined by Wolter's need not be lumped together at one time. Namely, several of Nguyễn Trãi's dream poems analyzed below that talk about "after ten years of chaos" were more likely written in *circa* 1428; that is ten years after Nguyễn Trãi first appears in the historical record in Lê Lợi's entourage and is traditionally thought to have joined Lợi according to family genealogies (1417). 1428 as the time of the poems' composition is also supported by internal evidence from the poems about warring, suggesting that "chaos" alludes to Lê Lợi's ten-year campaign to drive out the Minh from 1417 to 1427. O. W. Wolters, "A Stranger in His Own Land: Nguyễn Trãi's Sino-Vietnamese Poems Written During the Ming Occupation," *Vietnam Forum* 8 (Summer-Fall 1986): 60-90.

⁵⁵⁸ Phan Huy Chú, *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, 7.18b; Trần Huy Liệu, *Nguyễn Trãi* (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học, 1966), 28–29.

⁵⁵⁹ *Đồng Khánh địa dư chí* (1886-1887), edited and translated by Ngô Đức Thọ, Nguyễn Văn Nguyên, Phan Văn Các, *et. al.* (Hanoi: NXB Thế giới, 2003), vol. 1, 109, 195.

association with White Cloud Hermitage and Đạm's adoption of the name a century later that accounts for the similitude of their vernacular literature collections, which were easily conflated in later generations due to both of them having been composed by recluses of White Cloud Hermitage. Although the only source to explicitly mention White Cloud Hermitage as Trãi's residence is rather late from the nineteenth century, Minh Dynasty sources clearly indicate that the hermitage existed at Côn Mountain as one of three sites commonly associated with Trần Nguyên Đán's estate during Trãi's lifetime as well as Nguyễn Văn Đạm's in the sixteenth century (the other two sites being Clear Vacuity Grotto and Gushing Against Jade Bridge).⁵⁶⁰ The hermitage was located behind a Buddhist temple on Côn Mountain, Smoky Pagoda (Chùa Hun), and may have been initially inhabited by Đồng Kiên Cương 同堅剛 (a.k.a. Pháp Loa 法螺, 1284–1330), an elite monk with Trần royal patronage in the fourteenth century.⁵⁶¹ In 1439, Emperor Lê Nguyên Long 黎元龍 (1423–1442, r.1433–1442) made Trãi imperial custodian of Smoky Pagoda.⁵⁶² After Trãi's death in 1442, local people at Côn Mountain established a shrine for him there, where he is still venerated to this day.⁵⁶³ Thus, by Nguyễn Văn Đạm's time in the sixteenth century, Trãi's memory was a central feature of Côn Mountain's heritage.

Two key factors would have shaped the reception of Nguyễn Trãi's legacy for men like Nguyễn Văn Đạm in the sixteenth century. The first was the anthologist Trần Khắc

⁵⁶⁰ *Ngan-nan tche yuan* 安南志原 (comp. ca.1407–1427), introduction by E. Gaspardone (Hanoi: École Française D'Extrême-orient, 1932), 43; Li Wenfeng 李文鳳 (1532 *jinshi*), *Yue jiao shu* 越嶠書 (comp. 1540), in *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書 (Jinan: Zhailu shuxue, 1996), vol. 162, 675.

⁵⁶¹ Nguyễn Minh Tường, “Côn Sơn: một vùng văn hóa lịch sử,” *Nghiên cứu lịch sử* 325, no. 6 (2002): 45.

⁵⁶² Nguyễn Trãi, “Gián nghị đại phu kiêm tri tam quan sự tạ biểu” 諫議大夫兼知三館事謝表, in *Ức Trai tập*, 3.37a. “Custodian” (đề cử 提舉) was a position first used in 1088 during the Lý Dynasty (1009–1224) as an appointment for high ranking officials to oversee a Buddhist temple's lands and assets. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 3.12a.

⁵⁶³ *Đồng Khánh địa dư chí*, vol. 1, 109, 195; Nguyễn Minh Tường, “Côn Sơn: một vùng văn hóa lịch sử,” 45, 47–48; Nguyễn Thị Phương, *Di sản văn hóa dân tộc Việt Nam* (Tp. Hồ Chí Minh: NXB Văn hóa Dân tộc, 2016). 133–134.

Kiệm's 陳克儉 (fl. 15th C.) attempt to influence readers' remembrance of Trãi by highlighting a particular poem in Kiệm's preface, dated 1480, to Trãi's literary collection.⁵⁶⁴ Kiệm was selected by Emperor Lê Tư Thành in 1467 to assemble Trãi's writings, which had been deliberately destroyed after the Lychee Garden affair, with the hope that preserving Trãi's voice for posterity would restore literati confidence in the dynasty.⁵⁶⁵ Therefore, Kiệm's preface reflected how the emperor wanted his subjects and future generations to understand the man who had crafted the Lê dynasty's foundational statement, *Great Proclamation on Pacifying Ngô* (Chapter Two).

In the preface, Kiệm recalled a story about Trãi immediately after the Minh seizure of Thăng Long. According to Kiệm, Trãi wanted to escape the city with the intention of resisting Minh occupation. However, the northerners, recognizing the threat that he posed, detained him in the citadel.⁵⁶⁶ Thwarted, Trãi continuously recited a vernacular "head-tail" poem, a cyclic chant in which the first and last lines were identical, creating a looping verse.⁵⁶⁷ The poem reads:⁵⁶⁸

谷城南茅蔑間，
奴諾咄少咄啞。
昆隊遁揚埃眷，

Góc thành nam lều một căn,
No nước uống thiếu cơm ăn.
Con đòi trốn đường ai quyến,
B'ngựa gầy thiếu kẻ chăn.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁴ Trần Khắc Kiệm 陳克儉 (fl. 15th C.), "Úc Trai tập tự" 抑齋集序 (1480), in *Úc Trai tập*, 5.1a–2a.

⁵⁶⁵ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản ký," 12.30a; Phan Huy Lê, "Lời giới thiệu," in *Những vấn đề văn bản học Quân trung từ mệnh của Nguyễn Trãi*, by Nguyễn Văn Nguyên (Hà Nội: Viện Viễn Đông Bắc Cổ, Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm, NXB Văn học, 1998), 23.

⁵⁶⁶ According to Phan Huy Chú, Nguyễn Trãi was detained at the citadel's eastern gate. Phan Huy Chú, *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, 7.17a–b.

⁵⁶⁷ Trần Khắc Kiệm, "Úc Trai tập tự," 5.1a.

⁵⁶⁸ Nguyễn Trãi, "Thù vĩ ngâm" 手尾吟, in *Quốc âm thi tập* 國音詩集 (volume 7 of *Úc Trai di tập*), xylographic text reproduced in *Tổng tập văn học Nôm*, ed. Nguyễn Tá Nhí (Hà Nội: Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm, NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2008), vol. 1, 869.

⁵⁶⁹ This line exemplifies the incongruity of fifteenth century Vietnamese with Tang regulated verse that I described in chapter one. The word for "horse" is here represented by two Sinographs, but, in the fifteenth century, it was pronounced as one word *b'ngựa* due to the initial "B-" that has since been lost in the modern *ngựa*. How then did Nguyễn Trãi perform his chant? Did he "stretch out" *b'ngựa* to constitute two voiced positions in the chant—*bà ngựa*? If so, then the pronunciation of the word would have been unnatural. If he condensed them as one syllable, then he would have been left with a line of only five voiced positions, which would leave a chant with alternating five, six, and seven syllable lines. Or did he pronounce *b'ngựa* naturally, presumably something in between one and two syllables? However Trãi recited his chant, it is

娑馭瘕少几禎。
泐黜狹回坤且鯨，
茹渴趣庶礙掇攸。
朝官拯沛隱拯沛，
谷城南芻蕘間。

Ao bởi hẹp hòi khôn thả cá,
Nhà quen thú thửa ngại nuôi vắn.
Triều quan chẳng phải ăn chẳng phải,
Góc thành nam lều một gian

In a corner of the South's citadel, a single hut,
[I] have [my] fill of water to drink, but lack rice to eat.
[My] follower has run off, seduced by someone;
[My] horse is scrawny without anyone to care for it.
The pond is too constricted to release fish;
In a home accustomed to dilapidation, I am hesitant to keep a motley dog.
To be a court official is not right—to hide is not right—
In a corner of the South's citadel, a single hut...

With the benefit of Trần Khắc Kiệm's preface, we can readily imagine a vignette.

Nguyễn Trãi, displaced and alone, is huddling in a corner of the citadel. His mention of the South implies its antithesis and source of Trãi's troubles, the Minh North. In his corner of Thăng Long, Trãi incessantly repeats his vernacular chant for the ears of the local population with a furtive sentiment that is incomprehensible to northern outsiders. Framed in this way, Trãi gave voice to the gloom that beset the South. As Trãi voices his laments, we are encouraged to witness his plight vicariously as emblematic of the entire southern kingdom in the wake of northern conquest. We are led to see Trãi's "follower," perhaps a servant or disciple, as one of many local people who discovered opportunity and meaning in the effort to bring Đại Việt fully into the sphere of "central efflorescence" that

clear that his vernacular language did not lend itself to regulated verse as naturally as Vietnamese would in later centuries. As a result, vernacular poets like Trãi adopted the alternating tones and rhymes of regulated verse but ignored its strictures for line length, allowing for lines of five, six, seven, and presumably eight syllables. In light of this, the often reified poetic forms of seven (or five) syllable regulated verse; double seven, six, eight; and six-eight actually reflect a continuum of conventions that coalesced around alternating tones and rhymes within a free range of line lengths. Indeed, the free alternation in patterns of line length is exactly what we see in the sixteenth century with the earliest extant vernacular narrative, *Việt sử diễn âm* (despite Lê Tư Thành's former attempt to "discipline" the writing of vernacular poetry). On the changes in early Vietnamese, see John D. Phan, "Sesquisyllabicity, Chữ Nôm, and the Early Modern Embrace of Vernacular Writing in Vietnam," *Journal of Chinese Writing Systems* 4, no. 3 (September 2020): 169–182.

the Minh claimed to represent.⁵⁷⁰ But for Trãi, Minh occupation is suffocating and desolate. He like the lonely, abandoned horse is unable to gallop off, instead wasting away with nowhere to turn. Even the fish in Trãi's corner of the citadel feel confined. We behold how the Minh isolated and ruined people of the south like Trãi, who could not bring themselves to associate with the Minh, and yet felt miserable doing nothing. Minh occupation was intolerable, submission betrayed dignity, and inaction was unacceptable. Therefore, the only fathomable recourse was active resistance. This is precisely what Kiệm reminds us Trãi resolved to do by recounting his quest to find Lê Lợi, who would lead the mission to expel the Minh.⁵⁷¹ However apocryphal or at least embellished Kiệm's account may be (he also noted the role of a visionary dream and realizations gleaned from "patterns of heaven" in spurring Trãi on his quest), his narrative is one of northern cruelty and southern resilience congruent with Lê Dynasty historiography. By reading Trãi's poem synecdochally, Kiệm projected the voice of a restive south through its literati hero. In effect, by citing the poem, Kiệm placed Trãi squarely within the *xuất xứ* question and offered final clarity in its resolution.⁵⁷²

Of course, Trần Khắc Kiệm's preface betrays a conspicuous elision, the Lychee Garden affair. This is what Kiệm at the emperor's direction labored to distract from readers' attention. The second factor that impacted the reception of Nguyễn Trãi's legacy at Côn Mountain was his ignoble end. As we recall from Chapter Two, while serving as

⁵⁷⁰ On uses of "central efflorescence" 中華 see Liam Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Embassy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 24, 26, 34 and *passim*.

⁵⁷¹ Trần Khắc Kiệm, "Úc Trai tập tự," 5.1b.

⁵⁷² By the sixteenth century, Trần Khắc Kiệm's representation of the episode was supplemented with recollections of Trãi's encounter with the Minh by a family lineage that claimed descendant from him. According to family lore, Trãi's foremost motivation for fighting the Minh was revenge on behalf of his father Nguyễn Ứng Long. Trãi accompanied Long to Vạn Mountain (Wan Mt., Hubei) after being taken captive by the Minh until Long denied his son's filial impulse to follow him further, commanding Trãi to go back to exact vengeance upon the Minh. *Úc Trai Tập*, 5.2b.

custodian of Smoky Pagoda in 1442, Trãi entertained Emperor Lê Nguyên Long at his estate overlooking the confluence of rivers at Phả Lại, but the emperor died mysteriously on the way back to the capital at Lychee Garden in the presence of Trãi's wife Nguyễn Thị Lộ 阮氏路 (?–1442). Lộ was blamed for the emperor's death, Trãi was implicated, and both were summarily executed in Thăng Long. As mentioned above, local people at Côn Mountain pitied Trãi for the indignance of his death and established a shrine for him at the site where he had lived before being forcibly removed from the mountain. Later, Emperor Lê Tư Thành found Trãi's seemingly unjust murder particularly disturbing, especially since, as explained in Chapter Two, Trãi embodied the Lê state's bedrock ideology of martial and scholarly regional integration that Trãi had embedded in *Great Proclamation on Pacifying Ngô*.

Disquiet about Trãi's death was still raw in the sixteenth century. In his "odes of history," Hà Nhậm Đại 何任大(1525–?, 1574 *t.s.*) lamented Trãi's ending, "Since ancient times, with a virtuous wife, the husband's troubles are few; how could the afflicted serpent have dared to poison the man!"⁵⁷³ Here, Đại alluded to an alternative narrative to Lê Tư Thành's preferred hero—the tale about the retribution of the serpent. As we recall, according to this story, which appears to have emerged soon after the Lychee Garden affair, when Trần Nguyên Đán was about to lay the foundation of his estate on Côn Mountain, he dreamed of a female serpent, who begged him to halt construction long enough for her to transfer her nest to another place. However, by the time Đán awoke, his

⁵⁷³ The full poem is: "His brilliant heart like the Khuê Star produced literature [spontaneously] from his mouth; he arranged heaven (*Càn*) and earth (*Khôn*) anew; since ancient times, with a virtuous wife, the husband's troubles are few; how could the afflicted serpent dare to poison the man!" 心光奎藻口成文，整頓乾坤一度新，自古賢妻夫禍少，毀蛇安敢毒於人。 Hà Nhậm Đại, "Khiếu vịnh thi tập," translated with introduction by Vương Thị Hường, in *Tuyển tập thơ, phú thời Mạc*, ed. Đinh Khắc Thuân, (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2016), 266.

craftsmen had already destroyed the snake's den, killing her litter. She vowed vengeance upon Đán's progeny, and so manifested as Nguyễn Thị Lộ to bring ruination to Nguyễn Trãi and exterminate his entire family, as death for all offspring was the consequence of regicide.⁵⁷⁴ Whether visions of the serpent contributed at all to Đán's insomnia late in life is impossible to know, but that Đại dedicated half of his quatrain in summarizing Trãi's life to the tale shows that tremors of the Lychee Garden affair continued to provoke consternation a century later. Furthermore, the "ode to history" reveals that the serpent's story was not relegated to "folk" storytelling among locals around Smoky Pagoda but rather had become the concern of literati elite like Đại and presumably Nguyễn Văn Đát, too.

Let us return to Nguyễn Trãi's cyclic chant. There is nothing intrinsic to the poem in its words or title that identifies the Minh occupation as its time of composition. It could just as well have been written *circa* 1437–1438, when Trãi, facing successive failures and humiliations, contemplated quitting his career in Thăng Long in favor of retirement at Côn Mountain. By then, Trãi was in low spirits, having been discredited after failing to discipline palace youth, for whom he had vouched, and faltering in a musical rites debacle that was staged by his political opponents.⁵⁷⁵ How might a reader reflecting on the Lychee Garden affair interpret Trãi's chant? Imagining the Trãi of 1437–1438, we see him ruminating with futility and disappointment. In the arena of Thăng Long politics, Trãi is as weak and isolated as his sickly, forlorn horse and as marginalized as his lonely hut. He feels constricted in the capital, as his opponents have left him little space to maneuver like a fish in a shallow pool. With so many setbacks, he is too ashamed (*ngại*) to cultivate

⁵⁷⁴ Hà Nhậm Đại, "Khiếu vịnh thi tập," 265.

⁵⁷⁵ Esta Ungar, "Vietnamese Leadership and Order: Dai Viet Under the Le Dynasty," Ph.D. dissertation (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1983), 192–192, 205, 221–230.

allies, even a dog. He misses his “follower,” hinting at Nguyễn Thị Lộ’s assignations with the young emperor, who installed her in his inner palace.⁵⁷⁶ From this perspective, we do not hear the call of Trần Khắc Kiệm’s man of action but rather the perseverations of an inert, self-loathing cuckold. Rather than capturing the indignation that goaded men like Trãi to action, the words on which his chant turns, “To be a court official is not right—to hide is not right,” reveals the indecision and frustration of a man who is about to give up and skulk away to Côn Mountain. Indeed, Trãi’s words are a neat paraphrase of his grandfather’s conflicted sentiment in the poem that Trần Nguyên Đán sent from Côn Mountain to the scholars he left behind at the capital so many years ago (“...for me to go back would have no effect... [but] for me to have left is also wrong”).

How then might a sixteenth century reader of Nguyễn Trãi’s poetry have perceived Trãi’s literary legacy? Trần Khắc Kiệm’s preface to the imperial anthology of Trãi’s surviving works, to which Nguyễn Văn Đật had access during his time in Thăng Long as a disciple of Lương Ngạn Ích and, later, an imperial tutor himself, provoked the *xuất xử* question with Trãi at its center. By drawing attention to Trãi’s deliberations about whether or not to become a recluse, Kiệm only further piqued sentiments about the scandal that he hoped to quash. This is because Trãi practiced reclusion on Côn Mountain, and storied recollections of his fatal extraction from White Cloud Hermitage still loomed large. A sixteenth century reader like Đật, therefore, could not help but reflect on the ambivalent precedents that Trãi represented for the *xuất xử* question—the nobility of heeding the call of the Lê Dynasty founder on the one hand and the ungraciousness with which he died on the other. After being presented with the *xuất xử* question, such a reader could find further insights about how Trãi’s turbulent career spoke

⁵⁷⁶ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 11.54a, 11.55b. In Confucian decorum, a wife’s relationship to her husband was described as “following” him.

to this perennial dilemma by looking to Trãi's writings themselves. As evident from the "head-tail" poem, Trãi like his grandfather was conflicted about *xuất xứ*. And he, too, expressed his thoughts through dreams of Côn Mountain.

Beginning with the dramatic end of Lê Quý Ly's regime in 1407, Nguyễn Trãi repeatedly described himself as a downcast vagabond.⁵⁷⁷ The short-lived dynasty that he served was no more, and his family was scattered or dead. His journeying was certainly dramatic. He accompanied his captive father to the Minh north until Nguyễn Ứng Long eventually denied his eldest son's filial impulse to follow him and sent Trãi back to the south.⁵⁷⁸ Later, Trãi's younger brother, Nguyễn Phi Hùng 阮飛熊 (fl. 15th C.), who had stayed on in attendance of their father, is said to have returned to the Việt south and, in accordance with their father's final wishes, buried Long's remains at Bái Vọng Mountain 拜望山, a peak within eyeshot of Côn Mountain with the meaningful name "Gazing Out With Obeisance."⁵⁷⁹ During the many travels of his vicissitudinous career, Trãi seems to have taken solace in the thought that his wanderings would someday come to an end at the Chí Linh Mountains, where both his father and grandfather were laid to rest.

Returning to the Việt south in *circa* 1408, Nguyễn Trãi likened himself to fleabane whirling in the winds of change.⁵⁸⁰ The experience of his travels and displacement felt to Trãi like a spinning dream. These dreams, Trãi hoped, would take him back to Côn

⁵⁷⁷ O. W. Wolters, "A Stranger in His Own Land: Nguyễn Trãi's Sino-Vietnamese Poems Written During the Ming Occupation."

⁵⁷⁸ Nguyễn Ứng Long's genealogy records that Nguyễn Trãi parted with his father at Vạn Mountain near the ancient city of Tương Dương (Wan Mt. in Xiangyang, Hubei). The genealogy of Phạm Anh Vũ, who claimed to be a surviving son of Trãi, says that Trãi traveled all the way to the northern capital (Beijing). *Ức Trai tập*, 5.2. However, Trần Huy Liệu may be correct in his suspicion that these stories embellish the less exuberant possibility that Trãi only accompanied his father to the Minh border at the Southern Pass (Pengxiang, Guangxi). Trần Huy Liệu, *Nguyễn Trãi*, 21.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ức Trai tập*, 5.2b.

⁵⁸⁰ Nguyễn Trãi, "Ký hữu" 寄友, in *Ức Trai tập*, 1.5a. The third watch is 23:00–01:00, midnight. This poem is clearly linked to the poem below, which I am dating *circa* 1408.

Mountain. On the road back to the south, he wrote, “In the rains of the third watch (of the night), I return to my old garden in a dream.”⁵⁸¹ Similarly, in a companion poem that he also wrote during his travels, Trãi expressed his disorientation at having returned to the Minh dominated South with thoughts of dreaming.

上國觀光萬里途， 天涯屈指歲云徂。 夢中水遠山還遠， 別後書無雁亦無。 客夜不眠千感集， 清時誰料寸忠孤。 南州舊識如相問， 報道今吾非故吾。	Gazing towards the light upon the ten-thousand <i>ly</i> road to the Exalted Kingdom, Towards the horizon, [I] count on [my] fingers the passing years. In my dreams, the rivers are distant and the mountains further still, After parting, neither letters nor geese. [I am] a traveler at night, sleepless as a thousand emotions converge, In pacific times, who would suspect that [I] am alone with a scintilla of loyalty. When old acquaintances in the Southern Province seem to ask, [I] say “Am I not now the same person of old?” ⁵⁸²
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Trãi’s reference to the Exalted Kingdom, an honorific term for Minh China, and the Southern *Province* as well as his personal transformation and estrangement vis-à-vis former acquaintances makes it clear that he is speaking of his return journey to the Việt South during the Minh occupation *circa* 1408. After his return, Trãi never quite felt at home in the South again. As reflected in his description of a remote landscape within elusive dreams, Trãi felt like a lonely, restless sojourner in an unfamiliar, misty world.⁵⁸³ His dreamlike wanderings, however, were not without a final destination. There was one place where Trãi could still find a sense of belonging anchored in the past he knew, his family’s estate at Côn Mountain.

In ensuing years, Nguyễn Trãi often fantasized about returning to Côn Mountain, which summoned for him memories of a bygone past as well as his forebears and their

⁵⁸¹ 故園歸夢三更雨. Ibid.

⁵⁸² Nguyễn Trãi, “Đồ trung ký hữu” 途中寄友, in *Ức Trai tập*, 1.5a–b.

⁵⁸³ O. W. Wolters, “A Stranger in His Own Land: Nguyễn Trãi’s Sino-Vietnamese Poems Written During the Ming Occupation.”

language of dreams. For example, he wrote, “Thoughts entangled with the chrysanthemums along the three paths of the old garden; a ghost of dreams, night after night, mounts the sampan home” and “I vividly recall my past journey [to Côn Mt.]; [but] things of the past can only be found as the ghost of a dream.”⁵⁸⁴ Even seeing a painting of Côn Mountain was enough to evoke thoughts of journeying there in dreams. On a painting of the mountain, which he had personally solicited, Trãi inscribed, “At midlife, it is a waste to climb remote mountains and ravines; after the chaos, I’ll expend dreams in search of my ancestral land.”⁵⁸⁵

These sentiments were most poignant for Nguyễn Trãi in 1428, when at least one, if not all of the three poems excerpted above were composed.⁵⁸⁶ As we recall from Trãi’s “Record of the Vestiges of [Master] Ice Flask,” after the founding of the Lê Dynasty, one of Trãi’s first matters of business was to return to Côn Mountain and attend to his forebears’ graves, including those of his father Nguyễn Ứng Long and grandfather Trần Nguyên Đán. It was only natural that, during his boat ride along Thiên Đức River from Thăng Long to Côn Mountain, Trãi reminisced about his forefathers’ lives through poems that revisited their language of dreams. “After ten years of chaos,” Trãi’s phrase for Lê Lợi’s turbulent decade-long campaign against the Minh, the last of the fighting had yet to

⁵⁸⁴ 緬想故園三徑菊，夢魂夜夜上歸舫，Nguyễn Trãi, “Thu nhật ngẫu thành” 秋日偶成, in *Ức Trai tập*, 1.18b; 舊遊歷歷余曾記，往事重尋只夢魂，Nguyễn Trãi, “Chu trung ngẫu thành” 舟中偶成, in *Ức Trai tập*, 1.11a.

⁵⁸⁵ Nguyễn Trãi, “Khất nhân họa Côn Sơn đồ” 乞人畫崑山圖, in *Ức Trai tập*, 1.13b–14a.

⁵⁸⁶ “Chu trung ngẫu thành” (Happened to Be Completed on a Boat) appears to have been written as part of a series during Nguyễn Trãi’s boat ride to Côn Mt. in 1428. “Thu nhật ngẫu thành” (Happened to Be Completed on an Autumn Day) appears to have been written in the same vein as the previous poem, but lacks explicit mention of Trãi’s physical travel to the mountain. As for “Khất nhân họa Côn Sơn đồ” (Soliciting a Painter for a Picture of Côn Mt.), “one hundred years” was the literary reckoning of a full life, so midlife would be about fifty years of age. Trãi was forty-eight years old in 1428, but we don’t know specifically in which of Trãi’s middle aged years he wrote the poem.

come to an end when Trãi wrote “Composed When Returning to Côn Mountain by Boat”:⁵⁸⁷

十年飄轉嘆蓬萍，	Ruing ten years of fleabane and duckweed whirling in the wind,
歸思搖搖日似旌。	With thoughts of return, lurching through days as [uncertain as
幾托夢魂尋故里，	the fluttering of] a flag,
空將血淚洗先塋。	[I] consign the ghost of a dream to seek out my old village,
兵餘斤斧嗟難禁，	And wash my forebears' graves with hollow blood and tears.
客裡江山只此情。	Lamenting that soldiers' surfeit of axes are difficult to enjoin,
鬱鬱寸懷無奈處，	[I have] only the sentiments of a sojourner through rivers and
船窓推枕到天明。	mountains.
	With nowhere to cast the gloom of [my] bosom,
	[I] press against the ship's window as a pillow until the sky
	comes alight.

After the whirlwind of events that reeled through the previous decade, Nguyễn Trãi, on the unsteady boat to Côn Mountain, felt like a lingering ghost careening through an unfamiliar, even eerie world. Emerging from such turmoil, Trãi experienced what we might call survivor's guilt. As we saw in his account of his grandfather's legacy, in 1428, Trãi lamented that none of his grandfather's patrilinear descendants remained, and Trãi's father, too, had since been interred.⁵⁸⁸ Even the Trần uncles who managed to survive with Trãi as part of Lê Quý Ly's regime and shared in the displacement caused by its collapse had since fallen (see below). When Trãi dismounted his boat and ascended Côn Mountain, he continued to feel disoriented. Once he reached his family's old estate, he reported, “The only remaining vestige of [my] family's former existence is a blue woolen

⁵⁸⁷ Nguyễn Trãi, “Quy Côn Sơn chu trung tác”, in *Ức Trai tập*, 1.10b

⁵⁸⁸ Actually, in 1428, at least one descendant of Trần Nguyên Đán, his grandson Trảng Nguyên Hãn (1390–1429) was still alive. Hãn was one of Lê Lợi's foremost generals who, realizing that as a Trần descendant he could hardly coexist alongside the new emperor, retired of his own accord once Lê Lợi ascended the throne. Nevertheless, in early 1429, Hãn was executed because of suspicion that he was plotting rebellion, despite having renounced his claim of Trần royalty by assuming the Lê surname. *Khâm Định thông giám cương mục* (comp. 1856–1881), xylographic text (A.1/1–9) with translation by Viện Sử Học, (Hà Nội: NXB Giáo Dục, 1998), 4.15.20a; Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử* (comp. 1749), translated Ngô Thế Long (Viện Sử Học, NXB Văn hóa Thông tin, 2007), 234. Hãn is said to have had three wives, two of who gave birth to a total of three sons, who changed their surnames to avoid their father's fate. Another member of the royal Trần clan and contemporary of Hãn, Trần Nguyên Tôn, may also have been Đán's descendant, considering the semblance of his name to those of Đán and Hãn.

blanket; [after] chaos and displacement, for the moment now, my life is intact; a hundred years of [life] drifting through the world are truly like a dream...”⁵⁸⁹ Finally back at home, Trãi apparently saw himself in the blanket, an out of place relic from a former era.⁵⁹⁰ Even the landscape of his mountain estate seemed foreign, as Trãi described, “Exactly ten years ago, I left my family’s mountain; returning, half of the pines and chrysanthemums have since decayed... passing through my homeland at last is like coming upon a dream; with shields and halberds yet to be laid to rest, I am lucky to remain whole...”⁵⁹¹ Like the dilapidated plants of Trãi’s old garden, Trãi sensed that he embodied the ruins of his family’s former existence.

On Côn Mountain in 1428, Trãi no doubt hoped to repair the bind that connected him to his father and grandfather by longing for the day when he, too, would spend his final days on the mountain, where his ancestors lay.⁵⁹² It was probably with such thoughts that Trãi, in another poem about dreaming, “In a Dream of the Mountain,” imagined himself at his grandfather’s Clear Vacuity Grotto mounting a yellow crane to the realm of transcendents.⁵⁹³ In this poem, Trãi, like the former Trần emperors, alluded to his grandfather’s affinity for Daoist teachings. But whereas Trần Nguyên Đán tended to associate himself with Daoism, Trãi cast his dreams in a distinctly Buddhist tone.⁵⁹⁴ For example, sometime after 1437, when Trãi finally realized his wish to retire to Côn

⁵⁸⁹ Nguyễn Trãi, “Hạ nhật mạn thành” 夏日漫成, *Ức Trai tập*, 1.19b.

⁵⁹⁰ Nguyễn Trãi probably meant “blue woolen blanket” figuratively to mean scant, meagre family heirlooms. According to one tale about Vương Hiến Chi (Wang Xianzhi 王獻之, 344–386), the calligrapher once begged a band of robbers to spare his only family heirloom, a blue woolen blanket. Fang Xuanlin 房玄齡 (579–648), *Jin shu* 晉書, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=915967>.

⁵⁹¹ Nguyễn Trãi, “Loạn hậu đảo Côn Sơn cảm tác” 亂後到崑山感作, *Ức Trai tập*, 1.10b.

⁵⁹² Like Trần Nguyên Đán, Nguyễn Trãi premeditated his retirement on Côn Mountain. In both poems cited in the previous paragraph, Trãi pined about someday building a hermitage for himself the mountain.

⁵⁹³ The line in question reads, “Last night, the moon was bright, and the sky seemed as if water; [I] dreamed that I rode a yellow crane atop the transcendents’ platform.” 昨夜月明天似水，夢騎黃鶴上仙壇. Nguyễn Trãi, “Mộng sơn trung” 夢山中, *Ức Trai tập*, 1.2a–b.

⁵⁹⁴ Võ Văn Ái, *Nguyễn Trãi Sinh Thức Và Hành Động* (Paris: Quê Mẹ, 1981, 2015).

Mountain, he wrote, “[Existence] in this world is but the lingering of a millet dream; [I] have realized that all things ultimately come to naught...”⁵⁹⁵ The effect of this Buddhist sentimentality in Trãi’s dream poetry was a pervasive pessimism that reflected his disorientation amidst the residue of decades of vertiginous change, his haunting sense of sojourning through an unfamiliar, mercurial world, and the futility of his toil within it.⁵⁹⁶ In stark contrast to Lê Tư Thành’s unrelenting champion confident in the righteousness of his literary pursuits on behalf of the dynasty, the Trãi who loitered about poetic dreamscapes denied the purposefulness of the scholar’s trade. Whereas Trần Nguyên Đán’s melancholy was a function of his loyalty—he rued the twilight of his dynasty—Nguyễn Trãi’s doleful tone echoed the disillusionment of a man who consigned himself to lethargic somnambulance through a residual bad dream that stubbornly refused to end.

On the disconsolation in Trãi’s dream poetry, the judgment of Oliver Wolters, on whose observations I have repeatedly relied, can hardly be improved:

“The poems contain a cluster of related associations of purposelessness and uselessness: rejection of education and therefore of an educated man’s responsibilities to society; numbness to the extent of being unable to respond to the appeal of the Vietnamese landscape; indifference to the challenge of events; surrender to a dream-like existence; contemplation of the prospect of premature and therefore unearned, retirement.”⁵⁹⁷

Dr. Wolters was keen to the disillusionment and alienation evident in Trãi’s poems. Trãi was, in Wolters words, “a stranger in his own land.”⁵⁹⁸ What I might add, though, is that Trãi’s poetry about dreams further reflected alienation from himself. The dreamscape of Trãi’s post-1407 world was not surreal. On the contrary, the landscape of his homeland was all *too* familiar. However it had changed, everything he rediscovered at Côn

⁵⁹⁵ Nguyễn Trãi, “Ngẫu thành” 偶成, *Ức Trai tập*, 1.2b.

⁵⁹⁶ O. W. Wolters, “A Stranger in His Own Land: Nguyễn Trãi’s Sino-Vietnamese Poems Written During the Ming Occupation.”

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Mountain from the pines and chrysanthemums and blue blanket to his grandfather's grotto was undeniably the same as those of yesteryear, but now Trãi felt out of place among them. Trãi had changed, and he was a stranger to himself. Thus, Trãi could not but ventriloquize his own self-disaffection in all things familiar that *seemed* to ask (*như tương vấn* 如相問), "Am I not now the same person of old?"

What especially made Nguyễn Trãi's dream poems so haunting for fifteenth century readers like Lê Tư Thành and those of the sixteenth century like Nguyễn Văn Dật was their uncanniness.⁵⁹⁹ Here, by "uncanny" I mean the uneasy feeling of being set beside oneself to witness the dissonance between one's internalized views about cherished values, ideals, worldview, selfhood, and purpose and the paler realities of actual circumstance. Concomitant to this introspective gaze from outside oneself is defamiliarization with oneself and disorientation with one's previously familiar world with the result of finding oneself self-consciously proceeding out of step with the world, out of touch with oneself, and at a loss for meaningful direction.

We see this uncanniness in Nguyễn Trãi poetry. He repeatedly confused the familiar and the strange, dreamscape and reality. From his poem on the Thiên Đức River in 1428, "Ruing ten years of fleabane and duckweed whirling in the wind; with thoughts of return, lurching through days as [uncertain as the fluttering of] a flag; [I] consign the ghost of a dream to seek out my old village and wash my forebears' graves with hollow blood and tears"—we cannot quite tell whether Trãi is projecting his ghost as he dreams or whether he himself on the river journey is the hollow (*không* 空) ghost haunting the "rivers and mountains" on the way to reach his dead ancestors. Waking and dreaming

⁵⁹⁹ Sigmund Freud. "The 'Uncanny,'" *Writings on Art and Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 193–229.

collapse in a familiar yet distant space. The whole poem conjures an eerie, suspended dream journey wanting for daylight (“... until the sky comes alight”).

It is this confusion of the realms of wakefulness and dreaming, living and the dead that necessitates my translation of Trãi’s *mộng hồn* as the indeterminate “ghost of a dream” rather than possibilities of less abstruse subjectivity like “(as a) ghost in a dream,” “(my) soul through a dream” or “(my) dreaming spirit.” “Ghost of a dream” captures the specious substance of the scene as well as the (third person) out-of-body sensation of a poet dissociated from himself. Indeed, I would argue that Trãi repeatedly employed the term to this effect. We have already seen several examples of Trãi’s use of *mộng hồn* above. To cite another example by way of illumination, Trãi wrote in another poem, “As the autumn wind scatters leaves, choked with sentiments—night rain, a dim lamp, the sojourning (*khách*) ghost of a dream (*mộng hồn*).”⁶⁰⁰ In poems like this, the meaning of *mộng* 夢 is straightforward, “dream,” but *hồn* 魂 requires further interpretation. In Daoist contexts such as Trãi’s dream of the yellow crane, *hồn* can be the ethereal spirit or “cloudsoul” that like clouds in the sky is inclined to wander and, once dislodged from the corporeal body, can traverse on mystic flights or visionary journeys.⁶⁰¹ However, Trãi’s *hồn* was not taken to wanderlust but rather lost in raw liminality. As we have seen, in 1428 especially, Trãi contemplated death and the dead, and this bespeaks a different sort of journeying. Trãi’s was the afflicted *hồn* associated with the precarious journey to the afterlife and, whenever spited in this, the lingering restive and often pernicious presence of “forlorn ghosts” (*cô hồn*) and “roaming ghosts” (*du hồn*) that were reflected in early

⁶⁰⁰ 秋風落葉羈情思，夜雨青燈客夢魂。Nguyễn Trãi, “Thu dạ khách cảm” 秋夜客感, *Ức Trai tập*, 1.15b.

⁶⁰¹ Robert Ford Campany, *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), 73–74; Livia Kohn, *Daoism and Chinese Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Three Pines Press, 2001), 54, 63.

Chinese funerary rites and captured in the Sinitic literary tradition by lyrical songs like “Calling Back the *Hòn*” 招魂.⁶⁰² The latter poem, immortalized in the corpus of classical learning, described the shaman’s pleas on behalf of an afflicted man on the verge of death (or perhaps just beyond the threshold of death) for his lost souls’ return from roaming afar.⁶⁰³ As she began her summons, the shaman, after drawing a connection between dreams and the wanderings of lost souls, cried out to the afflicted’s *hòn*, “Oh *Hòn*, come back! You have abandoned your ordinary torso. Why wander the four directions?”⁶⁰⁴ The song thus described a lost and lonely *hòn* and likened its aimless journeying to dreaming. Trãi’s was such a *hòn*. In Trãi’s poems like the one cited above, he qualified “ghost of a dream” with *khách* 客—a guest, an outsider, and Oliver Wolters’ “stranger.” This means that Trãi’s *hòn* was not the familiar, intimate “cloudsoul” bound towards heaven and the ancestors, but rather a stray drifter, clearly a ghost. The unease with which Trãi’s *hòn* loitered through a familiar yet somehow inexorably distant space showed the tenuousness of its belonging in Trãi’s ancestral land. Out of place, Trãi’s “ghost of a dream” was as if sojourning there, and, in this sense, haunting. Finally, Trãi’s “ghost of a dream” was a torn soul, literally. As “Calling Back the *Hòn*” described, the *hòn* of the afflicted at the threshold of death is severed from corporeal existence and scattered along

⁶⁰² Jue Guo, “Concepts of Death and the Afterlife Reflected in Newly Discovered Tomb Objects and Texts from Han China,” in *Mortality in Traditional Chinese Thought*, ed. Amy Olberding and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 88–90; Michèle Pirazzoli-T’Serstevens, “Death and the Dead: Practices and Images in the Qin and Han,” in *Early Chinese Religion*, ed. John Lagerwey and Marc. Kalinowski, trans. Margaret McIntosh (Leiden: Brill, 2009), vol. 1, 969, 975–7.

⁶⁰³ David Hawkes, *Ch’u Tz’u: The Songs of the South, An Ancient Chinese Anthology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 101–109; Gopal Suk, ed. and trans., *The Songs of Chu: an Ancient Anthology of Works by Qu Yuan and Others*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 168–179.

⁶⁰⁴ My translation of 魂兮歸來！去君之恆乾，何為四方些？ The (female) shaman was Shaman Yang 巫陽 (“Shaman of the Sunlight World”). Wang Yi 王逸 (89–158), ed.(?), *Chu ci* 楚辭, Ming xylographic reproduction of Song edition, *Sibu congkan* (Nanjing: Jiangnan Tushuguan), available at *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=en&file=77937&page=39>; Gopal Suk, *The Songs of Chu: an Ancient Anthology of Works by Qu Yuan and Others*, 171, 178n4–5.

with other soul-stuff.⁶⁰⁵ Trãi's invocation of "ghost of a dream" fragmented his person and drew him outside himself. Trãi's *hồn* was uncanny in that it destabilized his sense of self and compelled him to witness himself in his eerily familiar yet evidently transformed native place remotely from without.

It is not difficult to imagine why Nguyễn Trãi felt disembodied. After cheating death, he emerged from the chaos of the Minh occupation not only physically severed from the people of the past, most notably his father and grandfather, but also, precisely because death's whim had spared him, suspended from communion with them in spirit as well. He was left behind. As he described in his poems, Trãi's corporeal body may have remained intact, but his *hồn* drifted towards the place of his ancestors, a destination that could only be reached with his own passing. Trãi's fractured soul lingered on as if suspended in a bad dream at the threshold of waking, an ending as inevitable as death. But until then, Trãi could only muddle on tentatively like a ghost roving through a dream at the cusp of a waking that would not be so forthcoming.

"Ghost of a dream" aside, Nguyễn Trãi conveyed the uncanniness of his poems most keenly through allusion to two dream stories from the "transmitted wonders" literature. These stories inform us about how Trãi likely imagined his dream wanderings as well as how his readers likely interpreted them. Both stories are notable for bridging the realm of imagination and fantasy on the one hand and the mundane world on the other. What makes them uncanny is the unmistakable semblance, even synchronization between these worlds. Both tales detail the life story of a protagonist that unfolds (unbeknownst to him) in a dream, which is circumscribed by the events of a pivotal episode from his waking life. The description of the dream elements mirrors those of the stories'

⁶⁰⁵ Wang Yi, ed.(?), *Chu ci* 楚辭.

beginnings and endings, which frame the dream and take place in the waking world. Moreover, the narrative style of the inner dream biographies reflect the conventions of traditional history writing in their use of real or real-sounding geography, dates, titles and ranks, characters, historical events, and the generic constituents of bibliography and genealogy writing (marriage, patron, career ups and downs, death, descendants, posthumous assessment, etc.).⁶⁰⁶ In fact, the authors of both were practiced historians and biographers.⁶⁰⁷ They adapted the common rhetoric and structure of biographical writing with which they were familiar to construct dreams that, however clearly demarcated as fantasy, still conveyed an air of credibility and contemporaneity.⁶⁰⁸ Thus, the stories' dream components resonated believably with historical memory and the perennial themes of lived experience. The stories seemed as if they could have happened, and in this their impact felt real.⁶⁰⁹ Therein was their power to pique for literati readers what one scholar has pointedly called "uncanny empathy."⁶¹⁰ Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, both stories brought together the realms of the dreamer and the dead. In one, death, as for many a nightmare, restored the dreamer to waking life. In the other, the worlds of wakefulness and dreaming, life and afterlife were so thoroughly confused as to defy unraveling.

⁶⁰⁶ Y.W. Ma, "Fact and Fantasy in T'ang Tales," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 2, no. 2 (Jul. 1980): 172–178.

⁶⁰⁷ Thẩm Ký Tế 沈既濟 (Shen Jiji, c. 740–c. 803) was an official court historian, while Lý Công Tá 李公佐 (Li Gongzuo, c. 778–848) composed an unofficial history of the Jianzhong reign (780–783), which is no longer extant. Bruce J. Knickerbocker, "'Zhenzhong ji' (Record within a Pillow)," in *Tang Dynasty Tales: A Guided Reader*, ed. William H. Nienhauser (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), 94–96; William H. Nienhauser, Jr., "'Nanke Taishou zhuan' (Account of the Governor of the Southern Branch)," in *Tang Dynasty Tales: A Guided Reader*, ed. William H. Nienhauser, Jr. (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), 161.

⁶⁰⁸ Y.W. Ma, "Fact and Fantasy in T'ang Tales," 172–178.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁶¹⁰ Bruce J. Knickerbocker on the old Daoist's voicing of the reader's empathy towards Scholar Lǎo, "'Zhenzhong ji' (Record within a Pillow)," 116.

The first story is that of the millet dream. In this story, fashioned by Thảm Ký Tế 沈既濟 (c. 740–c. 803) as “Record of Within the Pillow” (*Châm trung ký* 枕中記), a callow Scholar Lỗ enters a tavern and encounters a fellow traveler Elder Lã, whom we learn is a Daoist master (it is unclear if Scholar Lỗ is aware of this). As they chat, the innkeeper begins to steam millet. During the course of their conversation, Scholar Lỗ complains about his lack of recognition and career accomplishment, intimating that his ambitions far exceed his humble circumstances. After venting his frustrations before Elder Lã, the scholar grows weary. Recognizing this, the old man produces a pillow on which he entreats Scholar Lỗ to sleep and promises him that it will “render you glory apropos your ambition.”⁶¹¹ Scholar Lỗ dreams that he is back home, is soon married, excels in the civil service examinations, and goes on to an accomplished career. Despite suffering several setbacks caused by jealous slanderers, the pressures of which nearly cause him to commit suicide by slitting his own throat with a knife, he rebounds to achieve the glory that he craves. However, he must labor until he is old and feeble and, denied retirement, grows fatally ill. On his deathbed, he receives high praises from the emperor before passing away, leaving behind his many sons and grandsons. But death is his portal back to life, and he awakes to realize that the fifty years he had just experienced had all been an instant’s dream. The millet still uncooked.⁶¹²

The moral of the story both in its reception and authorial intent was to disabuse young scholars of their ambitions for the fleeting success of officialdom and spare their toil.⁶¹³ In fact, Scholar Lỗ makes this explicit after reviving from his former “life” by

⁶¹¹ 「當令子榮適如志」. Shen Jiji 沈既濟 (Thảm Ký Tế, c. 740–c. 803), *Zhenzhong ji* 枕中記, in *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華, comp. Li Fang 李昉 (925–966), *Wenyuange siku quanshu* digital edition (Hong Kong: Digital Heritage Publishing Limited, 2007), 833.11a.

⁶¹² Bruce J. Knickerbocker, “‘Zhenzhong ji’ (Record within a Pillow),” 73–130; Thảm Ký Tế 沈既濟 (Shen Jiji, c. 740–c. 803), *Zhenzhong ji*; 10b–14a.

⁶¹³ Bruce J. Knickerbocker, “‘Zhenzhong ji’ (Record within a Pillow),” 103–104.

recognizing that the old Daoist meant to “smother my desire.”⁶¹⁴ Nguyễn Trãi apparently drew this lesson from the story as well. We already saw him employ this allusion in a couplet above (“This world is but the lingering of a millet dream; [I] have realized that all things ultimately come to naught”). We detect echoes of Scholar Lỗ’s realization in Trãi’s vernacular poetry, too. In the story, after reflecting on his dreamed career, Lỗ exclaims, “The pathways of favor and disgrace, the fate of fulfilment and poverty, the principle of gain and loss, the sentiments of life and death—I have thoroughly known them all!”⁶¹⁵ Here we have in concise form four oppositional pairs denoting the ups and downs of the official’s career that figure abundantly in Trãi’s vernacular poems (as well as Nguyễn Văn Đạt’s vernacular and classical poems).⁶¹⁶ Trãi’s use of these terms suggests a keen awareness or even wariness of the career vicissitudes exhibited in Scholar Lỗ’s dream.

But Nguyễn Trãi’s adaption of the millet dream was more nuanced than his repetition of these terms alone implies. What is remarkable about Trãi’s evocation of the millet dream is that, despite the story’s behest to eschew worldly pursuits, Trãi placed himself squarely within the errs of the dream rather than heed its purportedly Daoist message. In a meditation about the penultimate Trần Emperor, who, after abdicating the throne, cultivated Daoist practices at Jade Clarity Observatory east of the capital, Trãi mused, “Having realized the cinnabar of the golden cauldron, [the emperor] has already gone off; awakening from the millet dream, affairs are difficult [for me] to pursue.”⁶¹⁷

⁶¹⁴ 「窒吾欲」. Shen Jiji, *Zhenzhong ji*, 14a.

⁶¹⁵ 「夫寵辱之道，窮達之運，得喪之理，死生之情，盡知之矣」. Ibid., 13b–14a.

⁶¹⁶ Interestingly, these oppositional pairs appear infrequently in Nguyễn Trãi’s *Hán* poems.

⁶¹⁷ 「金鼎丹成人已去，黃梁夢覺事難尋」. Nguyễn Trãi, “Đề Ngọc Thanh quán” 題玉清觀, *Úc Trai tập*, 1.24a–b. Emperor Trần Ngung 陳顥 (1377–1399, r. 1388–1398) was a child emperor when Lê Quý Ly exercised considerable power. He was forced to abdicate to his two-year-old son in 1398, and in 1399 was relocated to Jade Clarity Observatory (*Ngọc Thanh quán*) in Đạm Thủy (Quảng Ninh Province). Ngung’s exercise of Daoist longevity practices was not without considerable accomplishment. Even after being inflicted with poison and starvation, he could not be killed. Eventually, Ly’s henchman resorted to strangulation. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 8.33b.

The implication of Trãi's couplet is a clear contrast between the visionary, transcendent journey made possible through Daoist alchemical practices and his own struggle through a mercurial dream, the transience and pointlessness of which he had already seen through. Unlike the Daoist emperor, Trãi could not extricate himself from his entanglements with officialdom. As a result, Trãi could only trudge through what must have seemed like a lucid dream.

Nguyễn Trãi's self-conscious witnessing of himself in a dreamlike reality was uncanny. The artistry of the millet dream certainly lent itself to such an experience. One of the most notable features of the story is the seeming verisimilitude of its dream section, so much so that absent the story's narrative frame, it is nearly indistinguishable from an actual biography.⁶¹⁸ Hence, the tale does not present an alternative universe as much as it suggests an alternate possibility for Scholar Lỗ's world should he follow a certain trajectory versus another. Lỗ is not thrust into an alien world, but rather he is returned to his own, his common home from where his adventure unfolds amidst historical events and personages.⁶¹⁹ The story, therefore, juxtaposes two possible outcomes for Lỗ's life: one in which he follows after his unchecked desires and an implied, but never described, alternative should he abstains from such labor. This elision is critical, since it invites another layer to the story, the reader's.

Although Scholar Lỗ endured setbacks during his dream, he regularly bounced back to greater glory, received the emperor's gratitude and adulation at the end his life, and left behind many male descendants whose mothers were of noble pedigree. On the whole, this fantasy could stand for the scholar's ideal. Lỗ dreamworld was, quite explicitly, a land of wish-fulfillment. But readers' lives invariably fall short of perfection, and

⁶¹⁸ Bruce J. Knickerbocker, "'Zhenzhong ji' (Record within a Pillow)," 105.

⁶¹⁹ Y.W. Ma, "Fact and Fantasy in T'ang Tales," 176–177.

Nguyễn Trãi's was certainly no exception. Therefore, the real juxtaposition in the story is its ideal dreamworld and the reader's paler reality. Trãi, caught toiling in the uncertainty of career vicissitudes and incapable of predicting his future, could perceive in the millet dream the uncanny feeling of seeing himself passing midway through the unfinished, volatile dream, always awaiting that happy ending while simultaneously viewing his actual life from the perspective of a venturesome dream of uncertain conclusion. We are forced then to relate Trãi not to the enlightened scholar upon awakening, but rather to the man still suspended in the dream, the man who, after stripped of his glory because of a setback, takes a knife to his throat and pines for his old rustic life, but is doubly denied.⁶²⁰ He can neither go back nor awaken/die. The dreamer's millet dream would drag on. Similarly, Trãi, a self-described "ghost of a dream," could not but slumber on wistfully towards his ultimate finale.

But the tale that I suspect resonated most with Nguyễn Trãi was the dream of the ghost tree. The foremost version of this "transmitted wonder" was Lý Công Tá's 李公佐 (c.778 – c.848) "Account of the Governor of the Southern Branch" (*Nam kha Thái thú truyện* 南柯太守傳).⁶²¹ We visited this story before in recluse Vũ Dật Trai's response to Emperor Lê Tư Thành's poetic challenge in chapter one. The tree in question is *hòe* 槐, more precisely translated "locust tree" or "Chinese scholar tree" (*sophora japonica*).⁶²² Here, however, "ghost tree" is more fitting, since its Sinograph was sometimes divined by

⁶²⁰ Bruce J. Knickerbocker, "'Zhenzhong ji' (Record within a Pillow)," 86–87.

⁶²¹ William H. Nienhauser, Jr., "'Nanke Taishou zhuan' (Account of the Governor of the Southern Branch)," 131–188; [Lý Công Tá 李公佐 (Li Gongzuo, c.778–c.848)], "Chunyu Fen" 淳于棼, in *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, ed. Li Fang 李昉 (925–996), *et. al.*, *Wenyuange siku quanshu* digital edition (Hong Kong: Digital Heritage Publishing Limited, 2007), 475.1a–11a.

⁶²² William H. Nienhauser, Jr., "'Nanke Taishou zhuan' (Account of the Governor of the Southern Branch)," 134n12.

way of its components, “tree” 木 and “ghost” 鬼, suggesting “tree of ghosts.”⁶²³ Indeed, in “transmitted wonders,” *hòe* was often the site of weird, ghostly phenomenon and associated with capricious spirits and/or seductive sprites.⁶²⁴ The dream of the ghost tree is a prime example of this on both accounts. In the tale, an uncanny dream unfolds within the tree, and, afterwards, two characters determine that it is inhabited by “foxes and female tree sprites.”⁶²⁵ But most of all, Trãi’s usage of “ghost of a dream” in his poems warrants *hòe*’s rendering as “ghost tree.” This is because in the dream of the ghost tree, Trãi found a story that like his dream poetry confused the realms of dreaming, reality, and the dead. Moreover, the story offered a subtle message about coming to terms with the loss of a father with which Trãi could identify.⁶²⁶

In the tale of the ghost tree, Thuần Vu Phần 淳于棼 (750–797), a bibulous man of some martial talent from an affluent military family, is dismissed from the army after he offended his superior during a bout of drunkenness. Previously, Phần’s father, who had led forces at the border, had been captured by the enemy and never returned. Unemployed and absent paternal oversight, Phần loafs about, sapping his family resources to indulge in sotted dalliance with his friends around a “great, old ghost tree” (*đại cổ hòe* 大古槐) south of his residence.⁶²⁷ After one such episode in the year 794, Phần gets so intoxicated that he falls gravely ill.⁶²⁸ His two cohorts help him recline on a trestle, saying that Phần

⁶²³ Carrie Reed, “Messages from the Dead in ‘Nanke Taishou zhuan,’” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, 31 (Dec. 2009), 125.

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

⁶²⁵ 狐狸木媚. “Chunyu Fen,” 9a.

⁶²⁶ Carrie Reed, “Messages from the Dead in ‘Nanke Taishou zhuan,’” 122, 129.

⁶²⁷ “Chunyu Fen,” 1b.

⁶²⁸ Here, I am following the scholarly consensus that the date “ninth month of the seventh year of Zhenyuan” (791) should be amended to “tenth year” (794) in consideration of the plot’s prophecy about three years leading up to Đinh Sửu (797) and the possibility that 七 (seven) is a scribal error for 十 (ten). William H. Nienhauser, Jr., “‘Nanke Taishou zhuan’ (Account of the Governor of the Southern Branch),” 133n8; Carrie Reed, “Messages from the Dead in ‘Nanke Taishou zhuan,’” 127–128.

should rest while they feed the horses before returning to wash their feet to join him. As soon as Phần sets his head to a pillow, he feels everything turn “dim, dizzying, and hazy as if in a dream.”⁶²⁹ Two purple clad escorts arrive and entreat Phần to come with them. They take him through a cavity (*huyệt* 穴) beneath the old ghost tree and arrive at the Great Ghost Tree’s Kingdom of Peace (*Đại Hòe An Quốc* 大槐安國). Phần learns that his missing father had somehow arranged for his marriage to a noblewoman, Dao Phương 瑤芳, Princess of the Golden Branch and second daughter of this kingdom’s king. He is bewildered by this turn of events, but his apprehension is somewhat alleviated once he discovers that two of his drinking companions (not the same two who led him onto the trestle) also ended up in the Great Ghost Tree’s Kingdom of Peace, and Phần goes along with the marriage.

Once wed, Thuần Vu Phần inquires about his father. The king tells him that Phần’s father is at the northern border defenses and arranges for them to exchange letters. Phần receives an oddly plaintive but familiar missive from his father, who promises that they will reunite in Đinh Sửu (797). Soon afterwards, Dao Phương urges her husband to serve her father in government. Phần agrees, and the king appoints him governor of Southern Branch Commandery (*Nam Kha quận* 南柯郡), assigning Phần’s two friends to assist him. Phần governs Southern Branch Commandery commendably for twenty years (a feat he achieves largely by delegating to his former drinking companions). He has five sons, who are granted official posts, and two daughters, who marry members of the royal clan. Phần receives successive honors and achieves greater glory than anyone else in the land.

⁶²⁹ 昏然忽忽，髣髴若夢. “Chunyu Fen,” 1b.

Fortune then turns against Thuần Vu Phần. Southern Branch Commandery is raided by the Kingdom of the Sandalwood Creepers (*Đàn La Quốc* 檀蘿國), and Phần fails to repel them. In the aftermath, Phần turns on his general, one of his old drinking companions, and imprisons him for his defeat. Although his indignant friend is eventually released, he dies soon afterwards. Dao Phương also suddenly passes away. Humiliated and bereaved of the princess, Phần resigns and returns to the kingdom's capital. Without his wife's guiding presence and free of official duties, Phần cavorts idly with capital elites, ingratiating himself with them and gaining their favor. As rumors begin to circulate, the king becomes wary of him. With a combination of pity and disgust, the king reminds Phần of his alien past and effectively banishes him back to "the human realm" (*nhân gian* 人間), but not before promising that Phần will be summoned back in three years' time.

Thuần Vu Phần suddenly recalls his former life "vaguely *as if* in the murk of sleep."⁶³⁰ The same purple clad escorts appear as before. They unceremoniously lead Phần out of the cavity beneath the ghost tree and return him to his home. There, Phần witnesses the uncanny site of his reposed body resting on a trestle. He is frozen with fear. The escorts shout his name repeatedly until Phần is restored to his old self. He notices his friends washing their feet, sitting on a trestle. He tells them about his dream. His friends, believing that Phần's ordeal had been the mischief of "foxes and female tree sprites," search for the cavity under the ghost tree, where they discover a sprawling formicary. The likeness of the ants' lair to the strange terrain of his dream convince Phần that this was indeed the so-called Great Ghost Tree's Kingdom of Peace.

That night a storm washes away the ants. Before long, Thuần Vu Phần learns that the friend who died in his dream had indeed since passed away, and the other was

⁶³⁰ 忽若惛睡. "Chunyu Fen," 8b.

moribund with sickness. Reflecting on his fleeting dream, his friends' mortality, and the transience of the ants' existence, Phần abandons his errant ways and "perches his heart on the gate of the Dao."⁶³¹ He maintains an ascetic life for three years until his death in Đinh Sửu (797), the year portended by his father and the king. Phần's story thus told, its narrator, Lý Công Tá, claims to have personally investigated the ghost tree in 802 and (miraculously) encountered Phần, from whom he learned this story.⁶³²

The blurred contours of this narrative share much in common with Nguyễn Trãi's dream poetry and suggest that Trãi saw much of his own experience in Thuận Vu Phần's adventure. Phần like a "ghost of a dream" wanders lost through a dream spun with indistinct fibers of specious substance and verisimilar fantasy. Throughout his visionary journey through the ghost tree's underground, he is unable to discern dream from reality. He recognizes that the terrain and climate of the Great Ghost Tree's Kingdom of Peace is quite unusual, but he experiences its inhabitants as entirely human in appearance, speech, and ceremony.⁶³³ Only in retrospect does Phần begin to believe that he had stumbled into a subterranean world. In fact, the dream feels so real to him that in its midst Phần comes to consider his life in the Great Ghost Tree's Kingdom of Peace as his natural existence, so much so that the king must remind him not only that he is a guest in a place that is not his home, but also that he is sojourning in a realm outside humanity. Phần's confusion was not that he identified with the ants to whose world he had acclimatized, but rather that he mistook them for people like himself. Moreover, the narrative itself is obfuscating with vague expressions that mark Phần's transition in and out of his journey. When he lies

⁶³¹ 栖心道門. "Chunyu Fen," 10b.

⁶³² William H. Nienhauser, Jr., "'Nanke Taishou zhuan' (Account of the Governor of the Southern Branch)," 131–188; [Lý Công Tá 李公佐 (Li Gongzuo, c.778 – c.848)], "Chunyu Fen" 淳于棼, 1a–11a.

⁶³³ "Chunyu Fen," 1b–2a, 4b. By contrast, in another "transmitted wonder," the inhabitants of Phù Tang 扶桑 were portrayed as anthropomorphized shrimp with feeler-like whiskers. Duan Chengshi (d.863), *Chinese Chronicles of the Strange*: "The Nuogao ji," trans. Carrie E. Reed (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 41–42.

down in a drunken stupor, Phần enters the ghost tree's world, feeling "hazy *as if* in a dream," and he returns to wakefulness "*as if* in the murk of sleep." Phần's sense of waking and sleeping is befogged, even mixed up.

In addition to the beclouded boundaries of dream and reality, the tale about the ghost tree threads through another nebulous dimension that we also see in Nguyễn Trãi's poetry, the afterlife. Phần's entire dream sequence can be interpreted as a near death experience induced by alcohol poisoning. The purple clad escorts are depicted like envoys from the land of the dead. They take Phần down a hole (*huyệt*) in the ground beneath the ghost tree to a "kingdom of peace" (*an quốc*). This choice of words is suggestive of lowering the corpse to rest in peace (*an*) in the grave (*huyệt*). In this dark place, time is accordingly measured in nights rather than days.⁶³⁴ At least momentarily beyond the threshold of death, Phần is able to communicate with his presumably deceased father and dutifully fulfil his filial obligations to him by marrying, succeeding in officialdom, and establishing a reputation, all of which he had been remiss about in life. The other "real-life" characters to appear in the dream, Phần's two drinking companions, are likewise either dead or close to death. Moreover, the story associates the dreamworld with the afterlife in that both Phần's father and father-in-law promise that he will return to them in three years' time, when Phần dies. And perhaps most strikingly, the way the purple clad escorts revive Phần and return him to his inanimate body by incanting his name mirrors the sort of ritual displayed in "Calling Back the *Hồn*." Finally, Phần's ghostly apparition before the tale's narrator five years after his death signals that, perhaps, Lý Công Tá, too, was dead or dying and, if the reader can access this tale, then, maybe,

⁶³⁴ William H. Nienhauser, Jr., "'Nanke Taishou zhuan' (Account of the Governor of the Southern Branch)," 144n45, 148n58.

they are as well.⁶³⁵ Consequently, to the degree with which the literati reader could identify with the common sentiments accompanying the crests and waves of Phần's dreamlike, nether existence, so too could they recognize in his story an uncanny encounter with themselves.

We can imagine several reasons why Nguyễn Trãi might have been drawn to the tale about the ghost tree dream. The story portrays an intemperate military man, Thuận Vu Phần, who wins imperial favor, privilege, and repute despite lacking substantive achievement or erudition. Once he acquires power, he in turn makes sure to elevate his hearties. Meanwhile, the story's main female character, the princess Dao Phuong, exerts the real agency behind her feckless husband's career, demonstrating her outsized influence in the political sphere. All of this may have resembled to Trãi the sway that his opposing faction of Thanh Hoa's warriors, "meritorious subjects" from the anti-Minh campaign, held over Thăng Long politics during his career as well as their collusion with certain palace women to manipulate the emperor and secure his succession to their liking.⁶³⁶ At the same time, Trãi could also identify with the tale's protagonist. This was because Trãi like Phần lost a father to northern invaders, and the story promised reconciliation between a son and his late father. The driving force behind Phần's adventure beneath the ghost tree was willed by his father from beyond the grave.⁶³⁷ In the dim space between somnolence and waking and at the threshold of death, Phần matured to momentarily become the proud son that he failed to embody while his father was still alive. Similarly, since returning from the Minh north in *circa* 1408, Trãi felt the weight of filial duty to his father and the

⁶³⁵ Carrie Reed, "Messages from the Dead in 'Nanke Taishou zhuan,'" 121–130.

⁶³⁶ Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 192–199; Esta Ungar, "Vietnamese Leadership and Order: Đại Việt Under the Lê Dynasty," (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1983), 83, 120–123, 152, 168–252; John K. Whitmore, "The Development of Lê Government in Fifteenth Century Vietnam" (PhD. diss., Cornell University, 1968), 39–67.

⁶³⁷ Carrie Reed, "Messages from the Dead in 'Nanke Taishou zhuan,'" 122, 129.

guilt of having survived him as the worlds he knew, that of his youth at the end of the Trần Dynasty and of his brief career with Lê Quý Ly's regime, vanished as if whisked away by the ghost tree's violent storm. Indeed, Trãi's descendants emphasized that it was none other than Nguyễn Ứng Long's parting injunction to his son to exact revenge upon the Minh in the name of filial piety that compelled Trãi to seek out the forces that would chastise his father's captors with the blood of war and wipe clean the indignation that they had suffered because of them.⁶³⁸ Bearing this burden in his post-1408 world, Trãi felt like a vestigial presence, a "ghost of a dream" that like Phần, he hoped, might find some measure of solace by realizing his father's final charge in his new dreamlike existence and, thereby, afford them both peace come its end and their eventual reunion.

Nguyễn Trãi's familial connection to the tale about the ghost tree can hardly be understated, since this is precisely how he employed it in his poetry. In a poem that he probably wrote in *circa* 1408, Trãi commiserated with one of his maternal uncles; that is a son of Trần Nguyên Đán.⁶³⁹ Three such uncles are known to have survived into Lê Quý Ly's regime: Trần Mộng Dữ 陳夢與, Trần Thúc Dao 陳叔瑤 (d.1408), and Trần Thúc Quỳnh 陳叔瓊.⁶⁴⁰ As Trãi (perhaps) dramatically exhibited in his poem from a "corner of the South's citadel," in the early days of the Minh occupation, remnants of the Trần royal family were faced with a critical decision: to join their clansmen's incipient resistance in

⁶³⁸ *Ức Trai tập*, 5.2b–3a.

⁶³⁹ In "Record of the Vestiges of Ice Flask," Nguyễn Trãi reported that none of Trần Nguyên Đán's patrilineal descendants remained, and the content of the poem suggests that Trãi had yet to discover Lê Lợi, so the poem must have been written early in the Minh occupation between 1407–1416. *Circa* 1408 seems to be the most likely moment of composition, since that is when the concerns that Trãi expressed in the poem would have been most acute.

⁶⁴⁰ According to Nguyễn Trãi's "Record of the Vestiges of Ice Flask," Trần Nguyên Đán had twelve children, among whom Trãi's mother, Trần Thị Thái 陳氏太 (?–before 1390) was the third (3.36a). Trần Mộng Dữ was the eldest of Đán's known sons. Đán also had a daughter named Trần Thị Thai, who was apparently younger than her sister Thái. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản ký," 8.8a–b. I have been unable to find information about Đán's other seven children.

the south, throw in their lot with the Minh, or lay low.⁶⁴¹ Dao, a former general with command over the southern territory of Diên Châu, submitted to the northern invaders, and, for this, his kin murdered him in early 1409; while the actions of Dữ and Quỳnh when faced with the Minh threat (assuming they lived to see it) are unknown.⁶⁴² It was perhaps to one of these men that Trãi wrote “To My Maternal Uncle, Sir Trần Dịch Trai.”⁶⁴³

兵餘親戚半離零，	Amidst the surfeit of soldiers, half of [our] relatives have
萬死殘軀偶一生。	scattered and dispersed;
往事空成槐國夢，	Among ten thousand dead, [my] lingering body alone happens to
別憐誰寫渭楊情。	live.
不來自擬同王式，	Past affairs turn out to be the hollow Kingdom of the Ghost Tree;
避亂終當學管寧。	Commiserating with parting, who effuses emotion on the sunny
欲問相思愁別處，	side of Vĩ River? ⁶⁴⁴
孤齋風雨夜三更。	Do not come to imitate [others] by following Vương Thúc!
	Avoid the chaos and finally learn from Quân Ninh. ⁶⁴⁵
	If [you] want to know the place of [my] longing [for you] and
	sorrow from parting,
	Then it's a lonely hut in the wind and rain of the night's third
	watch. ⁶⁴⁶

In this missive poem, Nguyễn Trãi expressed the same guilty feeling that we saw in previous poems about being left over from a bygone past while many of his kinsmen had suffered, but this time he did so with his mother's brother, who shared his plight and, thus, could empathize with his distress. Following Trãi's depiction of lingering among the fallen and displaced, including their kin, Trãi evoked the dream of the ghost tree with all its connotations about becoming lost in the dreamlike fog that saturated the remnants of

⁶⁴¹ John K. Whitmore, *Vietnam, Hồ Quý Ly, and the Ming (1371–1421)* (New Haven, CT: Yale Southeast Asian Studies, 1985), 100–104.

⁶⁴² *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 9.8b. Diên Châu corresponds roughly to modern Nghệ An Province. Diên Châu was not used as the name of an administrative unit during Lê Quý Ly's regime, when Trần Thúc Dao was commander, but it was reinstated after the Minh occupation, when Dao surrendered.

⁶⁴³ Nguyễn Trãi, “Ký cữu Dịch Trai Trần công” 寄舅易齋陳公, *Ức Trai tập*, 1.9b. Dịch Trai was clearly the uncle's sobriquet.

⁶⁴⁴ The sunny side of Vĩ (Wei) River was its northern bank.

⁶⁴⁵ Another possible interpretation of this couplet might be: “I shall not come to imitate [others] to follow Vương Thúc; I will avoid the chaos and finally learn from Quân Ninh.”

⁶⁴⁶ The third watch is 23:00–01:00, i.e., midnight. The “hut” (*trai*) probably referred to a spartan study.

their lives and nostalgia for a world swept away. For the uncle, the story would have called to mind Trần Nguyên Đán, who had striven so hard to ensure his children's survival, just as much as, for Trãi, the tale evoked thoughts of Nguyễn Ứng Long, who had saved Trãi's life by casting him away to return back to their defeated and irreparably changed homeland. Trãi then bound the emotive force of the ghost tree dream through parallelism to an allusion from the *Book of Songs* about an uncle's parting at Vĩ River. The second half of the poem pertaining to the allusion reads, in Arthur Waley's translation, "I escorted my mother's brother; Far my thoughts followed him. What present did I give him? A lovely *ghost-stone*, a girdle-pendant of jade."⁶⁴⁷ Here, the nature of the nephew's gift is worth dwelling on. The unusual jade of the pendant was "ghost-stone," *quỳnh cô* 瓊瑰, probably a variety of white jade with patterns that resembled the flowers of the so-called Chinese snowball.⁶⁴⁸ Dream interpretation often involved Sinograph splitting (*triết tự*), so that in the context of dreaming introduced by Trãi in first half of his couplet, *cô* 瑰 from the allusion to Vĩ River could be rendered "ghost jade" (玉+鬼) just as *hòe* 槐 could become "ghost tree" (木+鬼).⁶⁴⁹ Albeit peripheral, this "glyphomancy" added subtle meaning to the couplet. That the "ghost-stone" was striking enough to give Dr. Waley pause during his translation suggests that for erudite men like Trãi and his uncle, who surely would have memorized the short poem, "ghost stone" was well within Vĩ River's range of associations, especially when explicitly juxtaposed with the dream of

⁶⁴⁷ Arthur Waley, *The Book of Songs: The Ancient Chinese Classic of Poetry* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 105 (emphasis mine). The original passage is: 我送舅氏、悠悠我思。何以贈之、瓊瑰玉佩。 "Wei yang" 渭陽, 'Qin feng' 秦風, *Shi jing* 詩經, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/book-of-poetry/wei-yang/zh?en=off>.

⁶⁴⁸ That is *quỳnh hoa* 瓊花 (*Viburnum macrocephalum*).

⁶⁴⁹ Brigid E. Vance, "Deciphering Dreams: How Glyphomancy Worked in Late Ming Dream Encyclopedic Divination," *The Chinese Historical Review* 24, no. 1 (2017): 5–8, 11–12.

the ghost tree.⁶⁵⁰ In effect, this subtlety allowed Trãi to paint an imaginary parting with his uncle in which Trãi presents a ghostly gift as hollow as the blood and tears with which he would wash his forefather's graves twenty years later. Such an encounter would have been as uncanny as that of Thuần Vu Phần with his story's narrator. This was what added sting to Trãi's self-referential question, "*Who* effuses emotion on the sunny side of Vĩ River?" Trãi turned inward in his commiseration with his uncle, effectively asking who they were now that they were left behind with their confusing, residual existence.

In the next couplet, Nguyễn Trãi made his response to the Minh crisis clear and urged his uncle to follow suit. He did this by contrasting two men of the past, Vương Thúc 王式 (810–874) and Quản Ninh 管寧 (158–248). Thúc was a late Đường Dynasty 唐朝 (618–907) general noteworthy for reestablishing order and northern control over the Protectorate of An Nam (i.e., the Vietnamese south) during his sojourn there from 858 to 860.⁶⁵¹ Ninh was a famous recluse who, at the end of the second century, sailed away to the northeast to avoid the chaos caused by the Yellow Turban Rebellion and remained there for thirty-seven years, attracting a large mass of refugees before returning to his home to quietly live out the rest of his life.⁶⁵² The point of Trãi's contrast was clear, shun northern entreaties and take to the lam. Trãi was wary of the dangers of allying with the Minh and, even though his father may have confided to him a mission of revenge, he understood the expedient of flight. His exhortation to his uncle was thus to learn from the example of Thuần Vu Phần, abandon political ambitions, and seek distant refuge. Trãi's

⁶⁵⁰ That Arthur Waley was piqued by the "ghost stone" is evidenced by his puzzled note about it. *The Book of Songs: The Ancient Chinese Classic of Poetry*, 105n2.

⁶⁵¹ Keith W. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 241–244.

⁶⁵² Alan J. Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement: The Practice and Portrayal of Reclusion in Early Medieval China*, 131–132.

remote hut, the site of his imagined ghostly parting represented not only loneliness but also security in isolation obscured by caliginous wind and rain.

Nguyễn Trãi hoped that his uncle would stay hidden and bide his time. He alluded to the ghost tree dream not only because it displayed the strife and uncertainty that his uncle would face should he take to action, but also because it bridged the distance between them by suggesting a spiritual connection unrestrained by earthly obstacles. Ghostly apparitions might inspire fear of death, but they can also afford comfort in their suggestion of ongoing existence or afterlife. The ghost tree dream brought Trãi and his uncle together in commiseration, spirit, and the thought of an ultimate journey home to their fathers.

The ghost tree dream's promise of returning to be reunited with lost family not only shaped Nguyễn Trãi's view of worldly strife but also reclusion. As we have seen, Trãi was repeatedly roused by familial memories during his returns to Côn Mountain. Such thoughts textured Trãi's view of the Chí Linh mountain landscape, including the white clouds that we recall had veiled Chu An's gate and accompanied him in solitude and would later constitute the name of Trãi's haven in retirement. In a poem that Trãi inscribed on an abiding scholar's painting of a hut atop a cloud covered mountain—an image not unlike Trãi's own retreat on Côn Mountain—Trãi depicted a picturesque mountain landscape, where a recluse receives a guest at his mountain hermitage. The painting no longer exists and analyzing visual art *ex nihilo* is a hazardous operation, but if we assume that Trãi's poem reflected the scene in the painting, then it portrayed a traveler's encounter with a mountain hermit. The hermit's "old mountain" was presented as a natural home, where the traveler felt invigorated to return. But the irony of Trãi's poem was that despite its remote setting, he concluded with allusion to urban life. After

describing the traveler's arrival in the mountains and the hermit's idyllic lifestyle, Trãi ended with the couplet, "Long through the day [the recluse] steals away on a stool, where [he] has forgotten words. Of a man and the white clouds, whose heart is free?"⁶⁵³ The "recluse" who famously was at a loss for words to describe the truth to be found in (drunken) idleness was Đào Tiềm 陶潛 (365–427), the retired official who set his hut beside a peopled road rather than away in the mountains.⁶⁵⁴ The carefree clouds of the final line also alluded to Tiềm, specifically his rhapsody (*phú*) "The Return," which reads, "With a cane I prop up my old self to linger and rest; Occasionally I look up and gaze into the distance; Clouds, carefree, emerge from the hilltops; Birds weary from flight know to return."⁶⁵⁵ We can thus infer from Trãi's mention of Đào Tiềm that the painting represented an urban fetishization of mountain hermeticism, while Trãi's poem was intended to flatter the painting's owner, an unengaged (or simply failed) "abiding scholar" (*xử sĩ* 處士) who liked to think of himself as an eremite aloof from common townsfolk. Trãi's rhetorical question about the man and clouds intimated that the abiding scholar had

⁶⁵³ The full poem is "Meeting a fine guest, [he] embraces the zither by day; How profoundly invigorated [he] is to have returned to the old mountain! Incense drifts about a clay cauldron as the wind animates the trees; The moon shines upon mossy river stones, while bamboo fills the forest. To souse clean dusty garments [he has] tea from the tender leaves beyond the flowers; To call [him] awake from a midday nap are the fowl beside [his] pillow. Long through the day [he] steals away on a stool, where [he] has forgotten words. Between a man and the white clouds, whose heart is free?" 佳客相逢日抱琴，故山歸去興何深。香浮瓦鼎風生樹，月照苔磯竹滿林。洗盡塵襟花外茗，喚回午夢枕邊禽。日長隱几忘言處，人與白雲誰有心。 Nguyễn Trãi, "Đề Trình xử sĩ vân oa đồ" 題程處士雲窩圖, *Úc Trai tập*, 1.14. Trãi wrote another poem with the title "Inscribed on a Hermitage in the Cloud," suggesting that Vân Oa, literally "nest in the clouds," may have been a tangible site. Ibid., 1.2b.

⁶⁵⁴ James R. Hightower, "T'ao Ch'ien's 'Drinking Wine' Poems," *Wen-lin: Studies in Chinese Humanities*, ed. Chow Tse-tsung (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 12; ; c.f. James R. Hightower, *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 269; Tian Xiaofei, *Tao Yuanming and Manuscript Culture: The Record of the Dusty Table* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 28.

⁶⁵⁵ 策扶老以流憩，時矯首而遐觀。雲無心以出岫，鳥倦飛而知還。 Tao Qian, "Gui qu lai xi" 歸去來兮，in *Tao Yuanming ji, Qinding sikuquanshu* version, *Chinese Text Project*, 5.6a, <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=en&file=54760&page=61>; c.f. James R. Hightower, *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 269.

found Đào Tiềm's dispassionate, effortless quietude in the city comparable to the ease of clouds' drifting freely above distant mountains.

But we must note that Nguyễn Trãi was a voyeur to all of this. The painting's urban context suggests that unlike its owner Trãi was busy with official duties, probably in Thăng Long after 1428, when he began what would become a decade of service as a Lê Dynasty official. He could neither slink away to his mountain home nor disengage from the political fray. Hence, Trãi could only ventriloquize the abiding scholar's insights about reclusion as he viewed the painting from without. From the perspective of its author, then, what did Trãi mean by questioning, "Of a man and the white clouds, whose heart is free?" As an official, Trãi was not carefree, literally "nothing in mind" (*vô tâm*) like Đào Tiềm's white clouds but rather its opposite, *hữu tâm* or with an "occupied mind." What then might have preoccupied Trãi's mind? For Trãi, the "old mountain" meant Côn Mountain, and, as we have seen, his allusions to Đào Tiềm evoked thoughts of returning home. Trãi would have seen in the painting the freedom of retreat back to his family's mountain homeland, which eluded him. From this vantage, Trãi's white clouds suggest a different allusion about longing for a distant home. That would be the story of Địch Nhân Kiệt 狄仁傑 (630–700), a prominent seventh century official who, taking respite from his official duties, climbed a mountain and looked out to see a single white cloud drifting away. He gazed out at the solitary cloud until it vanished beyond the horizon and said, "My parents live beneath that white cloud."⁶⁵⁶ The official's words call to mind Trãi's experience at Bái Vọng Sơn or "Gazing out with Obeisance Mountain," where Trãi had pined for his father, who was held captive in the north, and ultimately buried him. Thus,

⁶⁵⁶ Địch Nhân Kiệt (Di Renjie) was a favorite of Empress Võ Trắc Thiên (Wu Zetian). Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072), "Di Hezhu" 狄郝殊, in *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (comp. 1044–1060), *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=393137>.

Trãi's question drew a powerful contrast between himself and the painting's owner. The abiding scholar wanted to present himself with blithe equanimity, while Trãi furtively sought to affirm the ardency of his filial devotion to his deceased parents. By leaving his question about white clouds open-ended, Trãi could both suggest the painting's owner's insouciance and reveal that he himself remained full of heart. Such deft use of ambiguity in Trãi's mention of white clouds would have been something that a sophisticated reader like Nguyễn Văn Đạt could recognize.

Considering Nguyễn Trãi's enduring longing for his late relatives and its attendant survivor's guilt, it is not surprising that Trãi returned to the dream of the ghost tree when he retired into reclusion at White Cloud Hermitage. Despite his career successes, Trãi continued to think about his existence after cheating death in the upheavals of 1407–1408 as drifting through a residual life that may have been manifestly real but felt more like a dreamlike afterlife—a sensation that was keenest during moments of personal crisis—until his final days. In a poem that he probably wrote *circa* 1437–1438, when Trãi journeyed to Côn Mountain for the last time thirty years after returning from the north, Trãi looked again to the ghost tree dream:⁶⁵⁷

神州一自起干戈，	Ever since shields and halberds were raised in the Sacred
萬姓嗷嗷可奈何。	Kingdom,
子美孤忠唐日月，	The ten-thousand clans bellowed with grief, for what could be
伯仁雙淚晉山河。	done?
年來變故侵人老，	Tử Mỹ was alone with his loyalty during the days and moons of
秋越他鄉感客多。	Đường;
卅載虛名安用處，	Bá Nhân's two streams of tears flowed for the mountains and
回頭萬事付南柯。	rivers of Tấn.
	The years came with vicissitudes that afflicted a man with age;
	As autumns passed, many were the sentiments of a traveler in
	foreign lands.
	What was the use of a hollow name for thirty years,
	Looking back at all those things cast to the Southern Branch?

⁶⁵⁷ Nguyễn Trãi, “Loạn hậu cảm tác” 亂後感作, *Ức Trai tập*, 1.10a.

It is possible that the poem was written a couple years after the Minh invasion, when Trãi would have been thirty years old. The poem's description of displacement and dynastic collapse certainly lends itself to such an interpretation. However, Trãi's explicit mention of aging and retrospection should lead us to doubt the likelihood that Trãi composed the poem when he was still relatively young. Another dream poem in which Trãi spoke about "the last thirty years" offers clues that help clarify the poem's time of composition. The latter half of this second poem reads, "During the day, with tranquility between *Càn* (Heaven) and *Khôn* (Earth), [I] meditate on the expansive *Đạo*; Fame and profit in the human realm arouse [in me] the heart of an initiate; Looking back over the last thirty years; A distant, endless dream never to be retrieved."⁶⁵⁸ In these couplets, Trãi's apparent freedom from official duties, renunciation of fame and profit, and the finality with which he relinquished the past all suggest that Trãi wrote the poem late in life. Moreover, "heart of an initiate" (*sơ tâm* 初心) is a Buddhist term for a new devotee's incipient willingness to dedicate themselves to Buddhist cultivation. As we recall, after quitting life at Thăng Long *circa* 1437, Trãi took up residence behind Côn Mountain's Smokey Pagoda, where he would become imperial custodian two years later. All this leads me to believe that Trãi brushed the first poem around the same time, most likely when Trãi traveled from the capital to Côn Mountain to take up retirement, and so I have selected a suitably nostalgic tone for my translation.

Since 1407-1408 with the disturbances provoked by the north, Nguyễn Trãi saw his travails through the lens of the ghost tree dream. The same was true at the end of his career *circa* 1437–1438, when Trãi reflected on the last three decades of his life: ten years

⁶⁵⁸ 晝靜乾坤寬道思，人間名利醒初心，回頭三十年前事，夢裡悠悠更莫尋. Nguyễn Trãi, "Hạ nhật mạn thành" 夏日漫成, *Ức Trai tập*, 1.24b.

hiding in obscurity, another traveling with Lê Lợi's campaign, and the last serving amidst the intrigues of Thăng Long's court. In the first half of the poem, Trãi revisited the turmoil caused by the Minh. The "Sacred Kingdom" (*thần châu*) might be an honorific for the Minh similar to "Exalted Kingdom" that we saw in one of Trãi's poems above, but if I am correct that the poem voiced nostalgia, then it more likely harked back to Trãi's early days during the Trần Dynasty, when Trãi would have remembered that his countrymen still believed in the invincibility of the spirits that defended their land from the north.⁶⁵⁹ But once war broke out, Trãi recalled, the defeat inflicted by the Minh upended the southerner's worldview, dispelling confidence in their land's spirits just as it scattered its peoples into confusion. In the second couplet, Trãi compared his experience of these upheavals to those of Đỗ Phủ 杜甫 (a.k.a. Tở Mỹ, 712–770), who witnessed the rebellion that devastated the Đường, and Chu Nghĩ 周顗 (a.k.a. Bá Nhân, 269–322), who lived to see the Tấn Dynasty 晉朝 (266–420) lose control of northern China, fled with the exodus to the south (modern Nanjing), and, as Trãi alluded, died with blood streaming down to his ankles after a captor smashed his mouth for cursing the rebellious general who imprisoned him, a visceral drama that drew the tears of those who watched.⁶⁶⁰ By likening himself to these men of the past, Trãi showed that he clearly understood the historical magnitude of the events that unfolded throughout his life. He might even have recognized the significance of his role over thirty years for shaping his era. (And,

⁶⁵⁹ Keith W. Taylor, "Notes on the *Việt Điện U Linh Tập*" *Vietnam Forum* 8 (Summer 1986): 28–29.

⁶⁶⁰ Du Fu wrote abundant poetry about the An Lộc Sơn 安祿山 (An Lushan) rebellion (755–763) and its aftermath. Stephen Owen, "Introduction," in *The Poetry of Du Fu*, ed. and trans. Stephen Owen (Boston/Berlin: DeGruyter, 2016), liii–lvii. Chu Nghĩ (Zhou Yi) was a loyal retainer of Tư Mã Duệ 司馬睿 (Sima Rui, r. 318–323). He was executed after the general Vương Đôn 王敦 (Wang Dun, 266–324) turned on Duệ and temporarily seized the Eastern Tấn capital (modern Nanjing). Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (579–648), *Jin shu* 晉書, "liezhuan," *juan* 39, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=58233>.

curiously, his mention of Chu Nghĩ implies that he had no illusions about what could befall a man of even his stature). However, as Trãi shifts to retrospective commentary in the latter half of the poem, we see that his sense of history was no comfort to him. Trãi felt lost like a vagabond throughout the vicissitudes of the last three decades, and, in the end, he was left only with old age. Looking back, his accomplishments were as hollow as a ghost, and Trãi knew that coming back to Côn Mountain, all that was left to do was consign himself to pass his remaining days, letting them fade away like a residual dream on the grounds where his lost family once lived and now rested.

What then was the significance of Nguyễn Trãi's dream poetry for later literati readers of Trần Khắc Kiệm's anthology, including Nguyễn Văn Đạt? Trãi's poetry of dreams like all things uncanny provoked an existential crisis of identity. It juxtaposed the heroism Trãi was made to represent with his disenchantment, begging the question, "What was the point of being a scholar, whose imperative was to serve a noble ruler, if even a paragon like Trãi doubted the meaningfulness of his labors with a man as glorified as Lê Lợi and seemed to muddle through his career almost despite himself the way one does when one realizes one is dreaming but cannot yet awake?" Such self-reflection would have been hard to avoid for readers of Kiệm's anthology, where Trãi's poems were condensed in one place and explicitly set against the *xuất xử* question. Living in the wake of the Lychee Garden affair, for readers of his poems about ghosts and dreams, Trãi became a *oan hồn*, a bereaved ghost in its most proper sense. However his suffering may have been mitigated by the kind hearts of the locals about Smokey Pagoda and the redemption afforded by Emperor Lê Tư Thành, Trãi's death continued to haunt through his poetry and remembrance. Perhaps this is why later literati sought denouement by making Trãi into the protagonist of his own "transmitted wonder," the oneiric tale of Trần

Nguyễn Đán's dream of the snake who portended his grandson's demise, the very snake who would finally bring Trãi into communion with his forefathers and draw his lingering dream to a close.

Conclusion

After reviewing the Chí Linh Mountains reclusion poetry of Chu An, Trần Nguyên Đán, and Nguyễn Trãi, we can now appreciate the significance of Nguyễn Văn Đát's decision to retire and establish himself as Abiding Scholar of White Cloud Hermitage. Đát drew lessons from his teacher Lương Ngạn Ích's withdrawal during the troubled years of the early sixteenth century and strove to learn from him the *Thái Ất* studies that would help Đát understand the knack of proper timing amidst change, including when to set out into officialdom (*xuất*) and when to simply abide unengaged (*xử*). During the Thống Nguyên era, when Mạc Đăng Dung emerged preeminently to dominate the Lê court and the emperor over whom he exerted guardianship, Đát chose to bide his time, all the while cultivating a literary style that drew from the idiom of *Thái Ất* studies and captured his thoughts on officialdom and reclusion with the image of snowy whiteness, which both reflected Đát's connection to his native land along the Hàn (Cold) River and his ambivalence about the *xuất xử* dilemma as a symbol of purity and principle on the one hand, but also poverty and lack of recognition on the other. In 1535, eight years after the founding of the Mạc dynasty, Đát joined Dung's regime as an official with high honors. However, in 1542, when Đát determined that his position at the Mạc Dynasty court was untenable, he took after his mentor's example and relinquished his duties. At that time, he saw in the white clouds repeatedly invoked in Chí Linh Mountain poetry not only an image that resonated with his poetry about snowy whiteness but also a storied history of noble scholars who consigned themselves to reclusion when the times turned against them

much as Đạt himself had done. From Đạt's perspective, styling himself the Abiding Scholar of White Cloud Hermitage seemed natural.

But the force of Nguyễn Văn Đạt's style rested in how it spoke to the moment of his retirement. In 1542, Đạt left the Mạc court amidst brewing factionalism and internal strife that before the end of the decade would erupt in open warfare. Đạt sensed tremors of impending trouble, and his resignation publicly displayed his misgivings about the dynasty's future. Moreover, by selecting the appellation Abiding Scholar of White Cloud Hermitage, Đạt struck a nerve. Mạc Dynasty legitimacy was undergirded by two things, and Đạt cut at both. He did this by conjuring two ghosts from the past.

The first aspect of Mạc legitimacy was their alignment with the legacy of the Trần Dynasty (1225–1400). Popular veneration of the former Trần Dynasty survived well over a century after its demise, especially in the eastern Red River Delta. People continued to recall Trần victories over northern invaders, transmitted their literary heritage, revered their Buddhist and Daoist saints, and worshipped the many spirits the Trần believed defended their domain. Some even believed that the Trần kings would be restored to rule their kingdom again. Specifically, stories were circulated about the return of a man popularly remembered as the last of the Trần emperors, Trần Cảo 陳杲 (d.1429). Cảo's origins are obscure, but he emerged in the Ngọc Ma Territory, an area in modern Nghệ An then populated by predominantly non-Việt peoples, claiming to be a grandson of Emperor Trần Phủ (a claim later vouchered for by none other than another descendant of the royal clan, Nguyễn Trãi).⁶⁶¹ Recognizing that popular regard for the Trần remained high, in 1426, Lê Lợi anointed Cảo "emperor" to bolster local support for Lợi's campaign and also to placate the Minh, whose ostensible rationale for intervening in the southern Việt

⁶⁶¹ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, "Thái Tổ thượng," 1.42a.

kingdom was to reestablish the Trần. After Lợi ascended the throne, Cáo realized that his usefulness had expired, so he fled back to Ngọc Ma. Men loyal to the new emperor soon caught up with Cáo, and he was compelled to swallow poison.⁶⁶²

According to one story, when Trần Cáo was captured trying to escape to sea and left to die among a bed of thorns, he cursed the heavens with a death rattle so terrible that it haunted the memories of all who heard it. His indignant death transformed Cáo into a bereaved ghost (*oan hồn*), who passed through generations in rumor and prophecy until 1516, when tales about Cáo's reincarnation coalesced around the figure of the sixteenth century Trần Cáo, the insurgent at the head of the movement that brought the Lê Dynasty to near collapse.⁶⁶³ Although the ultimate fate of this later Trần Cáo is uncertain, what is clear is that, after quelling Cáo's forces, Mạc Đăng Dung contrived to align himself with the prophecies about the rise of the east formerly associated with the insurgent king and lay claim to the Trần mantle by realizing the prophecy himself.

As emperor, Mạc Đăng Dung took several steps to reify the impression that he had inherited the Trần legacy. He traced his ancestry to the Trần Dynasty luminary Mạc Đĩnh Chi 莫挺之 (1272–1346), passing over his equally prestigious but more senior forefather Mạc Hiến Tích 莫顯績 (1060–1189). Dung then restored to honor Trần Nguyên Hãn 陳元扞 (d.1429), the grandson of Trần Nguyên Đán who had fought alongside “Emperor” Trần Cáo and Cáo's guardian Lê Lợi but was killed by the latter early in the Lê Dynasty for fear of his royal blood. With his good name restored by the Mạc, Hãn was even worshipped as a guardian spirit of the realm in the Trần mold.⁶⁶⁴ Furthermore, Dung

⁶⁶² *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 10.24b, 10.54b–55b. Lê Quý Đôn recorded that Trần Cáo was made emperor in eleventh month of 1425 rather than 1426. *Đại Việt thông sử*, “Thái Tổ” 1.23b, 2.1a.

⁶⁶³ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, “bản ký,” 10.55b.

⁶⁶⁴ Trần Nguyên Hãn became the Spirit Lord of the Kingdom (*Quốc chủ thần*) and, alternatively, Spirit Lord of the Mountains (*Nhạc chủ thần*). Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử* (2007), 234.

adopted the Trần institution of dual senior and sitting emperors, abdicating to his son two years after establishing his dynasty to fish the waters of his kingdom as senior king.⁶⁶⁵

Finally, the Mạc held rites performed by ritual specialists that gave tangible expression to the idea that the winds of kingly prowess once associated with a reincarnated Trần Cao had come to inhabit the Mạc Dynasty lords of the east.⁶⁶⁶

As a master of *Thái Ất* studies, Nguyễn Văn Đạt was such a specialist. However, whereas his earlier prophetic poetry suggested that the Mạc's fortunes would rise with the eastern sun, his retirement signaled that the winds of change had shifted. Đạt's actions still alluded to the Trần era, but they harked not to the heyday of the Trần emperors but rather their dynasty's decline. Đạt submitted a petition for the execution of wanton officials and relinquished his duties in a manner almost identical to Chu An when the Trần dynasty was falling into disarray. Đạt made this connection evident to contemporary observers by choosing to style himself the Abiding Scholar of White Cloud Hermitage. The name of Đạt's retirement studio called to mind the reclusion poetry of the Chí Linh Mountains, including the poems by Chu An and Trần Nguyên Đán that expressed resignation toward the Trần Dynasty's degradation as well as their powerlessness to do anything about it. With this, Đạt showed that he believed the Mạc had hit a similar downturn and suggested that prudence and probity meant abandoning them.

⁶⁶⁵ Such, apparently, was Mạc Đăng Dung's pretext for relinquishing the role of emperor, but he continued to lead the dynasty until his death in 1541. Although he returned to Cổ Trai, he continued to maintain a residence at Thăng Long, the exuberant, favorite palace of the "Pig King" Lê Oanh. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, "bản kỷ," 15.74a; Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, "Nghịch thần truyện," 18a.

⁶⁶⁶ Keith W. Taylor, "A Vietnamese Literary Riddle from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: Hoàng Sĩ Khải's *Tứ Thời Khúc*," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (2020), 13. On the performance of "pitch pipe divination" and "watching the ethers" (*hầu khí*) see Derk Bodde, "The Chinese Cosmic Magic Known As Watching the Ethers," In *Studia Serica Bernhard Karlgren Dedicata, Sinological Studies Dedicated to Bernhard Karlgren on His Seventieth Birthday October Fifth, 1959*, ed. Soren Egerod and Else Glahn (Copenhagen: Einar Munksgaard, 1959), 14–35; Huang Yi-Long and Chang Chih-ch'eng, "The Evolution and Decline of the Ancient Chinese Practice of Watching for the Ethers," *Chinese Science* 13 (1996): 82–106; A.F.P. von Hulsewe, "Watching the Vapours: An Ancient Chinese Technique of Prognostication," *NOAG* 125 (1979), 40–51.

The second pillar of Mạc legitimacy rested in their attempt to recreate the bureaucratic institutions and scholar ethos of Lê Tư Thành's Hồng Đức era and empower a scholar-official elite populated predominantly by educated men of the Red River Delta.⁶⁶⁷ The movement to revive the flourishing literati culture of the Hồng Đức era began almost immediately with the dispatchment of Lê Tuấn, the ruler deemed responsible for ruining his grandfather's legacy, and Lê Oanh's coronation.⁶⁶⁸ Lương Ngạn Ích was central to this effort from its inception by virtue of his call for reforms in fourteen policies. But, as we have seen, Oanh failed to make good on his promise of dynastic rejuvenation and, because of this, Ích renounced official life and retreated to his estuarine homeland. In 1542, Nguyễn Văn Đạt, as Ích's student, made a similar move, the optics of which called the Mạc Dynasty's stewardship of the scholar tradition and the nobility of government that depended upon it into question. Đạt took such action just as Ích's son, also a master of *Thái Ất* studies, claimed that the winds of kingly vitality had abandoned the Mạc and flew to Thanh Hoa in the west, and the Vũ clan summoned capable men opposed to or disillusioned with the Mạc to seek refuge in their haven for recluses in the upriver highlands.

But perhaps Nguyễn Văn Đạt delivered his most poignant message by casting himself in the shadow of Nguyễn Trãi, the original abiding scholar of White Cloud Hermitage.⁶⁶⁹ With this, Đạt stoked anew the smoldering consternation about Trãi's wrongful death that had long lingered since the Lychee Garden affair and summoned

⁶⁶⁷ Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 238; John K. Whitmore, "Ching-hsing and Cheng-t'ung in texts of and on sixteenth century Việt Nam," in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, ed. K.W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University Press, 1995), 122–123.

⁶⁶⁸ John K. Whitmore, "Ching-hsing and Cheng-t'ung in texts of and on sixteenth century Việt Nam," 119–120.

⁶⁶⁹ In Nguyễn Trãi's case, since he was made imperial custodian of a Buddhist pagoda, "lay devotee" rather than "abiding scholar" is probably a more precise rendering of *cư sĩ* 居士.

Trãi's "ghost of a dream" inexorably to the fore. By evoking Trãi's uncanny dream poetry and the unresolved meaning of the Lychee Garden affair, Đat compelled his contemporaries to reconsider the purposefulness of officialdom and, specifically, their place (or prospective place) in Mạc Dynasty institutions that belied the failings and dangers about which Đat had grown wary. As much as Lê Tư Thành saw his scholar-officials as the lifeblood of his government (Chapter One) so did Đat by his chosen style strike at the heart of Mạc legitimacy. Đat's contemporaries could see in his resignation the insinuation, however subtle, that the Mạc effort to restore the Hồng Đức ethos had failed. At the same time, Đat made sure that Mạc partisans understood that willful action would have to be taken to avoid the shortcomings of past efforts such as that that Lương Ngạn Ích had abandoned. And this was Đat's masterstroke. By recasting himself in Trãi's shadow, Đat guaranteed that, however volatile factional tensions may have become, all parties agreed that the perceived errors of the Lychee Garden affair could never be repeated. Đat could not be harmed. Instead, they lavished Đat with high honors, granting his entire family imperial investitures and elevating him to the status of national preceptor with the title Duke of State Trinh.⁶⁷⁰

However, as we saw with the examples of Vũ Dật Trai and Lương Ngạn Ích, earning imperial favor by the road to Chung Mountain—that is seeking recognition by becoming a recluse—cut both ways. Đat had made his point and ensured his survival, but he also permanently indebted himself to the Mạc regime. Thereafter, Đat was beholden to the graces and whims of his Mạc benefactors. Consequently, Đat was repeatedly recalled from "reclusion" at the beckoning of the dynasty's leaders to lend his experience and

⁶⁷⁰ Nguyễn Văn Đat's honorary title Duke of State Trinh (*Trinh quốc công*) cast him in the light of the two Trinh brothers (*Lưỡng Trinh* 兩程), Trinh Hạo 程顥 (Chen Hao, 1032–1085) and Trinh Di 程颐 (Cheng Yi, 1033–1107).

expertise to ongoing exigencies. Đat could not fully extricate himself from dynastic politics. The irony of Đat's retirement was that, although he may have wanted to escape the perils of Thăng Long factionalism, by returning to the east, he effectively replanted himself in the heartland of Mạc influence and power. This irony would become ever more apparent as Đat approached his later years, when Thăng Long became increasingly irrelevant relative the Sunlit Capital, from where Mạc regents dictated the dynasty's affairs and set their ships off to war. How Đat expressed his adventures in and out of seclusion and the fields of war through the imagery of snowy white clouds is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

NGUYỄN VĂN ĐẠT AND CENTERED MOORING SHELTER

Introduction

Nguyễn Văn Đạt retired in the ninth month of Nhâm Dần (Oct. 19–Nov. 16, 1542) to return to his home village of Trung Am on the Hàn (Cold) River near the eastern coast. He may have left the imperial court at Thăng Long, but his move towards the east brought him within another center of power, the Mạc clan's littoral homeland. Fifteen years earlier, Mạc Đăng Dung had established the coast around his ancestral village of Đồ Sơn (Miry Mt.) as Dương Kinh or the Sunlit Capital, a bustling commercial region and Mạc military and political stronghold that grew to include Trung Am.⁶⁷¹ The power of this eastern capital relative to Thăng Long would grow during the remainder of Đạt's life as an immature and unexceptional emperor stood as placeholder over the Mạc court, which was repeatedly displaced and reassembled in the face of military exigencies, while senior Mạc family regents increasingly concentrated their activities in the east. At the same time, despite having relinquished his position at the imperial court, Đạt's regard in the Mạc political sphere and especially his native region grew as well. As we saw in the previous chapter, Đạt delivered blunt commentary on the tenuous fortunes of the dynasty by styling himself the Abiding Scholar of White Cloud Hermitage and preserved his own wellbeing by the sobriquet's allusion to the former Lê dynasty's unjust murder of another staunch

⁶⁷¹ Diệp Đình Hòa and Nguyễn Văn Sơn, "Làng thủ đô Dương Kinh: nhận xét dân tộc – khảo cổ học," *Những phát hiện mới về khảo cổ học năm 1996* (Hà Nội: Viện Khảo cổ học, 1996), 493; Đinh Khắc Thuân, *Lịch sử thời Mạc qua thư tịch và văn bia* (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2001), 172–173; ———, *Văn khắc Hán Nôm thời Mạc* (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2017), 646–647; Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, "Làng quê Trung Am trong thơ, văn của Nguyễn Bình Khiêm," *Tạp chí Hán Nôm* 1 (2001): 14–17.

moralizer, Nguyễn Trãi. This unhappy precedent ensured that the Mạc treated Đát with honors rather than the executioner's knife. Moreover, Đát's status rose further after the Mạc recalled Đát from retirement to assist in dealing with a series of existential threats to the dynasty. Đát was credited with playing a key role in securing the dynasty's survival, and, for this, he was honored accordingly.

Nguyễn Văn Đát's renown as national preceptor presented an awkward irony. On the one hand, he had claimed the moral high ground by forsaking fame, wealth, and influence to embrace poverty and a "cold" life in the obscurity of his rustic home away from the capital, but, on the other, he was lavished with honors in the Mạc heartland with its increasing prosperity and heightened status. Đát's contemporaries chided him for this apparent contradiction.⁶⁷² For example, an unknown individual wrote a poem mocking Đát by likening him to Phùng Đạo 馮道 (882–954), a talented but seemingly self-serving scholar who earned the condemnation of classical historians for his having served several different regimes in succession and presumptuously publishing his own writings with a preface of self-praise.⁶⁷³ Such ridicule was not without merit. During his retirement, Đát, too, compiled his own poetry anthology and prefaced it himself. Furthermore, Đát's wavering in and out of official duty, in addition to a number of his associates and students who turned against the Mạc, presented for the critic the appearance of inconstancy. The critic's poem no longer avails, but Đát's response suggests an accusation of insincerity and hypocrisy. Đát defended himself, saying:

草庵高臥白雲稠， Resting high above my thatched hermitage, the white clouds

⁶⁷² Nguyễn Thanh Tùng, "Khi nhân cách lớn bị hoài nghi: giải đọc hai bài thơ 'Giải trào' của Nguyễn Bình Khiêm," *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu văn học* 12 (2015): 29–40.

⁶⁷³ E.g., see Ouyang Xiu's (1007–1072) comments in the *New History of the Five Dynasties* (*Xin Wudai shi*) and Sima Guang's (1019–1086) *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* (*Zizhi tongjian*). Phùng Đạo's (Feng Dao) biography and preface can be found in Xue Juzheng 薛居正 (912–981), *Old History of the Five Dynasties* (*Jiu Wudai shi*), available at *Chinese Text Project*, ed. Donald Sturgeon, <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=en&file=4782&page=104>.

野性疎慵亦自羞。	are dense;
危行肯為清節累，	Rustic by nature and languid, I do feel kind of embarrassed.
潔身恥與俗塵流。	Treading audaciously, I am willing to be burdened by probity;
釣名豈捷終南徑，	Pure myself, I would be ashamed to course among vulgar dust.
拯亂曾施渭北籌。	Fishing for a name, how could I have taken the Chung Nam
俯仰天人無愧怍，	shortcut?
囂然誰怨又誰尤。	To lift from chaos, I laid down the tally north of the Vĩ River.
	Looking to heaven above and people below, I am without
	shame;
	Smugly at ease, who is there to blame and who is there to
	criticize? ⁶⁷⁴

In his defense, Nguyễn Văn Đạt confessed a sense of embarrassment, but not shame. He presented his slowness to action and dull demeanor as a sign of noble simplicity and indifference to profiteering. At his rustic hut, he saw himself sitting high in guarded probity shielded by pure white clouds. Taking after Confucius, Đạt insisted that he is willing to “tread audaciously” and participate in official duties despite their hazards.⁶⁷⁵ However, he defended his desire to stay unengaged as an unwillingness to besmirch himself in vulgar currents. After having thus presented himself favorably, in the second half of the poem, Đạt zeroed in on his interlocutor’s accusation and defended his perspective. The critic apparently accused Đạt of taking the “Chung Nam Mountain shortcut,” in other words, feigning lofty morals and posing as a recluse for the sake of worldly recognition and profit.⁶⁷⁶ But Đạt insisted that his actions took after Lữ Thượng 呂尚, who helped King Văn establish the Chu Dyansty after they met while Thượng was fishing on the northern bank of the Vĩ River.⁶⁷⁷ Đạt’s being plucked from his retreat was thus no different than Lữ Thượng’s being pulled from his idyllic fishing spot. Finally, Đạt

⁶⁷⁴ *Bạch Vân am thi tập* Vhv.144, 63b–64a; c.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.55b–56a.

⁶⁷⁵ See chapter fourteen, “Xianwen” of *Lunyu*. *Confucius Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, edited and translated by Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 154–155.

⁶⁷⁶ Alan J. Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement: The Practice and Portrayal of Reclusion in Early Medieval*

China (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 137.

⁶⁷⁷ Sima Qian, “Qì Taigong shìjiā” 齊太公世家, in *Shiji*, available at *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/shiji/qi-tai-gong-shi-jia/zh#n5926>.

pointed out the pettiness of his critic's snickering by appealing to the wisdom of Confucius, who claimed that no one but Heaven could judge him, saying "I do not resent Heaven, nor do I blame others. I study here below to approach [Heaven] above. Who but Heaven could understand me?"⁶⁷⁸

Similarly, in a somewhat more lighthearted gesture, a Mr. Nguyễn from Kim Thành, also a part of the Sunlit Capital about twenty *ly* north of Nguyễn Văn Đát's home village on the other side of the Hàn River, kidded Đát for his repeated shuffling between his retirement home and the sites of official duty.⁶⁷⁹ Đát replied to Mr. Nguyễn, whom he appears to have respected, with a poem:

節慚倏往忽來頻，	Restraining my embarrassment, constantly coming and going
屑屑徒勞老病身。	hurriedly,
與世寡諧寧避世，	I strain my old, afflicted body, toiling in vain.
因人成事敢言人。	In this world, few are those with whom I agree, so I'd rather
維持清議公多力，	avoid them;
棲息衡門我獨貧。	But as people accomplish their tasks, I dare to speak to them.
蔗境雖佳嫌未到，	Maintaining pure discussions, your strength is abundant;
相違恐負故園春。	Perched on my boarded gate, I am alone with poverty.
	Although the sugarcane is exquisite, I am ashamed that I have
	yet to reach [its sweetness];
	I am afraid that to leave would be to betray the spring in my
	old garden. ⁶⁸⁰

In the poem, Đát again acknowledged his embarrassment, this time with the piteous image of himself struggling with illness and old age to keep up with the hasty pace that Mr. Nguyễn mocked him for. As such, Đát did not feel that he fit in with others as they pursued their tasks. Nevertheless, he felt the responsibility to tag along and speak his

⁶⁷⁸ "Wenxian (14.35)," *Lunyu*, available at *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/analects/xian-wen#n1472>. C.f., Edward Slingerland trans., *Confucius Analects*, 168.

⁶⁷⁹ Kim Thành was about 4 *ly* from Nguyễn Văn Đát's maternal village on the left bank of the Hàn River, which was in turn another 17 *ly* to Trung Am on the right bank. Phan Tam Tỉnh 潘三省 (1816–?), "Hải Dương địa dư (A.568)," in *Địa phương chí tỉnh Hải Dương qua tư liệu Hán Nôm*, ed. Đinh Khắc Thuân (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2009), 286; Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, *Dại Nam nhất thống chí* (Huế: NXB Thuận Hóa, Viện Sử học, 2006), tập 3, 1011.

⁶⁸⁰ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Văn Đát), *Bạch Vân am thi tập* 白雲庵詩集, manuscript, Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. VHv.144, 63a; c.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập*, xylographic text, Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. R.2017 /A.2256, 1.56a.

mind to them with the moral authority of his status and age. In the second half of the poem, Đạt exhibited humility, praising Mr. Nguyễn for his efforts in honest deliberations (of official business), while allowing himself to slink away alone to embrace his meek existence. In the last couplet, he intimated the nobility of aging with characteristic humility. His reference to sugarcane called to mind Cố Khải Chi 顧愷之 (344–406), who is said to have chewed sugarcane first from the tasteless tips before slowing coming to the sweeter middle. When asked about his habit, he explained that he savored the sweetness that gradually matured with patience.⁶⁸¹ Đạt implied that his aging was not decline, but rather mellowing to fuller flavor and, with self-depreciation, something to which he could still look forward. This was because his bustling back and forth every time he was recalled took him away from his old garden, where he wished to savor his autumnal years.

These two poems exemplify the tensions implicit in much of Nguyễn Văn Đạt's poetry after 1542. In this chapter, I seek to explore how Đạt negotiated his desire to stay away from official duties and his being repeatedly thrust into the mist of dynastic exigencies as expressed in his later writings. To do this, I look at three episodes, each about a decade apart. The first is Đạt's construction of Trung Tân *quán* 中津館 or Centered Mooring Shelter in 1542–1543 and his stele piece commemorating it in which he created both a physical sanctuary and intellectual refuge by interpreting the *Trung Dong* doctrine of "Maintaining Perfect Balance" to describe a constant moral equanimity that remains aloof from the vicissitudes of his era. Đạt continued to exemplify this neutrality and moral relativism in his successive poetry about the shelter. Two sets of poems stand out. The first was written *circa* 1551, when Đạt was sixty years old. At that time, he had

⁶⁸¹ Liu I-ch'ing, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yu: A New Account of Tales of the World*, trans. Richard Mather (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan 2002), 458.

just returned from the upriver regions of the Red River after a campaign to rescue the dynasty from a force led by generals who had defected from the Mạc, several of whom had been Đat's close associates. The campaign saw him perform the role of a moralizer who tested the loyalty of those harboring thoughts of defection and betrayal. Similarly, a decade later at the age of seventy, Đat wrote a second series of poems about the shelter after a massive two-year offensive that again threatened to destroy the Mạc Dynasty. Đat was credited with forwarding the strategy that ultimately saved the dynasty from destruction. Afterwards, upon returning to his home village, he expressed his thoughts about his adventures going out to the battlefield and then returning to his idyllic retreat. I argue that the sense of aloofness and equanimity that Đat crafted in his writings about Centered Mooring shelter fostered the literary persona that eventually came to be seen as the neutral prognosticating sage who foresaw and to some degree dictated future events in later storytelling traditions. This transformation was made possible because Centered Mooring Shelter became the site of social poetry exchanges that began with Đat's retirement writings and continued at Centered Mooring Shelter for centuries after his lifetime.

Centered Mooring Shelter

In 1542, as tensions were brewing at the capital in the wake of Mạc Đăng Dung's passing, Nguyễn Văn Đat apparently could not wait to quit Thăng Long's fractious intrigues and return home. Indeed, Đat seems to have felt greatly relieved once Emperor Mạc Phúc Hải, Dung's grandson, approved Đat's request to retire. At that time, Đat captured his thoughts in his poem, "Retiring."⁶⁸²

⁶⁸² Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Văn Đat), "Trí sĩ" 致仕, *Bạch Vân tiên sinh thi tập* 白雲先生詩集, manuscript, Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. VHV.188, 56a; c.f. *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.62a.

不待都門設祖筵，
故鄉歸思已飄然。
晴舒柳色濃春酒，
暖送香風穩客船。
舊德雖非天下老，
得閒亦是地中仙。
家貧欲為營生業，
更恐兒孫未必賢。

Without waiting for a farewell banquet to be set up at the
capital gates,
I feel lighter just thinking about returning to my home
village.
Clearing skies will open up the colors of the willows,
deepening vernal wine;
Warm air shall send off a sweet breeze to compose the
traveler's boat.
Although my old merits will not endure beneath heaven,
Getting to be at leisure, I am still an immortal on earth.
My household poor, I wish to make a living,
But I fear that my children and grandchildren may not turn
out wise.

In the poem, Đạt allowed the anxiousness and haste with which he rushed away from the capital, the kind of angst and noise he associated with Thăng Long, mellow with a warm spring breeze that quieted worries that parted with the clearing skies. Then Đạt reflected on his abortive career, commenting that although it ended in just under eight years, he was nevertheless content just to go home. For him, his poor home was its own paradise, where his frustrations concerned not the fate of the dynasty and its political machinations but rather were limited to domestic tasks like raising his children.

As the previous poem suggested, ambitious and pretentious youths presented a consistent source of vexation for Nguyễn Văn Đạt. As we saw in a previous chapter, Đạt left officialdom at a time when a new generation of upstarts began vying for power and repute, apparently pushing aside older elites, many of whom stood with Mạc Đăng Dung since the beginning of his rise to the throne. Although Đạt did not join Dung's regime until eight years after its founding, he made it clear what had driven him from the capital. After he got back to Trung Am, Đạt sent a poem expressing his distaste for his former colleagues' disputations and connivances.⁶⁸³

⁶⁸³ “Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Văn Đạt), “Ly cư giảm chư đồng chí” 里居簡諸同志, *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.30a; c.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 6a; *Bạch Vân am thi tập* 白雲先生詩集, manuscript, Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. VHv.850, 8b.

不才誤被袞龍褒， 玩愒區區慢自勞。 實學未能孚士望， 虛名空自取時嘲。 人榮簪綬同年友， 我愛松筠晚歲交。 誰是誰非休說著， 青雲爭似白雲高。	Without talent I was undeservedly cloaked in dragon robes; I steal away idly, venturing to labor of my own accord. Real learning was unable to inspire trust among officials; With a hollow reputation, I emptily called my contemporaries' ridicule upon myself. People are honored with hairpins and silk straps, befriending those of the same generation; I am fond of pines and bamboo, with whom I mingle in later years. Who is right? Who is wrong? Say no more! Blue clouds only contend to be as lofty as white clouds.
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In this poem, Nguyễn Văn Đật hinted that he felt mistaken to have participated in officialdom. Without a knack for politicking, he failed to win the confidence of his younger colleagues and earned only their disdain, despite his classical erudition. Back at his village, Đật contrasted his fondness for simple integrity, symbolized by the constant evergreens and upright bamboo, with his former colleagues' want of wealth and honors. In conclusion, Đật placed himself above the fray and halted their bickering, asserting that the youthful "blue clouds" of the capital could never attain to Đật's loftiness at White Cloud Hermitage.

Disappointed with the jockeying upstarts at the capital, Nguyễn Văn Đật sought more genuine companionship in his eastern homeland. In a poem that was probably written in the late 1540s or early 1550s, Đật expressed his thoughts in a poem about the east that exemplified his connection with his costal home region, desire for sincere friendships other than the pretentious relationships he experienced at the capital, and belief that the east was truly the enduring source of the Mạc Dynasty's power.⁶⁸⁴

金海門

Golden Sea Gate

洪州形勝地， 金海門得名。 輶韉挾荊棘， 喉襟控太平。	The Hồng region's terrain is advantageously formed; Golden Sea Gate is famous. Horse-drawn chariots and quivers are constricted by thorns, In a choke point that reigns in absolute peace.
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⁶⁸⁴ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Văn Đật), "Quá Kim Hải Môn ký," *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.6a–b.

東來正派遠，	From the east comes the main river from afar;
西挹雪江清。	The west leads to the clear waters of Snow River.
岸樹水中現，	Cliff trees appear in the water;
溪禽天外鳴。	Stream birds sing from beyond the skies.
波光魚出沒，	Fish appear and submerge amidst the glimmer of ripples;
山景象縱橫。	Elephants roam the mountain landscape.
夕照熹微色，	The evening shimmers in a faint glow;
漁歌欸乃聲。	Fishermen sing beating to their tune.
流奔知瀨處，	When the current races, you know where it surges.
風利覺帆輕。	When the wind is fierce, you feel the sails aloft.
浪帖龍眠穩，	The waves smooth, dragons sleep soundly;
寒多鶴夢驚。	With so much cold, cranes are startled awake from dreaming.
著蒿泥石活，	Budding mugwort enlivens muddy rocks;
待月夜潮盈。	Awaiting the moon, the night's tide is full.
曾記鯤鵬化，	I remember transforming from abyssal fry to stratospheric roc;
閑尋鷗鷺盟。	At leisure, I search for gulls to befriend.
靜觀潮汐後，	After tranquilly observing the morning and evening tides,
會得古今情。	I realize the sentiments of past and present.
重憶歌江漢，	I remember singing <i>The Rivers Giang and Hán</i> ,
何時洗甲兵。	"When shall we be washed clean of arms?"
回頭紅日近，	Looking back, the crimson sun approaches,
依舊一輪明。	With a halo of light as brilliant as ever before.

Nguyễn Văn Đạt began his poem by pointing out the sea gate's strategic military position, conjuring thoughts of war to which he would return in his concluding lines. Golden Sea Gate was located in Đạt's native Hồng ("flood") region between Snow River (the lower Thái Bình River) and the main river leading out to Đồ Sơn, the center of the Sunlit Capital. As such, the sea gate was probably in the area of today's Văn Úc Estuary.⁶⁸⁵ After stating Golden Sea Gate's significance for the realm's defenses, Đạt dedicated the bulk of his poem, twelve of twenty-six lines, to descriptions of nature. He vividly portrayed the coast's trees, birds, fish, elephants, cranes and even dragons as well as natural wonders like lively gales, ripples, tides, and the full moon. Đạt's only mention

⁶⁸⁵ Chien Chin-sung 簡錦松, "Yuenan Mo chao shiren Ruan Bingqian *Baiyun 'an shiji xiandi jianjiu*" (On-Site Research on Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, Vietnamese Poet of the Mạc Dynasty, and His *Bạch Vân Am thi tập*), *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan* 43 (2013): 86–89.

of humans referred to those in concert with nature, a fisherman and the hint of a person sailing.

With these images, Đat intended to do more than just paint a beautiful scene. He wanted to present a landscape unadulterated by human contrivance. This becomes clear with Đat's last section, in which he reflected on its meaning for him. He recalled how he once rose to the rank of a high official in a manner reminiscent of the legendary roc who emerged from the depths of an abyssal sea.⁶⁸⁶ Now, Đat sought friendship only with the seagulls of the coast. He mentioned seagulls with allusion to a Daoist parable attributed to Master Liệt 列子 (ca. 5th C.). In this story, a man who lived near the sea played with hundreds of seagulls that flocked to him every morning until, one day, his father ordered him to capture one. Thereafter, the seagulls avoided their former human playmate and would no longer approach him.⁶⁸⁷ As we saw in a literary exchange between Đat and his friend from Cao Xá in a previous chapter, the innocent and uncontrived relationship between the seagulls and the boy before he was corrupted by his father's order represented authentic friendship.⁶⁸⁸ Seeking friendship with the gulls and other creatures in nature suggested that the retired Đat was looking for sincere friendships with those like the fisherman, a hometown locale free of political machinations and selfish profiteering.

Having found peace in the simplicity of his life in his native land, Nguyễn Văn Đat stepped back to behold the coast with the purview of aloof tranquility and thus saw the harsh vicissitudes he had endured as part of nature's transformations as indifferent as the

⁶⁸⁶ Zhuangzi, "Xiaoyao you," Inner Chapters of *Zhuangzi*, available at *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/enjoyment-in-untroubled-ease/zh#n2717>.

⁶⁸⁷ Lieh-Tzu, *The Book of Lieh-Tzu: A Classic of the Tao*, trans. A. C. Graham (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) 45–46; "Huangdi," chapter in *Liezi*, available at *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/liezi/huang-di/zh#n37429>, passage 11.

⁶⁸⁸ Philip Ivanhoe, "The Theme of Unselfconsciousness in the *Liezi*," in *Riding the Wind with Liezi*, ed. Ronnie Littlejohn and Jeffrey Dippmann (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011), 137–138.

undulating tides. Đạt observed in the natural littoral landscape his place against the broad strokes of time, resonating with the sentiments of people past and present. Then he reflected on the events of the moment by alluding to the experiences of the celebrated poet Đỗ Phủ 杜甫 (712–770), who had witnessed the upheavals caused by An Lộc Sơn 安祿山 (703–757) and Sử Tư Minh 史思明 (703–761) that nearly toppled the Đường Dynasty (618–907). From the perspective of the Đường, the eight-year uprising (755–763) demarcated a former period of prosperity that was followed by a period of restoration (*trung hưng*) afterward. If Đạt meant his allusion to Đỗ Phủ to be analogous, then Đạt probably wrote the poem about Golden Sea Gate *circa* 1546–1551 during an uprising that Mạc historians similarly marked as a rupture in history after which the Mạc entered a period of restoration.⁶⁸⁹ During that time, as was the case with the Đường, the Mạc emperor was forced to abandon the capital.⁶⁹⁰ He took refuge in the east, and presumably Golden Sea Gate was a critical defensive position after his flight from the capital.

Viewing the tides of Golden Sea Gate as well as history, Nguyễn Văn Đạt reflected on Đỗ Phủ's experience with the Đường insurrection as a mirror for his own plight amidst war and dynastic crisis. Đạt called to mind the former poet's words about the Giang (Yangtze) and Hán rivers, "At Yangzi and Han, a traveler longing to go home/ between Earth and Heaven, one Confucian hack... From ancient days, when taking care of old horses/ one has not made them take to the long road."⁶⁹¹ Like Đỗ Phủ, Đạt saw himself as an aged, reluctant traveler as worn out as an old horse. Đạt then recalled another of Đỗ

⁶⁸⁹ E.g., *Việt sử diễn âm* 越史演音, trans. Nguyễn Tá Nhí (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa thông tin, 1997), 187.

⁶⁹⁰ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, Sinographic text appended to *Đại Việt thông sử*, trans. Lê Mạnh Liêu ([Saigon?]: NXB Giáo dục và Thanh niên, 1973), "Nghịch thần truyện," 63b. The Mạc Dynasty analogue to An Lushan was, according to Mạc historians, Phạm Tử Nghi, who attempted to replace the young emperor Mạc Phúc Nguyên (d.1561, r.1546–1561) with his great-uncle Mạc Chính Trung. For his part, Phạm Tử Nghi accused Nguyễn Kính, who along with Nguyễn Kính Diễm succeeded in defeating Nghi, of "harboring intentions like An Lushan." Ibid., 51a.

⁶⁹¹ Du Fu, *Poetry of Du Fu*, trans. Stephen Owen (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), vol. 6, 152–153.

Phủ's poems, in which he longed for the day when weapons and armor would be washed clean and never used again.⁶⁹² Finally, Đat returned to the littoral landscape with an affirmation that the sun rising in the east, a symbol of the Mạc Dynasty, would endure as brilliantly as ever. Thusly Đat cast himself as a creature of the east, where he found peace and sincerity in the simplicity of nature while allowing his assistance, however disinclined, to the designs of war with a nod to the longevity of the Mạc.

Nguyễn Văn Đat's poem about Golden Sea Gate shows that, in his poetry, Đat cultivated the image of a dispassionate sage aloof from the turbulence of his era and, although allied with the Mạc, viewed the dynasty's tribulations with a detached perspective. At the same time, Đat expressed his frustration with those ensnared in contests of power that punctuated life in officialdom. Instead of vying with such pretentious characters, Đat sought genuine companionship in simple, local folk, whom he likened to the seagulls of the coast. For Đat, such people often meant participants in local community organizations. These associations, called *giáp*, were local groups that attended to the collective needs of villages and hamlets. Members of various clan lineages came together to form the *giáp*, which consisted of local elites, intelligentsia, village elders, rich folks, and in some cases women.⁶⁹³ The *giáp* gathered at community houses (*đình*) to organize annual festivals, plan community projects, and discuss the concerns of community members at a local level without significant input or oversight from the imperial regime and its regional administration.⁶⁹⁴

As a local luminary, Nguyễn Văn Đat took part in the *giáp*'s activities. Đat saw in these collective, community-oriented associations a sincerity that contrasted with the

⁶⁹² Ibid., vol. 2, 80–81.

⁶⁹³ Đinh Khắc Thuân, *Lịch sử triều Mạc qua thư tịch và văn bia* (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội. 2001), 335–339; Vũ Duy Mẫn, “Một số vấn đề về làng xã thời Mạc,” *Nghiên cứu lịch sử* 6 (1991): 26–27.

⁶⁹⁴ Đinh Khắc Thuân, “Đình làng thời Mạc,” *Nghiên cứu tôn giáo* 4 (2003): 60.

contestation that he witnessed at Thăng Long. The Mạc leadership's familiarity with the coastal trading of their ancestral homeland fostered an open attitude towards commerce, and markets flourished during times of stability, especially in the east.⁶⁹⁵ At the same time, private ownership of land and its sale and purchase increased under the Mạc.⁶⁹⁶ As a result, households and individuals in the east were able to amass some degree of personal wealth and material assets. Đat looked on the self-centered profiteering that he experienced around him with suspicion.⁶⁹⁷ However, Đat also understood that people could direct their expendable wealth towards charity. This is what drew him to the *giáp*. Public works in the collective interest of the community were central to the *giáp*'s activities. Educated men like Đat were frequently called upon to document and commemorate such projects as building and repairing bridges, roads, and worship spaces in the name of performing "goodness" (*thiện*).⁶⁹⁸ Đat participated in numerous public projects. He wrote commemorative stele for several bridges around his village, at least half a dozen Buddhist pagodas, and, in one case, a temple dedicated to the worship of the central figures of the three religions (Confucius, Buddha, and Laozi).⁶⁹⁹ In some

⁶⁹⁵ Nguyễn Văn Kim, "Kinh tế công thương thời Mạc," *Nghiên cứu lịch sử* 12 (2010): 3–18; Trần Quốc Vương, "Xứ Đông nhìn từ Kê Chợ," in *Theo dòng lịch sử: những vùng đất, thần và tâm thức người Việt* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa thông tin, 1996), 267–268; Trần Quốc Vương, "Hải Phòng nhìn từ thủ đô Hà Nội," in *Theo dòng lịch sử: những vùng đất, thần và tâm thức người Việt* (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa thông tin, 1996), 293.

⁶⁹⁶ Đỗ Đức Hùng, "Vài nét về chế độ ruộng đất và kinh tế nông nghiệp thời Mạc," *Nghiên cứu lịch sử* 6 (1991), 18.

⁶⁹⁷ Nguyễn Văn Kim, "Kinh tế công thương thời Mạc," 14; Đinh Khắc Thuân, *Lịch sử triều Mạc qua thư tịch và văn bia*, 228.

⁶⁹⁸ Nam Nguyễn, "Being Confucian in the Sixteenth-century Vietnam Reading Stele Inscriptions from the Mạc Dynasty (1527–1593)," in *Confucianism in Vietnam*, ed. Nguyễn Loan (Tp Hồ Chí Minh: NXB Đại học quốc gia, 2002), 149–150.

⁶⁹⁹ Lê Thế Loan, "Điểm lại những di tích liên quan đến thân thế, sự nghiệp Nguyễn Bình Khiêm," in *Trạng Trình Nguyễn Bình Khiêm*, ed. Nguyễn Huệ Chi and Ngô Đăng Lợi (Hải Phòng: Viện Sử học, Hội đồng lịch sử Hải Phòng, 1991), 395; Nguyễn Hữu Tường, "Hai tấm bia Trạng Trình soạn mới phát hiện ở Thái Bình," *Tạp chí Hán Nôm* 6 (2000), <http://www.hannom.org.vn/web/tchn/data/0206v.htm>; Trịnh Khắc Nghiễn and Nguyễn Trung Hán, "Đôi bờ sông Vĩnh Trinh và các di tích về Nguyễn Bình Khiêm," in *Trạng Trình Nguyễn Bình Khiêm*, ed. Nguyễn Huệ Chi and Ngô Đăng Lợi (Hải Phòng: Viện Sử học, Hội đồng lịch sử Hải Phòng, 1991), 402–404; Vũ Tuấn Sán and Đinh Khắc Thuân, "Bài văn bia ghi việc tạo tượng Tam giáo, chùa Cao Dương của Trình Quốc Công," *Tạp chí Hán Nôm* 1 (1990): 84–88.

instances, he contributed by applying his knowledge of geomancy to selecting sites for construction.⁷⁰⁰ In others, Đat took a lead role in certain grassroots projects. For instance, he is attributed with the organization and naming of the eighteen hamlets (*am*) in his home region with his central role evident in the naming his own village “Central Hamlet” (Trung Am).⁷⁰¹

Nguyễn Văn Đat’s most significant community project was one that he initiated soon after he retired in 1542. Back in his home region, Đat encouraged village elders to build a shelter along the right bank of the Hàn River just north of his village between the sea to the east and the former Vĩnh Trinh Canal to the west.⁷⁰² Đat’s three compartment home, probably a stilted house on water, and White Cloud Hermitage rested to the shelter’s south at the former Liêm Creek, near where a village by that name now stands.⁷⁰³ Đat explained his thinking behind his project to build the shelter, which he called Trung Tân quán 中津館 or Centered Mooring Shelter, in an essay that he wrote early in the spring of 1543, about four months after its completion, and had it along with a poetic summary inscribed on a stele. It was this stele that Vũ Khâm Thận would consult two centuries later when he composed Đat’s genealogical record.

Nguyễn Văn Đat’s inscription read as follows⁷⁰⁴:

⁷⁰⁰ Trịnh Khắc Nghiễn and Nguyễn Trung Hán, “Đôi bờ sông Vĩnh Trinh và các di tích về Nguyễn Bình Khiêm,” 404.

⁷⁰¹ Lê Thế Loan, “Điểm lại những di tích liên quan đến thân thế, sự nghiệp Nguyễn Bình Khiêm,” 395; Nguyễn Khắc Nghiễn and Nguyễn Trung Hán, “Đi tìm dấu vết ông Trạng trên hai bờ sông Vĩnh Trinh quá khứ,” in *Nguyễn Bình Khiêm: danh nhân văn hóa*, ed. Nguyễn Huệ Chi (Hà Nội: NXB Bộ Văn hóa, Thông tin và Thể thao, 1991), 357.

⁷⁰² Ngô Đăng Lợi, “Một vài ý kiến về vấn đề văn bản học bài ‘Ký bia quán Trung Tân’ của Nguyễn Bình Khiêm,” in *Nguyễn Bình Khiêm trong sự phát triển văn hóa dân tộc*, ed. Trần Khuê (Đà Nẵng: NXB Đà Nẵng, 2000), 248; Trịnh Khắc Nghiễn and Nguyễn Trung Hán, “Đôi bờ sông Vĩnh Trinh và các di tích về Nguyễn Bình Khiêm,” 397–402.

⁷⁰³ Lê Thế Loan, “Điểm lại những di tích liên quan đến thân thế, sự nghiệp Nguyễn Bình Khiêm,” 395; Nguyễn Khắc Nghiễn and Nguyễn Trung Hán, “Đi tìm dấu vết ông Trạng trên hai bờ sông Vĩnh Trinh quá khứ,” 348.

⁷⁰⁴ The original stele is no longer extant. However, manuscript copies survived and were incorporated into early nineteenth century printed anthologies. This translation of the “Stele Inscription of Central Mooring

The Stele Inscription of Centered Mooring Shelter

The nature of all people is innately good. [However], bound by our endowments of *khi* and obscured by material desires, our inherent goodness becomes somewhat less whole than at its pristine origin. Arrogance, stinginess, wickedness, and perversion—there is not one of these that we do not commit. At court, we struggle for fame. In the market, we compete for profit. If opulent in nobility, then we have cooling pavilions and saunas. If wealth is spectacular, then we have dancing towers and song taverns. Seeing someone dying of starvation on the road, we are too stingy to donate a single gold. Watching someone sleeping exposed [to the elements], we do not grab him thatched covering. We have failed to cultivate goodness long enough! Nevertheless, heaven's principle lies latent in the human heart. It has never been extinguished.

How good are the elders of my village! They encourage one another to do good. Bridges, Buddhist pagodas, and taverns, they have built and repaired them all over. I am also of a heart that delights in goodness, and I always applaud them.

In the autumn of *Nhâm Dần* (1542), I relinquished my office and retired to the fields of my native village. I took the village elders out for an outing at the central ferry. Looking out to the east, one sees the sea. Gazing out towards the west is the [Vĩnh Trinh] canal.⁷⁰⁵ If one follows with one's eyes towards the south to espy Liêm Creek, then there are Trung Am and Bích Động [villages] densely joined one after the other.⁷⁰⁶ If one looks north over towards Snow River, then Cold Market and Moon Ford form a brilliant stretch left to right.⁷⁰⁷ A large road cuts across horizontally between them with wheels, spokes, axels, and horses' hooves for how many *dặm*, no one knows.

Shelter" or "Trung Tân quán bi minh" 中津館碑銘 is based on the text found in *Prose Selections from the August Việt Kingdom* or *Hoàng Việt văn tuyển* (R.979, Q.3, 13a-15a) 《皇越文選》, which was compiled by Bùi Huy Bích 裴輝璧 (1744-1818) in ca.1788 and later printed in xylographic form in 1825. The text is compared to the version found in the 1814 printed edition of the *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (A.2256, 3a-5a). The title of the stele differs in the *Bạch Vân am thi tập*: "The Stele Record of Centered Mooring Observatory" 中津觀碑記.

⁷⁰⁵ Vĩnh Trinh Canal once began at the convergence of the Hóa and Luộc Rivers and coursed southwest of Trung Am, Nguyễn Văn Đạt's Village, before running out to the sea. Trịnh Khắc Nghiễn and Nguyễn Trung Hán, "Đôi bờ sông Vĩnh Trinh và các di tích về Nguyễn Bình Khiêm," 397–399.

⁷⁰⁶ Liêm Creek ran through the area of today's Bái Khê and Liêm Khê villages. Ibid., 397.

⁷⁰⁷ Some versions of the stele inscription have Sun Ford instead of Moon Ford. Cold Market and Moon Ford were probably in the area of the former Tang Thịnh shrimp and fish market along the Thái Bình River in Vĩnh Bảo District. Nguyễn Khắc Nghiễn and Nguyễn Trung Hán, "Đi tìm dấu vết ông Trạng trên hai bờ sông Vĩnh Trinh quá khứ," 351.

Thereupon, I turned to the village elders and addressed them, “Your previous building projects such as Greeting the Wind Bridge and Eternal Spring Bridge, etc., are indeed resplendent, yet there’s no place as scenic as this. How can we not build a shelter here for passersby to rest?”

The village elders all agreed.⁷⁰⁸ I immediately donated my household assets to fund it. I instructed Trương Thời Cử, Nguyễn Trọng Xiêm, Nguyễn Mẫn, Đinh Thanh Miếu, Vũ Đình Dịch, and Lê Sùng Phúc to oversee the project. Work on it began on the third day of the eighth month.⁷⁰⁹ On the twenty-ninth day, the shelter was completed.⁷¹⁰ On its horizontal placard, I inscribed “Centered Mooring Shelter.”

Someone asked me, “By naming the shelter ‘Centered Mooring’ (Trung Tân), what do you mean?”

I said, “‘*Trung*’ means equanimity centered on perfecting goodness. Not perfecting goodness is to be uncentered. *Tân* is to moor.⁷¹¹ Knowing where to stop is [to know] the critical point of mooring. If we don’t know where to stop, then we are lost for mooring. The meaning of the shelter’s name is basically derived from this.”

“It is like being centered (*trung*) on loyalty towards the ruler, respect for elders, congeniality between brothers, harmony between husband and wife, and trust among friends. It is also the equanimity (*trung*) of facing wealth without being greedy, seeing profit without contending, delighting in goodness to teach others, and extending sincerity in attending to all creatures.”

“The meaning of centeredness (*trung*) is where utmost goodness abides. If we could indeed moor therein with knowledge of the critical point for mooring, then by upholding and carrying this out with all things and all creatures nothing would be without goodness. Would not the flourishing of such meritorious virtue be immeasurable?”

The village elders were all pleased with what I said about goodness. They requested that I inscribe it in stone to be conveyed through generations.

The inscription reads:

⁷⁰⁸ Here, I am following *Bạch Vân am thi tập*’s 諸鄉耄皆從. *Hoàng Việt văn tuyển* has “The village elders were all delighted by this” 諸鄉耄皆樂之, which seems redundant with the same phrase below.

⁷⁰⁹ September 21, 1542.

⁷¹⁰ October 17, 1542.

⁷¹¹ The line “Mooring is to moor” 津者津也 is absent from *Hoàng Việt văn tuyển*. Here, I insert it as found in *Bạch Vân am thi tập*.

The Emperor on High endows goodness;⁷¹²
People thus bestowed grasp the goblet.⁷¹³
Bound by natural endowments,
We pursue desires perniciously.
Gurgling and drowning, gurgling and drowning,
Pettily flapping about, pettily flapping about,
Lascivious, libertine, wicked, and perverted,
What repose do we ever afford to contemplate our misdeeds?

Nobility generates arrogance.
Wealth meets with opulence.
Extravagant halls and corridors,
With painted beams and jade ridges,
Luxurious stoves and pots,
Wax for firewood, malt for dried grains,
Drunk from rich liquors, full of the freshest foods,
Dressed in the lightest cloths, riding the fattest [horses];
A starving man rolling in a ditch,
For a single gold, too stingy!
A traveler sleeping exposed [out in the open],
A single covering we fail to donate.⁷¹⁴
All we see is profit,
As if crazy, as if obsessed.
The heart to do good—
Who might extend and carry it out?

The shelter's name is Centered Mooring.
Its meaning, from what is it derived?
"Centered" means goodness.
"Mooring" is for us to return.
Knowing where to stop, we are stable,

⁷¹² This is an allusion to the chapter "Remonstrations of Tang" in the *Book of Documents* or *Thư kinh* 書經 (Ch. *Shujing*), which reads, "The August Emperor on High endows goodness on the people below" 惟皇帝、降衷于下民.

⁷¹³ To "grasp the goblet" means to uphold proper norms.

⁷¹⁴ The *Bách Vân am thi tập* reads, "A single bowl we fail to donate" 一碗不施.

Without departing for even a moment.
Tread on level earth, the straight road,
Without becoming lost to byways.
Conduct yourself, attend to others.

Meditate on this! Abide therein!
Serve your father with utmost respect.
Serve your ruler without failing him.
Elder brothers be congenial, younger brothers reverent.
Husbands lead the melody, and wives follow with harmony.
When meeting friends, uphold trustworthiness.
Earnestly exhort one another,⁷¹⁵

Meditate on this Way of goodness!
That which is not our own,
But belongs to others,
Is still as if possessed by ourselves.

What kind of man is a sage?
His desires and ambitions few,
He pursues the pinnacle,
And is critical of his actions.

The instructions of the ancients are quite clear.
With sincerity as our companion,
Do not regard goodness as trite;
We must focus on it as a guide.
Do not regard evil as trite;
We must be wary of the slightest [deviance].

Now wise, now stupid,
One returns, the other is lost.
Cultured men of intelligence!

⁷¹⁵ The lines “Meeting friends, retain trustworthiness. Earnestly exhort one another” is an allusion to the *Analects*, which reads, “Friends should earnestly exhort one another” 朋友切切偲偲.

Vigorously appraise and contemplate!
Consider this purport!
Devotedly read this stele!⁷¹⁶

On an auspicious day during the first month of early spring in the third of thousands of years of Quảng Hòa (1541–1546).⁷¹⁷

The stele demonstrates Nguyễn Văn Đát's engagement with the local community, his participation in charitable projects, and the leadership role that he readily assumed. He gathered fellow villagers for an outing along the river, inspired them to support his idea for construction at the central ferry, put up the resources to fund the project, and assigned a team of specific individuals, including his own students, to carry out the project.⁷¹⁸ More importantly, the inscription reveals that Đát's purport in initiating the project was essentially moral. He praised his fellow villagers for their previous community projects, specifically the two bridges, and saw his contribution to the shelter as participation with his community's acts of goodness. In the sixteenth century, it was commonplace for literati to speak about "goodness" (*thiện*) when commemorating public works.⁷¹⁹ Goodness as a *habit* among scholars and their communities gave performative expression to Confucian ideas about human nature, created a common ethos, and lent an affective "aesthetic" morality to the physical structures that they created.⁷²⁰ In keeping with his

⁷¹⁶ Here *Bạch Vân am thi tập* reads, "Follow this purport; Do not be ashamed before this stele!" 順此名義、毋愧斯碑。

⁷¹⁷ That is between February 14 and March 14, 1543.

⁷¹⁸ Trương Thời Cử is known to have been one of Nguyễn Văn Đát's disciples. In some sources, his surname is given as Bùi. I have not been able to find any information about the identities of the others listed here.

⁷¹⁹ Nam Nguyễn, "Being Confucian in the Sixteenth-century Vietnam Reading Stele Inscriptions from the Mạc Dynasty (1527–1593)," 149–152.

⁷²⁰ Roger T. Ames and David L Hall, *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the Zhongyong* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 46–48, 76.

contemporaries' tradition of goodness, Đạt often spoke of his fondness for such acts. For example, in commemoration of a village community's restoration of a bridge in 1568, he wrote, "[like these villagers] I am also fond of goodness... Scholars should encourage good deeds, fostering goodness in people's hearts to create a land of goodness. Then we would all dwell in a realm of goodness."⁷²¹ Similarly, in 1587, to commemorate a votive statue of Diệu Thiện 妙善, a pious Buddhist daughter turned *bodhisattva*, Đạt opined, "Diệu Thiện (lit., "Marvelous Goodness") gained her name from "goodness," which is found nowhere else except within the nature of the heart. If people with goodness could indeed broadly illuminate the way of goodness and reverently preserve teachings about goodness, root it in themselves and extend it towards others, then the fortune that would flow forth would be limitless."⁷²² Similarly, Đạt began his stele inscription for Centered Mooring Shelter with a rhetorical assertion of Mencian inherent goodness and an explanation for ordinary individuals' uneven expressions of goodness by quoting nearly verbatim from Chu Hy's 朱熹 (1130–1200) commentary on the *Great Learning*.⁷²³

By speaking of goodness, Nguyễn Văn Đạt followed the conventions of his contemporaries. What set him apart regarding his conceptualization of community volunteer projects was his emphasis on the Confucian classic *Trung Dong* 中庸 or *Centering Constantly* (more conventionally translated *Doctrine of the Mean*).⁷²⁴ Đạt's use of *centering* or *trung* for the name of Centered Mooring Shelter takes

⁷²¹ Nguyễn Hữu Tường, "Hai tấm bia Trạng Trình soạn mới phát hiện ở Thái Bình."

⁷²² Đinh Khắc Thuân, *Văn khắc Hán Nôm thời Mạc*, 259–263.

⁷²³ Daniel Gardner, *The Four Books: The Basic Teachings of the Later Confucian Tradition* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), 3; Ian Johnson and Wang Ping, *Daxue and Zhongyong* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2012), 126–127.

⁷²⁴ Nam Nguyễn, "Being Confucian in the Sixteenth-century Vietnam Reading Stele Inscriptions from the Mạc Dynasty (1527–1593)," 151.

advantage of the multifaceted connotations of the word that, as in the *Trung Dong* itself, engendered many philosophical possibilities and open interpretation over the centuries from cosmological and metaphysical speculation to the common and mundane.⁷²⁵ Today, owing to its abstruse language, “*Trung Dong* thinking” has even been abstracted for clinical and business applications.⁷²⁶ In his stele inscription, Đạt’s explanation of *trung* shows familiarity with Chu Hy’s understanding of the text, in which one arrives at the utmost goodness (*chí thiện*) of the *Great Learning*, and rests there in constant equilibrium without deviation irrespective of external disturbances and disruptions.⁷²⁷ For instance, Chu Hy explained, “Not deviating to either side is called being ‘central’ [*trung*]. Not changing is called being ‘constant’ [*dong*].”⁷²⁸ What is remarkable about Đạt’s usage of *trung* is that he gave Chu Hy’s ideas tangible expression with a metaphor that resonated with the eastern coast’s riverine landscape, the image of mooring a boat at the central ferry, where he had led the village elders on an outing. Đạt likened the practice of *trung* to landing a boat at a dock and then remaining moored there without drifting away. Whereas Chu Hy expounded in abstraction with comments like “To overshoot is to fail to maintain perfect balance; to fall short is

⁷²⁵ For a survey of historical interpretations and translations see Ian Johnson and Wang Ping, *Daxue and Zhongyong*, 181–185.

⁷²⁶ E.g., Fan Zhonghe, “Knowledge Sharing Mediates the Relationship between Zhongyong Thinking and Employee Creativity” *Social Behavior & Personality* 49 (2021): 1–9; He Xuan, “Symbiotic Relationship of Modern Contract and Traditional Ethic: Entrepreneur’s Zhongyong Rationality and Family Firm Governance Choice” *Frontiers of Business Research in China* 5, no. 3 (2011): 436–451; Wei Jiangru, Yuting Chen, Yamin Zhang, and Jing Zhang, “How Does Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy Influence Innovation Behavior? Exploring the Mechanism of Job Satisfaction and Zhongyong Thinking,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (May 8, 2020): 1–15; Yang Jianfeng, Hao Ji, and Conor O’Leary, “Group Ethical Decision-Making Process in Chinese Business: Analysis from Social Decision Scheme and Cultural Perspectives” *Ethics and Behavior* 27, no. 3 (April 1, 2017): 201–220; Yuan Li, and Robert Chia, “The Effect of Traditional Chinese Fuzzy Thinking on Human Resource Practices in Mainland China,” *Chinese Management Studies* 5, no. 4 (January 1, 2011): 431–449.

⁷²⁷ Daniel Gardner, *The Four Books*, 107–109.

⁷²⁸ Ian Johnson and Wang Ping, *Daxue and Zhongyong*, 406–407. In this passage, Zhu Xi was actually quoting Cheng Yi.

not to have arrived yet,”⁷²⁹ Đạt illustrated *Trung Dong* by saying that misdirected tack would overshoot the dock, while a poor jibe would undershoot it, in both cases missing the dock altogether. Such a sailor would be wayward and drifting unmoored. Proper landing at the dock required balanced steering; staying there necessitated vigilant moorage. Therefore, for Đạt, utmost goodness was a skill to be honed with practice. Moral cultivation was an ongoing process of “focusing,” or, in Đạt’s metaphor, zeroing in on the landing.⁷³⁰

More importantly, by erecting a shelter at the central ferry, Nguyễn Văn Đạt created a physical refuge that embodied balanced goodness in a space where it could be cultivated individually, performed communally, and extended outwardly toward travelers from afar. Đạt built the shelter in 1542 at a time of relative prosperity. As he himself depicted it, the structure was built along a river bustling with trade and travel with an equally busy road just to the south. As such, the shelter was meant to be a balanced, tranquil space amid clamorous business and travel. But, as Đạt had already intuited, the 1540s were a time of increasing disorder and, by the end of the decade, the political vagaries of the Mạc realm erupted in ways that devastated the east. At such a juncture, Đạt’s shelter offered an open, neutral haven for refugees fleeing from war and famine. The irony of this, however, was that Đạt himself would be pulled away to face growing chaos afield.

Moored in Morality

Nguyễn Văn Đạt imagined Centered Mooring Shelter as a peaceful rest stop removed from the clangorous activity that passed through the central ferry (also called

⁷²⁹ Daniel Gardner, “Zhu Xi’s Commentarial Work: Abiding in the Mean and the Constant,” in *Zhu Xi: Selected Writings*, ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 196.

⁷³⁰ Roger T. Ames and David L Hall, *Focusing the Familiar*, 7, 16–17.

Hàn Độ or Cold Ferry) and the main road in front of it as well as a moral safe haven away from the political turbulence, natural disasters, and violence that occasioned the east from the time that Đat retired through the remained of his life. Đat not only inscribed his message about unwavering goodness onto his shelter through physical architecture and steles, but through poetry as well. He took special interest in composing *vịnh* 詠 poems about sites and objects at Centered Mooring Shelter. These *vịnh* pieces like a still-life or snapshot captured images of particular sites, objects, and creatures in concise language. Over fifty such poems are found in extant anthologies of Đat's writings. In most of these poems, Đat associated the subject of his poem with moral principles, especially goodness, and a sense of principled aloofness alongside the nobility of poverty. For example, he wrote of the road in front of his shelter:

一條大路接通津，	A large road connects to the open ferry; ⁷³¹
坦蕩不嫌混世塵。	Level and expansive, it does not pettily sully itself with
古往今來都是夢，	worldly dust.
不知留得幾行人。	From past to present, all a dream;
	Who knows how many travelers have tarried here? ⁷³²

The road to Nguyễn Văn Đat's shelter was large and full of activity. It ran right up to the dock at Centered Mooring Shelter, but it did not carry dust from outside with it. Instead, it is noble (not petty) and stands aloof outside ordinary time as if in a dream, all the while providing a place to rest for the countless travelers whom it attracts to linger there. With similar language, Đat wrote poems about the pond beside the shelter, a pair of banyan trees, and a river lookout and bell tower nearby.⁷³³ He also wrote *vịnh* poems about the animals around the shelter, whom he attributed with human qualities, including morality. As we might expect, Đat ascribed the capacity for "goodness" (*thiện*) to the

⁷³¹ Thông Tân or the Open Ferry was another name for Centered Mooring Shelter.

⁷³² Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Văn Đat), "Trung Tân quán tiền đại lộ" 中津館前大路, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập*, manuscript, Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. Hv.25, 3a.

⁷³³ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.35b–36a, 2.7b, 2.12b, 2.51a–b.

creatures about Centered Mooring Shelter. For example, in a poem about the shelter's chickens, Đạt wrote:

五德有至情，	With five virtues and possessed of the sincerest sentiments,
三號非惡聲。	[The cock's] three calls are not an awful sound.
孳孳助為善，	Assiduously he helps by performing goodness,
時向曉窗鳴。	And time and again crows by the window at dawn. ⁷³⁴

In the poem, Đạt gives us both a vignette of a cock crowing in the morning by the shelter's window and a moral lesson steeped in allusion. Đạt personified the rooster with five moral attributes associated with the noble bird (literary skill, martial prowess, courage, benevolence, and trustworthiness).⁷³⁵ Possessed of the sincerest sentiments, the bird's three calls, the sound of which might otherwise be associated with death and mourning, were actually acts of goodness (*thiện*).⁷³⁶ Finally, by paraphrasing the words of Mencius, who linked the cock's cry to the virtues of King Thuán (Shun) 舜, Đạt portrayed the rooster as his assistant, whose contribution was to keep Đạt disciplined by waking him.⁷³⁷

In other *vịnh* poems, Nguyễn Văn Đạt issued his message about goodness in a more lighthearted tone. Whereas Đạt thought that the rooster's cry kept him to the sedulous practice of goodness, he found the dog's bark quite annoying. In a poem "The Shelter's Dog," Đạt disciplined the noisy canine.⁷³⁸

不要惡狺狺，	No need to bark so maliciously!
只要善循循。	Just be good and obedient!
莫向柴門吠，	Don't bark before my bramble gate!

⁷³⁴ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, "Quán kê" 館雞, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (Hv.25), 4b–5a; c.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017.A.2256), 2.7a.

⁷³⁵ That is *văn* 文, *võ* 武, *dũng* 勇, *nhân* 仁, and *tín* 信.

⁷³⁶ For the three cries' (*tam hiệu*) association with mourning, see the chapter about funeral rites in the *Book of Rites* and the funeral of Lao Dan (Laozi) in the *Zhuangzi*. "Sang Da ji," in *Liji*, available at *Chinese Text Project*, passage 3, <https://ctext.org/liji/sang-da-ji#n10201>; "Yangsheng zhu," in *Zhuangzi*, available at *Chinese Text Project*, passage 5, <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/nourishing-the-lord-of-life#n2738>.

⁷³⁷ Mencius (7A.25) taught, "He who rises with the cock's cry and assiduously performs goodness (*thiện*) is a disciple of King Thuán (Shun)." "Jinxin shang," in *Mengzi*, available at *Chinese Text Project*, passage 25, <https://ctext.org/mengzi/jin-xin-i/zh#n1816>.

⁷³⁸ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, "Quán khuyển" 館犬, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (Hv.25), 5a; c.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017.A.2256), 2.7a–b.

恐驚行路人。

I'm afraid that you'll startle folks walking on the road.

However facetious, Đat's poem about the shelter's dog like that of the chicken called for the abandonment of wickedness (*ác*, here, translated “maliciously”) in favor of pursuing goodness (*thiện*).

Nguyễn Văn Đat projected his moralizing voice in graver situations as well, particularly in crises when he was recalled to service away from Centered Mooring Shelter. During a military campaign from 1550 to 1551, he wrote several missive poems admonishing his compatriots at a time when many contemplated defecting to the enemy. Alluding to the Đường general credited with rescuing the dynasty from rebellion, Đat sent a message to the Mạc general, Commandery Duke Ninh, saying, “If you want to know how Quách Tử Nghi 郭子儀 (697–781) kept his reputation whole, then recognize that you must be able to be at peace with your righteous mission.”⁷³⁹ During the same campaign, in a poem to Đỗ Tông 杜綜 (1504–?), Đat admonished the 1529 examination's prime laureate, “I exhort you not to betray your entire life of study; Cease to be bothered by others' narrow-minded ways.”⁷⁴⁰ That Đat felt empowered to criticize Tông despite Tông's seniority as a prime laureate from two palace examinations earlier than Đat's shows the latter's confidence as a moralizing voice. In a more famous episode, after meeting with Nguyễn Thiến on a boat during the 1550–1551 campaign and learning that his long-time friend had resolved to switch allegiances and oppose the Mạc, Đat wrote to him with disappointment, “Look at me alone with abiding righteousness! Learning that

⁷³⁹ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Lưu đề Ninh quốc công,” in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.65a. Quách Tử Nghi (Guo Ziyi) was credited with quelling the An Lushan Rebellion.

⁷⁴⁰ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Tây hồ giản Lại Ốc Đỗ trạng nguyên” 西扈簡賴渥杜狀元, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.51b–52a.

your position has changed, how could I condone this?”⁷⁴¹ According to Đat’s eighteenth century biographer, “After receiving the poem, Thiến was terribly sullen.”⁷⁴² The same biographer credits Đat with later winning back the loyalty of Thiến’s sons, Nguyễn Quyện 阮倦 (1511–1593) and Nguyễn Miễn 阮免 (?–1593?), for the Mạc regime after their father died in 1557.⁷⁴³ Thereafter, Quyện honored his late father’s friendship with Đat by supporting Đat, as he did with provisions of rice during famine.⁷⁴⁴ Despite such benefaction, Đat took the occasion of Quyện’s charity to chasten him, “The constant virtues toward ruler and father have endured since antiquity for a thousand years; Of loyalty and filial piety, I implore you not to betray your original heart,”⁷⁴⁵ and cautioned, “Those of high talent often manifest jealousy; Those of weighty power easily grow malignant.”⁷⁴⁶ With words like these, Đat insisted that Quyện recall that his (and his father’s) loyalty originally rested with the Mạc and required that he not think too highly of himself or act presumptuously.

Such examples were impressive displays of Đat’s confidence as a moralizing force, but perhaps his most audacious criticism was the words he delivered to Mạc Kính Điển in

⁷⁴¹ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Loạn trung ký Nguyễn Cảo Xuyên” 亂中寄阮杲川, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.48b.

⁷⁴² Vũ Khâm Thân (1703–? t.s. 1727), “Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đat” 白雲庵居士阮公文達譜記 (1744) in Vũ Phương Đề, *Quick Jottings in Idleness* 公餘捷記, manuscript (Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies), accession no. A.44, 58b. Thân placed the exchange in the third year of Cảnh Lịch (1550).

⁷⁴³ Ibid. Nguyễn Quyện and Nguyễn Miễn returned to side with the Mạc in the eighth month of Nam Tỵ (Sept. 3–Oct. 3, 1557). Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, trans. Ngô Thế Long (Hà Nội: Viện Sử học, NXB Văn hóa thông tin, 2006), 376.

⁷⁴⁴ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Tạ Thạch quận công huệ mễ” 謝石郡公惠米, in *Bạch Vân am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình quốc công thi tập*, manuscript, Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. VHv.2081, 37b. After accepting the rice, Nguyễn Văn Đat expressed his gratitude to Nguyễn Quyện by telling the latter’s fortune.

⁷⁴⁵ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Lưu đề Thạch quận công” 留題石郡公, in *Bạch Vân Am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình Quốc Công thi tập*, manuscript, Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. VHv.850, 42a.

⁷⁴⁶ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Ký Thạch quận” 寄石郡, *Bạch Vân am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình quốc công thi tập* (VHv.2081), 38a. This and Nguyễn Văn Đat’s other poems were all written after 1557, since they refer to Nguyễn Quyện by a title he received in that year.

1563. On the occasion of Điền's birthday in early spring, Đạt congratulated him with a poem that ended, "The state of the kingdom and the hearts of the people should terrify you; I hope that you will be more careful and restrained, never forgetting the [potential or apparent] danger."⁷⁴⁷ Kính Điền had been a powerful figure in the Mạc regime since he became regent in 1547, and, by 1562, when an infant was installed as emperor, his control over the dynasty became virtually absolute. That Đạt felt he could so harshly accuse the de facto Mạc Dynasty ruler of complacency and neglect (on his birthday no less!) demonstrated that Đạt had come to assume the role of the dynasty's supreme moral authority.

Leaving for Đại Đồng

Nguyễn Văn Đạt's moral presence is what made his assistance so valuable in dealing with the crises for which he was recalled from retirement. These crises originated from disaffection with Mạc Đăng Dung's seizure of power. After Dung established his new regime, resistance to the Mạc splintered into three major parties that took shape by early 1531.⁷⁴⁸ The first was led by two brothers of the Trịnh surname who occupied Thái Nguyên north of the capital. This movement seems to have quickly fizzled out. The second was headed by Nguyễn Kim 阮淦 (1468–1545), who took refuge in what is modern day Laos. He succeeded in reestablishing the Lê dynastic line by anointing a scion of the former royal family as emperor. After his abrupt assassination in 1545, his son-in-law Trịnh Kiểm 鄭檢 (1503–1570) and then Kiểm's son Trịnh Tùng 鄭松 (1550–1623) led the Lê loyalist forces as guardians of the Lê dynastic lineage from the base they

⁷⁴⁷ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, "Hạ Khiêm đại vương dân nhật" 賀謙大王誕日, *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 66b–67a. In the poem, Nguyễn Văn Đạt's use of the idiom of the *Changes* shows that the poem was written in the *Dần* month of a *Hợi* year; that is the first lunar month of Quý Hợi (Feb. 3–Mar. 4, 1563).

⁷⁴⁸ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, 340–341.

established in Thanh Hoa. It was this Lê-Trịnh regime that went on to reclaim Thăng Long in 1592 and ultimately expelled the Mạc from the Red River Delta. The third group was led by two brothers originally from the eastern delta who took control of the regions upriver from the former Hùng-Lạc capital at Bạch Hạc (Việt Trì). It was against this force in these remote territories that Đat applied himself in defense of the Mạc.

The brothers, Vũ Văn Uyên (?–1546?) and his younger brother Vũ Văn Mật (?–*ca.*1571) hailed from Ba Đông Village about 30 kilometers northwest of Nguyễn Văn Đat’s home village.⁷⁴⁹ They came from a family of humble blacksmiths and originally seem to have harbored few political ambitions. The identities of the brothers are conflated in the extant sources, but apparently one of them murdered a fellow villager, and so the two fled to the remote upriver regions to evade punishment several years before the Mạc Dynasty’s founding.⁷⁵⁰ They settled in Khau Bàu Village in the Đại Đồng Territory (*châu*) through which the Trôi (Chảy) River coursed west of the capital.⁷⁵¹ At Khau Bàu, the brothers succeeded in winning the favor of a wealthy local family, and their rise to prominence began after Mật (or Uyên) married its patriarch’s daughter.⁷⁵² The local chief (probably not a Vietnamese) was reputedly cruel and thus hated by the local tribes. When the chief called upon the services of the brothers to forge something for him, Mật (or Uyên) took the opportunity to kill the chief with his blacksmith’s hammer.⁷⁵³ Taking advantage of the locals’ animus toward the old chief and credit for this “heroic” murder,

⁷⁴⁹ Ba Đông is now in Gia Lộc District of Hải Dương province.

⁷⁵⁰ Trần Huy Phác, *Hải Dương phong vật chí* (1811), in *Địa phương chí tỉnh Hải Dương qua tư liệu Hán Nôm* ed. Đinh Khắc Thuân (Hà Nội: Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm, NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2009), 167.

⁷⁵¹ The former Khau Bàu Village is now part of Yên Bình District of Yên Bái Province between Lady Falls (Thác Bà) and the right bank of the Chảy River. The Trôi (Chảy) River once flowed freely from Yunnan to converge with the Thao (Red) River, but it has been dammed at Lady Falls since 1971, forming a large artificial lake upstream.

⁷⁵² Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam nhất thống chí*, trans. Phạm Trọng Điềm, ed. Đào Duy Anh (Huế: NXB Thuận Hóa, 2006), tập 4, 419.

⁷⁵³ Trần Huy Phác, *Hải Dương phong vật chí*, 167.

the brothers banded together the many tribes that inhabited the upriver regions of the Thao (Red), Trôi, and Lô Rivers with the elder Uyên emerging as their leader.⁷⁵⁴ As their following grew, they rose up in arms first at the lowest reaches of the Thao River and then, working their way upstream, they eventually gained control of the territories all the way to the Ngọc Uyên mountain valley hamlet (*động*) near the border of the Minh's Vân Nam (Yunnan) Province.⁷⁵⁵ Their forces reportedly numbered in the tens of thousands, and they exerted influence over territories ranging from their stronghold at Đại Đồng at the convergence of today's Phó Thọ, Yên Bái, and Tuyên Quang provinces upstream through Lào Cai and Hà Giang to the border of southern China.⁷⁵⁶ By 1533, they succeeded in establishing a total of eleven military settlements (*dinh*) that stretched even further to Thái Nguyên and Cao Bằng north of Thăng Long.⁷⁵⁷ To defend their position, they erected a series of fortifications along the Trôi River and, near their old home in Khau Bàu, established their central base camp, Nghị Lang Citadel, ensconced against three fortuitous mountain peaks and overlooking the river.⁷⁵⁸ Because they emerged from Khau Bàu, the brothers became known as the Bàu Lords, and their defenses were called

⁷⁵⁴ The Thao (Red) River flowed from Yunnan through Lào Cai and Yên Bái to Việt Trì (formerly Bạch Hạc) in Phú Thọ Province. The Lô River flowed from Yunnan through Hà Giang and Tuyên Quang until merging with the Thao River at Việt Trì. The Trôi (Chảy) River flowed between them. Lê Quý Đôn, *Kiến văn tiểu lục* 見聞小錄 (1777), trans. Đinh Khắc Thuân (Tp. Hồ Chí Minh: NXB Giáo dục, 2009), tập 2, 83–88.

⁷⁵⁵ Lê Quý Đôn, *Kiến văn tiểu lục*, tập 2, 171. Ngọc Uyên was in present day Lào Cai Province. On the meaning of *động*, here rendered “mountain valley hamlet,” see Kathlene Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 122–123.

⁷⁵⁶ Ngô Thị Nhậm, *Hải Đông chí lược* (1772), in *Ngô Thị Nhậm toàn tập*, ed. Lâm Giang (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, 2006), tập 5, 480–481.

⁷⁵⁷ Lê Quý Đôn, *Kiến văn tiểu lục*, tập 2, 171.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 172. There is discrepancy about the exact location of Nghị Lang Citadel, but if Lê Quý Đôn was correct, then it was in today's Yên Bình District of Yên Bái Province, probably at Lady Falls (Thác Bà) Dam. The famed Tang Dynasty geomancer Cao Biền (Gao Pian) is said to have created the mountain formation where the citadel was built. For the locations of some of the other Bàu Fortifications, see *Đại Nam nhất thống chí*, tập 4, 411. Vestiges of the Bàu Fortifications were recognized as a national heritage site in 2013.

the Bàu Fortifications.⁷⁵⁹ These were the formidable adversaries that Nguyễn Văn Đạt was called on to confront at least three times during his life.

From the perspective of the lowlands, the upriver regions were remote and foreboding territories populated by menacing non-Vietnamese peoples, some of whom were reputed to unwittingly transform into vampire-like predatory flying bloodsuckers at night.⁷⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the Vũ brothers managed to transform Đại Đồng into a flourishing center of trade. The many rivers that coursed through Đại Đồng and connected southern China to the lands of the middle Red River as well as the region's abundant mineral resources contributed to Đại Đồng's prosperity.⁷⁶¹ Under the Bàu Lords, agricultural production increased as well owing to technologies purportedly introduced by Vũ Văn Mật's daughter.⁷⁶² Confident with such successes, the brothers seem to have adopted the trappings of an imperial dynasty. After Vũ Văn Uyên died soon after repelling an assault led by Emperor Mạc Phúc Hải (r. 1540–1546), Mật assumed leadership of Đại Đồng and bestowed on his brother the posthumous name Great Ancestor (Thái Tổ), a ceremonial title reserved for the founder of a dynastic lineage.⁷⁶³ In fact, Mật's son would succeed his father in 1571, and the Bàu Lords of the Vũ clan continued to exert autonomous rule over

⁷⁵⁹ Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam nhất thống chí*, tập 4, 420.

⁷⁶⁰ By Lê Quý Đôn's count, there were nine upriver peoples: Nùng, Hoàng Xi (Yellow Teethed), Hóa Thường, Tào, Ngô Ngạn, Mán, Xá Ngoại, La Quả, and Trá Tụ. *Kiến văn tiểu lục*, 94–95, 107, 147–149.

⁷⁶¹ Lê Quý Đôn, *Kiến văn tiểu lục*, tập 2, 23, 152, 175; Ngô Thị Nhâm, *Hải Đông chí lược*, 492.

⁷⁶² She was Vũ Thị Ngọc Anh, who since at least the eighteenth century has been venerated as a Goddess of the Granary (Bà Chúa Kho). Minh Đức, "Thăng Giêng nhớ Chúa Bàu," *Báo Yên Bái*, February 16, 2011, http://baoyenbai.com.vn/226/70643/Thang_Gieng_nh%E1%BB%80_Chua_Bau.htm.

⁷⁶³ This is evidenced in a poem by Nguyễn Hăng. See below. The time of Vũ Văn Uyên's death is murky, but according to Ngô Thị Nhâm, Uyên died soon after defeating an attack by Mạc Phúc Hải, perhaps *circa* 1546. *Hải Đông chí lược*, 492. In a written speech delivered in 1546 and quoted verbatim by Lê Quý Đôn, Phạm Tử Nghi mentioned Uyên by name, suggesting that he was still alive at that time. *Đại Việt thông sử*, 352.

the upriver regions from Đại Đồng until the second half of the seventeenth century, when the Lê-Trịnh regime finally exerted direct control over the area for the first time.⁷⁶⁴

What danger did the Bàu Lords present for the Mạc, and why was Nguyễn Văn Đát specifically chosen to tackle them? The Vũ brothers left their hometown before the ascension of Mạc Đăng Dung, so they remained partial to the Lê imperial line and never recognized Mạc rule. In 1534, when the Minh inquired of the disturbances unfolding for their southern neighbor, the Vũ brothers, taking advantage of their proximity to the Minh border, sent communications denouncing the Mạc while vouching for the Trịnh brothers in Thái Nguyên and the Lê court Nguyễn Kim assembled in exile.⁷⁶⁵ Their correspondences were effective, and, in 1538, the Minh “instructed” the Vũ brothers to recruit Lê loyalists and prepare for a joint war effort against the Mạc.⁷⁶⁶ Thus, the Bàu Lords posed a potent diplomatic and military threat to the Mạc. At the same time, by occupying the upriver lands, the Vũ clan deprived the Mạc of critical natural materials, territory, and human resources.

As a *Thái Ất* adept, Nguyễn Văn Đát was well suited to address the Bàu Lords’ military challenge. Prognostication was part and parcel of military practice since at least the Warring States period as prescribed by the so-called military classics.⁷⁶⁷ *Thái Ất* studies, in particular, were highly valued on the battlefield in premodern Vietnam.⁷⁶⁸ But what truly made Đát an invaluable asset for the Mạc was his moral bearing. The Bàu Lords presented a unique challenge. They conscientiously crafted an image for their lands

⁷⁶⁴ Ngô Thi Nhậm, *Hải Đông chí lược*, 493; Nguyễn Văn Siêu, *Đại Việt địa dư toàn biên* (Hà Nội: Viện Sử học, NXB Văn hóa, 1997), 420; Phan Huy Chú, *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí* (Hà Nội: Viện Sử học, NXB Khoa học xã học, 1992), tập 1, 145.

⁷⁶⁵ Phan Huy Chú, *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, tập 1, 337.

⁷⁶⁶ Kathlene Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam*, 135.

⁷⁶⁷ Ralph Sawyer, “Martial Prognostication,” in *Military Culture in Imperial China*, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 45.

⁷⁶⁸ Lê Quý Đôn, 黎貴惇 (1726–1784), *Thái Ất dị giản lục*, Sinographic text in *Thái Ất dị giản lục*, edited and translated by Đặng Đức Lương (Hà Nội: NXB Văn hóa thông tin, 1997), 133, 142.

that portrayed Đại Đồng as a refuge for the principled recluse—staunch Lê loyalists, former officials disaffected with the Mạc, and scholars who simply hoped to escape the dangerous and volatile situation downstream. Whereas Đat presented himself as an urban recluse, who like Đào Tiềm 陶潛 (365–427) built his hermitage by a peopled road, eremitism in the remote regions of Đại Đồng was the real thing. The distant, difficult territories of Đại Đồng provided an ideal scene for the recluse who sought to leave the world behind. People wary of life under the Mạc, including disenchanted scholars, responded to the Bàu Lords’ summons and came to Đại Đồng in notable numbers.⁷⁶⁹

To fashion Đại Đồng into a haven for recluses, the Bàu Lords relied on poetry. Although (or perhaps because?) they began as artisans, the Vũ brothers were keen to literary sensibilities. When Vũ Văn Mật heard that Nguyễn Hăng 阮沆, a former provincial graduate during Lê Tư Thành’s Hồng Đức Era (1470–1497), had rejected the Mạc and assumed the life of a recluse, Mật summoned Hăng from his home at the periphery of the Bàu Lord’s downriver territory, where the three main rivers converged, to Đại Đồng Citadel and treated Hăng as an honored guest.⁷⁷⁰ During the banquet, Mật enjoined Hăng to compose a vernacular poetic exposition (*phú*) about Đại Đồng. Hăng complied with a poem called “The Cultured Landscape [of Đại Đồng],” which regaled Mật with lofty language that recalled the Great (Imperial) Ancestor (Vũ Văn Uyên), praised the royal citadel (*vuông thành*), and with words reminiscent of Nguyễn Văn Đat’s poetry, celebrated Đại Đồng’s brilliance in the idiom of the *Changes*, “Heaven gave birth to a sagacious Lord (*Chúa*); [His] land is possessed of good subjects; In accord with the

⁷⁶⁹ Ngô Thi Nhậm, *Hải Đông chí lược*, 492; Nguyễn Văn Siêu, *Đại Việt địa dư toàn biên*, 420.

⁷⁷⁰ Nguyễn Hăng lived in Xuân Lũng Village in what is now Lâm Thao District of Phú Thọ Province. Lê Quý Đôn records that Vũ Văn Mật summoned Hăng during the Nguyên Hòa Era (1533–1548). If Vũ Văn Uyên indeed died during the reign of Mạc Phúc Hải, and Đôn did not confuse the Vũ brothers, then this episode probably took place *circa* 1547–1548.

hexagram *Càn* (Heaven), [he] follows the proper time as destiny unfolds; Guided by the lines of the hexagram *Sư* (The General), [he] finds the laws of using the military.”⁷⁷¹ By soliciting such words by a renown recluse, Mậ́t inscribed Đạ́i Đòng with a call to principled recluses seeking refuge and literary solace from the troubles downstream and cast himself as their patron.

This is why Nguyễn Văn Đạ́t was essential to Mạc campaigns against the Bầu Lords. As the premier recluse of the Mạc lands, Đạ́t countered Vũ Văn Mậ́t’s summons. In addition to his military and divinatory expertise, Đạ́t presented a moral refutation of Mậ́t’s claim as the patron of disaffected recluses, for if the Mạc were noble enough to summon a recluse of Đạ́t’s standing from retirement with the intention of subduing Đạ́i Đòng, then it was the Mạc rather than the Bầu Lords who deserved the recluses’ favor. Thus, throughout these campaigns, Đạ́t composed travel poems that recast Đạ́i Đòng as a land disturbed by rebellion and in need of solace, which Đạ́t and the Mạc afforded. For example, when crossing the Thao (Red) River on a campaign against the Bầu Lords, Đạ́t wrote, “Temporarily I give up my scholar’s cap to clutch a battle flag; For a second time, I come to cross this river... Now, for a sagacious ruler, benevolence overcomes violence; To rescue the people is a matter of widely inviting surrender.”⁷⁷² Poetry like this reinscribed Đạ́i Đòng’s riverscape as a place that summoned the great recluse, Đạ́t, but not in rejection of the Mạc, but rather in the service of their noble ruler, who put benevolence above violence with a mind to accept the locals’ surrender without the need to fight. In

⁷⁷¹ Lê Quý Đôn, *Kiến văn tiểu lục*, tập 2, 23, 172–175. Nguyễn Hắg conjured the hexagrams *Càn* 乾 ☰ and *Sư* 師 ☶.

⁷⁷² This poem was written in 1551, when Nguyễn Văn Đạ́t was sixty years old. The title of the poem points to the “right river,” which suggests the Thao (Red) River right of the Trời (Cháy) and Lô rivers. The Đạ (Black) River was a major river that flowed to the right of the Thao River, but none of Đạ́t’s poetry suggests that he traveled there. Nguyễn Bính Khiêm, “Hứu Giang” 右江, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144). 60a; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.51a.

addition, Đạt reclaimed Đại Đồng’s literary composition by cultivating a personal relationship with it, saying, “Since ancient times, the southern kingdom’s landforms have been superb; Most of all I love the western stretch of this famous river!”⁷⁷³ Moreover, as was the case in this last couplet, Đạt appealed to historical time to suggest that by quelling the Bàu Lords, the Mạc would return the landscape back to its natural state, pristine and peaceful. For instance, he wrote, “Again, I go west to inspect Tuyên Quang; This delightful land has now become a battlefield... We will see that once the king’s soldiers have pacified the land; The rivers and mountains will return to the frontier of old.”⁷⁷⁴

Of course, Nguyễn Văn Đạt’s participation in these campaigns to the west created a problem for him. How could he claim to be an aloof recluse after repeatedly reentering official service? His westward quests exposed him to the charges of hypocrisy that we saw earlier, and this sapped him of his moral authority. How could Đạt reconcile the apparent contraction between going off to active service (*xuất*) and abiding in reclusion (*xử*)? As we might expect, he accomplished this through poetry each time he returned home by portraying Centered Mooring Shelter as a self-contained “heaven and earth” sequestered from the turmoil around it and appealing to Đạt’s favorite image of snowy whiteness.

Returning to Centered Mooring Shelter

Nguyễn Văn Đạt participated in at least three military campaigns against the Bàu Lords. Not much can be gleaned about his first mission, but it seems to have taken place between 1540 and 1545, when Đạt would have accompanied Emperor Mạc Phúc Hải (r.

⁷⁷³ The western river was the Thao (Red) River. This poem was written before 1545, since it was sent to Nguyễn Bình Đức, who died in that year. Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Phụng căn tông quả Thao Giang” 奉跟從過洮江, *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 54a; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.43a.

⁷⁷⁴ This poem was also written in 1551. Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, ““Hựu Giang,” 右江, *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 60b; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.52b.

1540–1546) to attack Đại Đồng.⁷⁷⁵ Đạt seems to have met with some success on this expedition. His poetry reveals that he and the Mạc forces made their way upriver through the Bàu defenses at Tang Ma Fortress (Phú Thọ), the Đại Đồng heartland in Quy Hóa, Thu Vật, and Văn Bàn (Yên Bái), and all the way to Ngọc Uyển, the mountain village hamlet in the Thủy Vĩ Territory (Lào Cai) near the Minh border that had served as an early foothold during the Vũ brothers rise to power.⁷⁷⁶

The second campaign occurred from 1550 to 1551. This crisis was triggered by the defection of Lê Bá Ly 黎伯驪 (1476–1557), a seventy-seven year old stalwart of the Mạc Dynasty who had been with Mạc Đăng Dung since his early days. After the Mạc regent's foster brother slandered Ly's son and gathered a private army against him, the senior general reluctantly turned to seek refuge with the Lê loyalists in Thanh Hoa. Ly then led his armies against the Mạc in conjunction with Trịnh Kiểm and Vũ Văn Mật's forces. The assault succeeded in seizing Thăng Long and forced the Mạc Emperor to seek safety in the more secure east. After three months of fighting, the Lê Emperor, intuiting Trịnh Kiểm's hesitation, decided not to press their advantage and withdrew.⁷⁷⁷

Witnessing the defections that occasioned this war, Nguyễn Văn Đạt served as a moralizer to shore up the loyalty of wavering Mạc officials and generals by writing many of the missive poems cited above. He also made his second journey to Đại Đồng, this time reaching Thu Vật and Đại Yên (Yên Bái).⁷⁷⁸

⁷⁷⁵ In a series of poems about this mission, Nguyễn Văn Đạt used *tây hồ* 西扈 or “accompanying the emperor to the west” in his title. According to Ngô Thì Nhậm, Mạc Phúc Hải personally led forces (r. 1540–1546) to attack Đại Đồng. Đạt sent one of his poems on this expedition to Nguyễn Bình Đức (1493–1545), who died in 1545. Hence, Đạt's first mission probably took place between 1540 and 1545. It may have been earlier if the mission was led by a previous emperor Mạc Đăng Dung or Mạc Đăng Doanh, but I am unaware of such a campaign. Ngô Thì Nhậm, *Hải Đông chí lược*, 491–492.

⁷⁷⁶ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.43a–45a.

⁷⁷⁷ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, 359–370.

⁷⁷⁸ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.48a–53a.

The third campaign took place from 1559 to 1561 in response to a massive logistical operation masterminded by Trịnh Kiểm. Kiểm coordinated with Vũ Vất Mật to create a supply chain that flowed from the Lê base in Thanh Hoa to the remote upriver regions that Mật controlled and around to the north and northeast to Thái Nguyên and Lạng Sơn. Trịnh Kiểm and Vũ Văn Mật's forces then descended from the north to take control of several territories in the eastern Red River Delta. By going around the capital through the west and north and then striking the east, the Lê loyalists succeeded in surrounding Thăng Long in all directions. The Mạc intended to outlast their enemies' offensive, but after two years, owing to Kiểm and Mật's supply chains, the Lê loyalists showed no sign of relenting. At this impasse, Nguyễn Văn Đát proposed a surprise naval assault on Thanh Hoa, where the Lê emperor remained, in order to force Trịnh Kiểm to withdraw his troops and rush to the Lê emperor's rescue. Thus, in the seventh month of *Tân Dậu* (Aug. 21–Sep. 18, 1561), the Mạc regent Mạc Kính Điển launched his war ships and landed on the Thanh Hoa coast.⁷⁷⁹ According to one version of the battle, Kiểm initially repelled the attack and countered by advancing again to squeeze Thăng Long from the north and south. In response, Đát advised planting false flags on the banks of the Vĩ Hoàng River to deceive Kiểm and then sending calvary to cut off Kiểm's rearguard.⁷⁸⁰ The ploy worked and, tricked and outmaneuvered, Kiểm retreated to Thanh Hoa. Soon afterwards, Mật also withdrew back to Đại Đồng, and the Mạc regime was spared.⁷⁸¹

⁷⁷⁹ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thông sử*, 379–385.

⁷⁸⁰ The Vĩ Hoàng River branched off from the Yellow River, the lower portion of the Red River, just south of Mỹ Lộc District (Nam Định) and flowed west through Nam Định and Ninh Bình before flowing out to sea. The Vĩ Hoàng River no longer exists, having since been filled in with earth. Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam nhất thống chí*, tập 3, 395–396.

⁷⁸¹ Ngô Thì Nhậm, *Hải Đông chí lược*, 535; Vũ Khâm Thân, “Genealogical Record of the Recluse of White Cloud Hermitage Master Nguyễn Văn Đát,” 56b–57a.

After each of the latter two campaigns, Nguyễn Văn Đát composed series of poems about Centered Mooring Shelter that captured his thoughts about his participation in the Mạc war efforts and his return back to idyllic life in his hometown. In these poems, Đát revealed himself to be an old-timer who was reluctant to contend with more energetic youths and intimated a preference for what he felt was the more authentic “good old” ways, sites, and people that he associated with his native place. For instance, he began his first series of poems after the 1550–1551 campaign, “Spontaneous Creations,” with remarks about his agedness, distaste for officialdom, and embarrassment towards having left behind a more genuine life back at home.

荏苒年踰六十強，	Swiftly my years jumped to sixty!
老來自笑太疎狂。	Come old age, I laugh at my sloppy quirkiness.
江山秋色宦情薄，	Autumnal colors along the rivers and mountains, the
門館春風客夢涼。	sentiments of officialdom run thin;
恥與嬌花爭世態，	The vernal breeze by the shelter’s gate cools the traveler’s
好同晚菊伴幽香。	dream.
煙村村外誰家笛，	I am ashamed to contend with the airs of haughty flowers;
醉倚高樓弄夕陽。	I prefer to accompany the late chrysanthemums, befriending
	secluded fragrances.
	Beyond the smokey village, whose flute?
	Drunk, I lean on the tall building, tinkering with the evening
	sun. ⁷⁸²

Nguyễn Văn Đát exclaimed that, in 1551, he had already reached sixty and lightheartedly noted the lack of skill and seeming eccentricity that came with old age. He then contrasted the flavors of the life of an official with that in his hometown. The springtime wind before Centered Mooring Shelter afforded cool solace to the unperturbed traveler, while the sentiments of officialdom were as sparse as leaves upon a denuded tree in autumn. Reflecting again on his age, Đát suggested his discomfort struggling with proud younger folks, whom he likened to ostentatious spring flowers. Instead, he chose to

⁷⁸² Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Ngẫu thành, no. 1” 偶成, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 4b; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.28b.

associate with the late blooming chrysanthemums that displayed more genuine sentiments that only grow with seniority. Finally, as was so often the case in Đạt's poetry, he finished with blithe indifference to the troubles that drew him back into official business, concerned only with the superficial question of a local flute player as he amused himself in the evening light.

At the same time, Nguyễn Văn Đạt felt that he could not ignore his duty to serve the Mạc Emperor, however awkward he may have felt doing so. He expressed this in another poem in the 1550–1551 series:

忠誠誓欲報君王， 暫許馳驅效寸長。 肯作枯槁隨世態， 休誇鉛粉鬪時粧。 一團春草嬌花醉， 三徑秋高晚菊香。 為報流鶯應斂舌， 莫穿好樹弄笙簧。	I vowed to make good on my loyalty and sincerity toward the ruler king; Temporarily I allowed myself to gallop off and prove my meagre abilities. I'm willing to be a withered old tree following after worldly affairs; Cease boasting of white powders and contending with contemporary fashions. On a patch of spring grass, showy flowers are intoxicating; Along the three paths in clear autumn, the late chrysanthemums are fragrant. I tell the orioles that they should hold their tongues, "Don't shuffle through fine trees and trifle with reed instruments!" ⁷⁸³
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Here, Đạt affirmed his willingness to uphold his sense of duty to the Mạc dynasty and travel afar, however weary his might be at sixty, like a withered tree chasing after developments in the world. As with the last poem, he associated himself with the late blooming chrysanthemums that he contrasted with showy flowers at the peak of youthful vigor. This time he appears to have had a tangible foil for his sense of noble seniority. His mention of white powder, fashion, and singing orioles points to hawking prostitutes that must have haunted Centered Mooring Shelter with the hope of enchanting idling

⁷⁸³ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, "Ngẫu thành, no. 3" 偶成, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 5a; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.29a.

travelers. This was certainly not the sort of activity Đạt intended to frequent his haven of unwavering goodness, and so he instructed them not to shuffle about the shelter and its good (however old and withered) trees with their alluring but deviant calls.

Aside from chrysanthemums, Nguyễn Văn Đạt took pines and bamboo as symbols of moral constancy. This was because for him these evergreen plants demonstrated their virtue most clearly in the snowy cold, as Confucius once opined, “Only after the year grows cold do we come to understand that the pine and cypress are last to lose their leaves.”⁷⁸⁴ It was with such thoughts that he wrote, “With fishing hook and tea pitcher, I plan my new life; Among mountains tall, rivers colorful, and confidants of old; When the year grows cold, I reacquaint myself with pine and bamboo friends; I’m willing to receive the severe frost and boldly face the snow’s intrusion.”⁷⁸⁵ Allusion to evergreen plants gave seasoned depth to Đạt’s favorite image of snowy whiteness that he could only add as he approached his later years.

Evergreens may have conveyed Đạt’s sense of moral constancy, but they could also carry his feeling of ambivalence. For example, in another poem in the series, he wrote, “For how many years on the seas of officialdom did I suffer wind and waves? For now, I’ll sneak away at leisure to find my old home; With the pines and chrysanthemums that fill my garden, I set down my new life; With the volumes of poetry and books that were my former livelihood.”⁷⁸⁶ In this poem, Đạt connected symbols of aged nobility, the late blooming chrysanthemums and the pines whose worth was revealed only toward the

⁷⁸⁴ Confucius, “Zi Han” 子罕, in *Lunyu*, 9.28, available at *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/analects?searchu=%E5%B2%81%E5%AF%92&en=off>; c.f., Edward Slingerland trans., *Confucius Analects*, 96.

⁷⁸⁵ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Ngẫu thành, no. 2” 偶成, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 4b–5a; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.28b.

⁷⁸⁶ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Ngẫu thành, no. 7” 偶成, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 5b; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.30a.

end, with his “new” life, which was actually a return to his “truer” former self at leisure in his study. At the same time, he related a sense of regret for having put himself through the toil and uncertainties of official life. This regret was perhaps most apparent in the following poem from the series:

如流歲月苦駸駸， 消幾人間忿欲心。 萬古英雄無地葬， 一生忠義有天臨。 渡頭芳草牽幽恨， 濱畔黃花帶暝陰。 浮世功名休說著， 聊將一醉且閑吟。	Flowing like a river, the years and months gallop on miserably; How many frustrated, desirous hearts have been extinguished in the human realm? Heroes over tens of thousands of years since antiquity are bereft of land to bury them; A single life of loyalty and righteousness has only Heaven to face. At the ferry, fragrant grasses are burdened with hidden regrets, By the riverbank, yellow chrysanthemums bear gloomy shade. In this floating world, of merit and fame I shall cease to speak, For the moment, all drunk and chanting at leisure. ⁷⁸⁷
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In the 1550–1551 poems from “Spontaneous Creations,” we see that Nguyễn Văn Đạt struggled with the torturous but dutybound campaign upon which he embarked to Đại Đồng, his displacement by younger, more ostentatious talents, and the gloom he carried back home with him from the battlefield. Faced with these troubles, as he had done before by “chewing sugarcane,” Đạt consoled himself with the thought that aging might deepen the nobility of his character. He found expression for this in the natural greenery around Centered Mooring Shelter, late-blooming chrysanthemums and evergreens like the pine, cypress, and bamboo that exhibit their worth most clearly in the snowy cold along the banks of Cold River. Nevertheless, Centered Mooring Shelter harbored unwelcome creatures, too, like the orioles who perturbed the poet, denying him peace. And though he might become more seasoned with age, time also galloped mercilessly onward, extinguishing countless lives like the many heroes Đạt witnessed abandoned

⁷⁸⁷ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Ngẫu thành, no. 6” 偶成, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 5b; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256, 1.29b).

unceremoniously because of war's destruction. Thus, Đạt saw that even the chrysanthemums at the central ferry were cast in nether shade, and riverside grasses betrayed unseen regrets. Plagued by such thoughts, he found relief only in momentary drunkenness. Though Centered Mooring Shelter was inspired by the idea of equanimity, Đạt had yet to realize it.

During the disturbances of 1550–1551, Nguyễn Văn Đạt acquiesced to going off to war. The 1559–1561 emergency was different. Vũ Văn Mật and Trịnh Kiểm's war machine descended from the northern provinces and overtook a large swath of the eastern delta.⁷⁸⁸ War had come to Đạt, and both he and his homeland would be deeply affected. In the aftermath of the fighting, at the age of seventy, Đạt came back to his damaged shelter and reflected on the ordeal of 1559–1561 in a series of poems called "Capturing Inspirations at Centered Mooring Shelter." In it, he wrote, "Having been caught up in the chaos, I am lucky to remain whole; In the end, glory and disgrace create only worry; With lingering drunkenness, late chrysanthemums open after the frost; I chant with friends, the plum blossoms in the cold before year's end."⁷⁸⁹ With the scale of the war, Đạt felt fortunate just to have survived and thought that, compared to this happy fact, striving for fame and worrying about losing honor were trifling matters. As he had done before, he took comfort in the lasting pleasures of his autumnal years that he represented with his images of late-blooming chrysanthemums and the plum flowers that appear only in the deep cold at year's end. Similarly, he revisited these old natural friends in another poem from the series:

浮萍幾度寄關河，	Drifting duckweed, how many times have I been dispatched
笑指寒江是故家。	through the river passes?
	Laughing, I point to Cold River as my old home.

⁷⁸⁸ Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Việt thống sử*, 383–384.

⁷⁸⁹ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, "Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 41" 中津館寓興, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 44a; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256, 1.17b).

曾把孤舟懸景日，
休將一艇釣潏波。
僧廚慣煮鴟頭芋，
雪水新烹雀舌茶。
借問雲庵何所在，
滿園松菊是生涯。

I once took my boat to linger under the glistening sun;
I'll rest my skiff to fish a rivulet downstream.
In the monks' kitchen, they are accustomed to cooking owl
head and taro;
In Snow River, I prepare anew sparrow tongue tea.
If you ask what there is in [White] Cloud Hermitage,
Filling the garden are the pines and chrysanthemums that
constitute my life.⁷⁹⁰

Reflecting on the summons that repeatedly recalled him upstream and his eventual journeys home, Nguyễn Văn Đạt felt like duckweed floating back and forth. He formerly suspended himself in the spotlight, but now he wanted to rest in his little one-person boat downstream on the Cold River of his homeland. He was old and ailing, but he found nourishment in the local monks' medicinal owl head brew and fine tea made from the pure waters of Snow River. At home, he found his place where like the chrysanthemums and pines, simple things and personal worth deepened with age.

Nguyễn Văn Đạt was certainly relieved to be home, as he put it, "Once again I encountered a chaotic world, I am lucky to be safe and whole; At [White Cloud] Hermitage and [Centered Mooring] Shelter, I am spry and buoyant."⁷⁹¹ But in other ways, Đạt like his shelter were worse for wear, as he explained, "My years have come upon seventy, but I've yet to retire my cart; I repeatedly thought of the creek and springs, my dwelling among the water and bamboo; The late chrysanthemums are dilapidated along Nguyễn Lương's path; The dragon lies still huddled in Không Minh's hut."⁷⁹² In this poem, Đạt fretted his being forced to travel afar and abandon retirement at an age when he should have been tending the chrysanthemums like Nguyễn Lương (Đào Tiềm) and

⁷⁹⁰ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, "Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 32," in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 12b; C.f., *Bạch Vân Am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình Quốc Công thi tập* (VHv.850), 18a–b; *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.16a.

⁷⁹¹ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, "Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 67," in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 18a; C.f., *Bạch Vân Am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình Quốc Công thi tập* (VHv.850), 26b.

⁷⁹² Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, "Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 28," in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.14a.

staying comfortably hidden like Không Minh (Gia Cát Lượng 諸葛亮). Instead, he stuck his neck out for the dynasty, and, in his absence, the fighting had taken its toll on his refuge.⁷⁹³

By 1561, developments like this appear to have made Nguyễn Văn Đạt wary of official service. He was quite straightforward about this in the 1561 series with words like “Who says that the path of officialdom to tread is level? How many times it was rugged and craggy, I regret having ever taken it before!”⁷⁹⁴ He was resolved to go home, “Rough and craggy are the affairs of the world and insufferable to tread; Once again I seek out my secluded dwelling, where I get to be at ease.”⁷⁹⁵

Many apparently thought that Đạt’s decision to quit was strange, considering that his stratagems during the crisis contributed greatly to the Mạc Dynasty’s triumph, and he would have received high honor and reward. On this, he explained, “I once searched through the rivers and streams to find a critical point for mooring; Returning to where I set my home, I delight in my poverty; For merit and reputation, wanting success, many chase after the world; How few are those who are capable of being at ease among the mountains and rivers?”⁷⁹⁶ Other times, he was more sparse with this words, “Whenever I meet someone, I only say, ‘I retired as an official and left’; In the end, how few are those who retire from officialdom?”⁷⁹⁷

⁷⁹³ Nguyễn Văn Đạt would later restore Centered Mooring Shelter. *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 30a.

⁷⁹⁴ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 33,” in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 12b–13a; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.16a.

⁷⁹⁵ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 22,” in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 11a; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.14b.

⁷⁹⁶ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 19,” in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 10b; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.13a.

⁷⁹⁷ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 17,” in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 10a. C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.12b.

The poems cited above show that Nguyễn Văn Đát returned home to seek what he saw as a more genuine life at his humble dwelling that only grew richer with aging. He contrasted this with ostentatious and contending youths. At the same time, although he was a war hero, his repeated travels left him weary and sour toward the paths of officialdom, while his untended refuge, Centered Mooring Shelter was degraded in his absence. How was he to restore meaning in his former safe haven and his personal and public persona as a detached paragon of reclusion? Đát addressed these questions in “Capturing Inspirations at Centered Mooring Shelter” by setting his hermitage and shelter apart from the rest of the world as a miniature, hidden, and sequestered universe of its own. It was this image of being away and outside the world that through poetry and social interactions most contributed to Đát’s reputation and remembrance as an aloof observer above the world’s troubles.

We already saw that Nguyễn Văn Đát could sometimes be curt in his response to inquiry about his adventures in officialdom and the thinking behind his swift withdraw back to Trung Am. But, in other instances, he simply refused to speak at all by claiming to stand beyond such concerns. He wrote, “Right or wrong? I arrest talk about the affairs before my eyes; Why worry about gain and loss in my life outside it all.”⁷⁹⁸ Similarly, he said of his hermitage, “At [White] Cloud, I cultivate clumsiness and am content with poverty; As for gain and loss, I am a person at ease outside it all.”⁷⁹⁹ In this way, throughout “Capturing Inspirations at Centered Mooring Shelter,” Đát repeatedly separated himself from the vagaries beyond the purview of his little place in retirement as we see again in this poem:

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁹ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 7,” in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 8b; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.10a.

白雲庵近白雲鄉，
取拙都無憤世忙。
紅日初升東海近，
清風微送北窗涼。
閒中最愛山泉賞，
分外休論富貴場。
誰識這般春意足，
數聲啼鳥落花香。

At White Cloud Hermitage near White Cloud Village,⁸⁰⁰
Taking to clumsiness, I have no frustrations about the
world's troubles.
The red sun begins to rise above the eastern sea nearby;
A clear breeze blows faintly by, cooling the northern
window.⁸⁰¹
In leisure, I love most appreciating the mountains and
streams;
At rest outside it all, I cease deliberating in the arena of
wealth and nobility.
Who recognizes that such springtime thoughts are sufficient?
The sounds of singing birds, the scent of falling flowers.⁸⁰²

In these poems, Nguyễn Văn Đạt used expressions like “life outside it all” (*phận ngoại thân* 分外身) and “at rest outside it all” (*phận ngoại hưu* 分外休) to distance himself from his past experiences on the battlefield and in officialdom. In addition to conveying a conceptual sense of being “outside it all,” Đạt’s phrase *phận ngoại* could carry temporal meaning that followed from his notion of a life enriched through maturation. In this temporal sense, Đạt used *phận ngoại* to mean “remainder” or “leftover” to suggest his remaining years or time outside his former life engaged in official duties. With *phận ngoại*, Đạt demarcated his earlier life embroiled in dynastic drama from his later life “at leisure” (*nhàn* 閒), by which he meant unengaged as opposed to employed as an official.⁸⁰³ With nothing to do, Đạt showed that, at the age of seventy, he was past his former days as an official. It is here that we most clearly see how Đạt reinterpreted the meaning of reclusion represented by his namesake, White Cloud Hermitage. Whereas Nguyễn Trãi’s loathed his “lingering life” at Côn Sơn, Đạt saw his remaining days outside of officialdom as the moment when authentic life truly began.

⁸⁰⁰ That is at White Cloud Hermitage set outside but in the vicinity of White Cloud [Hermitage’s] village.

⁸⁰¹ The breeze by the northern window alluded to Đào Tiềm (Tao Qian).

⁸⁰² Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 27,” in *Bạch Vân Am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình Quốc Công thi tập* (VHv.850), 16a; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.13–14.

⁸⁰³ Trần Đình Hượu, “Triết lý ‘nhàn dật’ và ‘tự tại,’” in *Nguyễn Bình Khiêm: Danh nhân văn hóa*, ed. Nguyễn Huệ Chi (Hà Nội: NXB Bộ Văn hóa Thông tin và Thể thao, 1991), 134–139.

As we have seen, Nguyễn Văn Đát used *phận ngoại* to display an inward, conceptual space cut off from the world's problems as well as temporal distance from his days as an official. At the same time, Đát meant “outside it all” to draw physical distance from external problems. As evident in the above poem, Đát built his studio, White Cloud Hermitage, nearby, in other words just outside, the hermitage's village. He kept his retreat like his worries small, just over one *mẫu* (approx. 1/6 acre), and at a distance, as he indicated in another poem of the 1559–1561 series, “Set apart, I occupy a field and garden that's just over one *mẫu*; Abiding in leisure, I quite love my abode.”⁸⁰⁴ With similar language, he wrote in another of the series' poem, “Set apart, I occupy the creeks and springs, a scene of utmost seclusion; I returned to set up my abode in pursuit of leisurely outings.”⁸⁰⁵ His selection of a location at a distance was quite deliberate, as he noted with reference to geomancy, “I divined a place to build [my shelter and hermitage] where I could again find the pleasure of streams and rocks; Outside the human scene, I occupy a clear, secluded space.”⁸⁰⁶

At the same time that Nguyễn Văn Đát set his places of reclusion away at a distance, he imagined them to be sequestered from outside troubles. With allusion to an aged luminary from the Đường Dynasty, Búi Độ 裴度 (765–839), who had built a separate studio (*biệt thự*) for reclusion called the Verdant Wild Field Studio late in life, Đát explained, “Although [White Cloud] Hermitage and [Centered Mooring] Shelter are not the Verdant Wild Field Studio; They are just like separate little villages.”⁸⁰⁷ For Đát, they

⁸⁰⁴ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 39,” in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 13b; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.17a.

⁸⁰⁵ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 15,” in *Bạch Vân Am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình Quốc Công thi tập* (VHv.850), 13a; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.11b.

⁸⁰⁶ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 4,” in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 8a; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.9b.

⁸⁰⁷ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 44,” in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 14b; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.18a–b. On Búi Độ (Pei Du), see Liu Xu 劉洵 (888 – 947), “Pei

resembled miniature universes unto themselves, as he wrote elsewhere in the 1559–1561 series, “The sun shines askance for a moment with wild geese on the horizon; A sad, single flute sounds from the smoke beyond the village; Narrow and low-lying, never mind that no guests ever come; Who knows that here are a heaven and earth?”⁸⁰⁸ In this poem, Đạt described his “narrow and low-lying” places of reclusion as a little universe cut off from visitors from outside. They lay outside in the open with wild geese in the distant sky and a lonely flute-player (a fisherman) beyond the village. Đạt struck a similar tone in another of the series’ poems:

半庵別占小乾坤， 此外而無車馬喧。 行客問津知野渡， 斜陽聞笛覺漁村。 春江隨曲波千頃， 秋夜窺簾月一痕。 石老岩幽人複靜； 這般好景與誰言。	My partial hermitage occupies a little heaven and earth apart; There is no noise from horses and carts outside. Travelers who inquire of the [shelter’s] dock learn of its rustic ferry; Listening to a flute in the receding sunlight, they realize that it is a fishing village. The river in springtime follows along crooks in a thousand ripples, In an autumn night, peering through the curtains, a streak of moonlight. The rocks are ancient, the cliffs are secluded, and the people are quiet, too; With whom can I speak of such splendid scenery? ⁸⁰⁹
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With poems like these, Nguyễn Văn Đạt created a literary persona for both himself, his hermitage, and his shelter that placed him outside of the fighting and political turmoil beyond his hometown. Although his hermitage was just outside his village and his shelter lay along a busy riverway, he carved out a space for himself through his poetry that

Du” 裴度, in *Jiu Tang shu*, available *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=183493>; Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072), “Pei Du,” in *Xin Tang shu*, available at *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=778927>.

⁸⁰⁸ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 34,” in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 13a; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.16a–b.

⁸⁰⁹ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Trung Tân quán ngụ hứng, no. 36,” in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 13a; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.16b.

he imagined to be sequestered from noise, business, and worries from outside. He may have been repeatedly compelled to leave his retreat, but whenever he came back, he thought of himself as returning to his authentic self, a recluse abiding in his own little universe apart from the troubles he left beyond the bramble gates of his retreat, where he kept himself vigilantly centered and unwavering.

For some of his contemporaries as well as people of later generations, Đạt's aloof, genuine persona came to be viewed as someone above time and space altogether, a neutral and prescient observer of his and future ages. What made this possible was Centered Mooring Shelter's position as a rest stop for numerous passersby and the transformation of Đạt's hermitage into a pilgrimage site for those who wished to pay respects for the kingdom's most elevated teacher. Poetry about White Cloud Hermitage and Centered Mooring Shelter became more than Đạt's personal project but a social activity that resulted in the collective construction of a particular style of poetry in conversation with the poet and, later, his memory.

The Social Construction of a Literary Tradition and the Making of a Prophet for the Ages

During his retirement, especially after 1561, Nguyễn Văn Đạt spoke in the voice of his literary persona at Centered Mooring Shelter and White Cloud Hermitage in a number of exchanges with contemporaries, who participated in his literary style. For example, Đạt wrote to two military officers, inviting them to White Cloud Hermitage, "I'll wait for the day that our king's generals return triumphant; At [White] Cloud Hermitage, we'll enjoy partaking of drunkenness in the springtime breeze."⁸¹⁰ Similarly, Đạt invited a family of doctors, "Why should a cultivated man look for the Way outside himself? At ease of

⁸¹⁰ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, "Giản đồng sai Nghĩa Trai bá, Hồng Trung hầu" 簡同差義齊伯宏忠侯, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 64a; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 57b.

one's own accord without concern about poverty... In my field and garden, if we come upon an idle spring day; [Then] among the pines and chrysanthemums, this host shall still abide.”⁸¹¹ In the same way, Đat welcomed a county magistrate's assistant from Từ Liêm, “At [Centered] Mooring Shelter, they'll come a year for an outing together; Contentment with poverty to my own amusement is sufficient to become a worthy.”⁸¹²

More significantly, in other instances, we see other poets imitating Nguyễn Văn Đat's literary style in their exchanges with him. For example, when Trần Lâm 陳琳 (fl. 16th C.) assumed his new assignment as district magistrate of Đat's hometown, he paid homage to Đat, whom Lâm described as “the venerable teacher.” Lâm took note of Đat's home village, his shelter, a separate library north of the shelter, and the many educated men who passed through and visited the resident master. To pay his respects, Lâm composed a poem that reflected Đat's stele about the meaning of Centered Mooring Shelter, “If bystanders ask about in what you delight, then it is in accumulating goodness to be compounded over and over and celebrating its abundance.”⁸¹³ Sometimes visiting poets would honor Đat by writing a poem and then soliciting his help in “polishing” their writing. Such was the case with a return visitor to Đat's hermitage, Vũ Diệp 武燁, a member of the prestigious Vũ clan from Mộ Trạch and assistant to the prefect of Gia Hưng Prefecture.⁸¹⁴ Diệp was delighted that to him the scenery around Đat's hermitage was even more splendid than during the previous year, so he composed a poem about

⁸¹¹ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Hý tác ký Bành Đức y gia tử Lễ Bá hầu huynh đệ” 戲作寄彭德醫家子禮伯侯兄弟, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 65a; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.59b.

⁸¹² Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, “Hý tác, ký Từ Liêm, Thượng Cối, Ngự Thiên huyện thừa,” 戲作寄慈廉上檜御天縣丞, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 65b; C.f., *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (R.2017/A.2256), 1.59b.

⁸¹³ Trần Lâm, “Vịnh Trình tôn sư thư lâu” 詠程尊師書樓, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 70a.

⁸¹⁴ Gia Hưng Prefecture was part of the former Hưng Hóa Province and is now corresponds roughly to an area of Sơn La Province.

White Cloud Hermitage and Centered in Mooring Shelter in Đạt's style and invited his host to improve upon it.

庵館重來又一春，	Once again, I return to your hermitage and shelter in spring,
四時佳興最宜人。	The most inspiring and pleasant time among the four seasons.
無私花柳還依舊，	Selfless blossoms and willows return to just the way they were
有味江山宛若新。	before.
醒裏忘憂憑酒聖，	Attractive rivers and mountains, the garden seems renewed.
吟邊得妙奪詩神。	Inwardly alert, I forget my worries to become a drunken sage;
暄妍萬景看長好，	Chanting on the banks, I capture the marvels of poetry divine.
知是東皇發育仁。	I'll always love this bright, fresh scenery,
	Knowing that the Spring Goddess issues benevolence. ⁸¹⁵

On another spring occasion, Nguyễn Dịch Khang 阮迪康 (1492–?, *hoàng giáp* 1532) paid his respects to Đạt during the new year of Ất Sửu (1565), and wrote a poem that partook of Đạt's idea of being outside it all, "Books speak, and diagrams convey meaning, the delights of leisure; As wine makes our poetry run wild, we are outside it all; When will we again see an age of Nghiêu and Thuần? A Son of Heaven of Absolute Peace, a people of Absolute Peace?"⁸¹⁶ In turn, Đạt replied to Khang's poem, "From ancient times to present, boundless is the joy of leisure; Between heaven and earth, ageless has been life beyond the Way; Gain and loss, in the final judgment are a matter of fate; Of sages and worthies, follow whatever comes to pass without regard for poverty."⁸¹⁷ Đạt then added in his characteristic style evoking the language of the *Changes*:⁸¹⁸

亂中遠相訪，	In the midst of the disturbances, you visit from afar;
携手語平生。	Hand in hand, we talk about our lives.
靜驗艮安止，	In stillness, realize <i>Cấn</i> (Mountain), peacefully at rest;
動隨坎流行。	In action, follow <i>Khảm</i> (Water) in your coursings.
命途有通賽，	The road of destiny has free passage and obstruction;
天道有虧盈。	The Way of Heaven has attenuation and repletion.
	In my simple perch, I am poor but happy;

⁸¹⁵ Vũ Diệp, "Untitled," in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 71a.

⁸¹⁶ Nguyễn Dịch Khang is referring to the sage rulers of antiquity Yao and Shun. Nguyễn Dịch Khang, "Tân xuân hỷ tác, Ất Sửu niên" 新春戲作, 乙丑年, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 66a.

⁸¹⁷ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, "Tân xuân hỷ tác, Ất Sửu niên" 新春戲作, 乙丑年, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 66a.

⁸¹⁸ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, "Lưu ký Vĩnh Thế Nguyễn hoàng giáp" 留題永世阮黃甲, in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 67a.

素位貧而樂， Without an official assignment, I am old but all the more
無官老更榮。 honorable.

On the occasion of Nguyễn Dịch Khang's visit, Nguyễn Văn Đạt acknowledged the hardship Khang endured to pay his respects during a period of crisis. (Since autumn of the previous year, Trịnh Kiểm had led raids encroaching upon the Mạc territories south of the capital that would not end until the following autumn, when Mạc Kính Điển again directed a surprise naval attack on Thanh Hoa that forced Kiểm to withdraw).⁸¹⁹ In the middle couplets, Đạt evoked the hexagrams *Cán* 艮 ䷳ and *Khảm* 坎 ䷜ to suggest his (and possibly his interlocutor's) life trajectories toward action in officialdom and rest in reclusion. Then, in the sixth line, Đạt alluded to the hexagram of his namesake, *Khiêm* 謙 ䷎, from which he derived his sobriquet Bình Khiêm 秉謙 ("Keep Humble") and for which the *Classic of Changes* explains, "The Way of Heaven attenuates the replete to enrich the Humble (*Khiêm*); The Way of Earth transforms the replete, channeling it towards the Humble (*Khiêm*)."⁸²⁰ Finally, he concluded with typical affirmation of the joy of his modest, simple lifestyle in reclusion and the nobility of aging.

Through such literary interactions, writers like those above contributed to the development of Nguyễn Văn Đạt's literary style and occasional poetry associated with his place of retirement, namely White Cloud Hermitage and Centered Mooring Shelter.

None, however, contributed more to Đạt's poetic style than his friend from Cao Xá. The

⁸¹⁹ Lê Quý Đôn, *Dại Việt thông sử*, 398–399.

⁸²⁰ 天道虧盈而益謙，地道變盈而流謙。 "Khiêm (Qian)," in *Book of Changes*, available at *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/qian1#n25265>. The original meaning of the hexagram *Khiêm* has been interpreted variously as a rodent or bird, the so-called "wedwing." Stephen Field, *The Duke of Zhou Changes* (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2015), 104; Richard Rutt, *The Book of Changes: A Bronze Age Document Translated with Introduction and Notes* (Surrey: Curzon, 1996), 238.

friend from Cao Xá interacted with Đạt through a number of literary exchanges, of which the following three round series is just one example.⁸²¹

Friend from Cao Xá

不於城市不林泉，	Not in the city or market, not in the forests and springs,
覓得通津地一廛。	I found the Open Ferry on a stretch of land. ⁸²²
岸樹村花相甲乙，	Trees along the riverbank and village flowers follow after
水光山色共嬋娟。	one another,
閑中今古詩千首，	The water's glistening, the mountain's colors graceful.
靜裡乾坤易一篇。	At leisure, from past to present, a thousand poems,
借問我公何所樂，	In tranquility, <i>Càn</i> (Heaven) and <i>Khôn</i> (Earth), one <i>Book of</i>
公言吾亦樂吾天。	<i>Changes</i> ,
	Should someone ask milord in what he delights,
	He says, "I rather delight in my heaven."

Nguyễn Văn Đạt

歸來結屋傍岩泉，	I returned to set up my abode next to the cliffs and springs,
右抱村溪左市廛。	To the right, nestled against a village stream, to the left a
庭簇千花紅丹丹，	market.
門排萬竹翠娟娟。	Clustered around the courtyard are crimson flowers;
醉中亂耳無歌吹，	Arrayed by the gate is bluish bamboo.
靜裡擬心有簡編。	In drunkenness, the ears are confused, negating songs and
若問生涯何處是，	whistles;
雪江江水共長天。	In stillness, the mind ruminates with a book.
	Should you ask where are the horizons of my life,
	The waters of Snow River and the boundless sky.

Friend from Cao Xá

構得通津地一弓，	You built the Open Ferry along a bend of earth,
不文不質適乎中。	Not fancy, not stark, just right in the middle.
窻虛明照天心月，	Through the space of a window, the moon shines brightly
院靜涼生水面風。	from the heart of the sky;
暑往寒來知剝復，	In the stillness of the courtyard, a cool breeze stirs above the
坎流艮止驗窮通。	water's surface.
這般誰識有真樂，	As the heat passes and the cold comes, I know <i>Phốc</i>

⁸²¹ Nguyễn Bình Khiêm and "Friend from Cao Xá," "Đề Thông Tân quán," in *Bạch Vân am thi tập* (VHv.144), 29a–30a. Thông Tân quán (Mooring with Open Passage Shelter) was another name for Centered Mooring Shelter. I have slightly altered certain mistaken or problematic Sinographs in light of variations in the same series by the title "Đề Trung Tân quán (On Centered Mooring Shelter)" 題中津館, in *Bạch Vân Am tiên sinh trạng nguyên Trình Quốc Công thi tập*, manuscript, Hanoi, Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies, accession no. VHv.2081, 26a–27a.

⁸²² The "stretch of land" was a *triển* equal to two and a half *mẫu* (close to half an acre). Thông Tân or "Open Ferry" was another name for Centered Mooring Shelter.

樂在惟吾與物同。

(Depletion) and *Phục* (Renewal).⁸²³
As *Khâm* (Water) courses and *Cấn* (Mountain) stands still, I
realize impoverishment and attainment.
Who recognizes that therein is true joy?
Joy is in my harmonizing with things.

Nguyễn Văn Đạt

先幾奚待歎良弓，
出處附時兩中中。
門館無私寒度日，
圖書不盡雪江風。
閒中今古供吟咏，
靜裡乾坤識變通。
欲識這般吾樂處，
知吾樂在与人同。

Why wait in anticipation to marvel over a fine bow?⁸²⁴
I set off (*xuất*) and abide (*xử*), following the proper timing,
and strike them both dead center.
Before the gate and shelter, the indifferent sun at Cold Ferry,
Diagrams and documents, the undying wind above Snow
River,
At leisure, now as in the past, I partake of chanting songs;
In stillness, between *Càn* (Heaven) and *Khôn* (Earth), I know
how to flow with change.
Should you want to know this joy of mine,
My joy is in harmonizing with others.

Friend from Cao Xá

羨今程老中津館，
多古裴公綠野堂。
池水有情環左右，
俗塵何處放邊傍。
窗連海氣琴書潤，
戶引潮聲枕簟涼。
靜驗芭蕉舒卷處，
道中誰可識行藏。

I now admire Elder Trình's Centered Mooring Shelter;⁸²⁵
Long ago was Mr. Bùi's Verdant Wild Field Studio.⁸²⁶
The affective pond waters circle around left and right;
Nowhere can vulgar dust settle on its banks.
The window leads the sea air, moistening zither and book;
The door guides the sound of the tide, cooling pillow and
mat.
In stillness, I experience the banana [leaves'] folding and
unfurling;⁸²⁷
On the Way, who can recognize [when to] move on and

⁸²³ With only one remaining yang *hào* in the sixth (uppermost) position, the hexagram *Phốc* ䷗ (lit. “flaying”) represents the final moment of yang before it vanishes completely to become entirely yin, while the hexagram *Phục* ䷗ (lit. “return”) represents the moment of incipient renewal, since the first yang *hào* rises in the first (lowest) position. Together the two hexagrams mean something like ebb and flow, wax and wane.

⁸²⁴ Perhaps this alludes to *Mozi*, “A fine bow may be hard to draw, but it can shoot high and deep... Thus, rivers and streams do not loath filling minor crevices.” “Qin Shi” 親士, in *Mozi*, available at *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org/mozi/befriending-the-learned#n537>, passage 6.

⁸²⁵ Elder Trình refers to Duke of State Trình, Nguyễn Văn Đạt's honorary title.

⁸²⁶ Mr. Bùi's Verdant Wild Field Studio refers to Bùi Độ's (Pei Du) study. See above.

⁸²⁷ This is probably an allusion to the lyric “To the tune ‘Vile Charmer,’ long version” by Lý Thanh Chiếu 李清照 (Li Qingzhao, 1084–1155), which Ronald Egan translates: “Who planted a banana tree in front of the window?/ Its shade fills the central courtyard/ Its shade fills the central courtyard/ Leaf after leaf, heart after heart/ folding and unfolding with an excess of feeling.” 窗前誰種芭蕉樹，陰滿中庭，陰滿中庭，葉葉心心，舒卷有餘情。 Li Qingzhao, *The Works of Li Qingzhao*, trans. Ronald Egan (Boston/Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 148–149.

[when to] hide away?⁸²⁸

Nguyễn Văn Đạt

偷閒自笑中津館，	Stealing away at leisure, I laugh at my own Centered
假隱殊非昔草堂。	Mooring Shelter;
山送青來煙樹外，	My pretentious hideaway is certainly not the grassy studio of
水將白遶雪溪傍。	old.
天光入戶春光好，	The mountains issue verdancy with smoke beyond the trees;
竹色侵盃酒色涼。	The waters are surrounded in whiteness beside the snowy
道以屈伸隨所遇，	creek.
藏中庶亦不終藏。	The light of the sky entering through my door, the springtime
	light is nice;
	The colors of bamboo invade my goblet, tinging the cool
	wine.
	On the Way, recoil and outspread following whatever is
	encountered; ⁸²⁹
	Hiding, perhaps, is not ultimately hiding away.

In these exchanges, Nguyễn Văn Đạt invited his friend to participate in his literary style with frequent references to the *Changes*, a concern about *xuất xử*, and the sense of a *Trung Dong* space that is both physically and conceptually suspended between vigorous activity and reclusive leisure, yet on some level outside of it all. Thus enjoined, Đạt's friend described Centered Mooring Shelter by locating it not in the busy market, nor away in remote landscapes, but rather along a bend "just right in the middle." At the same time, the friend compared the shelter to Búi Độ's studio set just beyond the world's "vulgar dust." As Đạt and his friend communicated, "Open Ferry" allowed unobstructed passage of bustling people and goods, but it also afforded free entry to the vernal light and wind, the natural pleasures of an idyllic, disengaged life. Finally, with all the movement and activity that passed through it, the poets saw the shelter at Snow River's ferry as a place

⁸²⁸ "Moving on and hiding away" or *hành tàng* 行藏 was used in the same way as *xuất xử*, meaning to go out into officialdom or remain hidden in obscurity. This usage was inspired by the *Lunyu*, in which Confucius said, "If put to use, then go out. If abandoned, then hide away" 用之則行，舍之則藏. "Shu Er," in *Lunyu*, available at *Chinese Text Project*, passage 11, <https://ctext.org/analects/shu-er/zh#n1261>.

⁸²⁹ "Recoil and outspread" or *khuất thân* 屈伸, was used in a similar way to *hành tàng* and *xuất xử*.

where they could witness the fluctuations of the *Changes* in centered stillness. From this vantage, the Cao Xá friend inquired about movement toward action and recoiling away, and Đat observed, “Hiding, perhaps, is not ultimately hiding away.” This was because, in the eyes of the poets, Centered Mooring Shelter was its own universe, where Đat and his friend could behold the enfolding and unfurling of ultimate truths and their transformations.

Through interactions like these, Nguyễn Văn Đat invited his counterparts to participate in occasional poetry apropos passing through Centered Mooring Shelter and visiting White Cloud Hermitage by echoing Đat’s literary style. From the time that Đat erected his hermitage and shelter in 1542, visitors partook of poetry that added to the site’s literary character. Over time, the accretions of these exchanges eventually grew beyond the scope of one man’s life and writings. As physical spaces, White Cloud Hermitage and, especially, Centered Mooring Shelter outlasted Đat the person and became sites where a literary tradition developed around the memory of Đat the literary persona for centuries to come as they were repeatedly restored and visited upon by generations of sympathetic poets. As these writers reflected on Đat as a poet and a keen observer of change, they considered his memory as embodied in the physical vestiges of his life to think through the course of history and fate. It was these meditations that through successive generations kindled a remembrance of Đat as a prophet of the ages, an aloof, centered witness detached from the transformations of time.

To illustrate this point, let us consider one literary exchange from the second half of the eighteenth century. During this period, Trương Đăng Thụ (d.1788) traveled to Nguyễn

Văn Đát's former hometown, came across the vestiges of Centered Mooring Shelter, and took note of its stele.⁸³⁰ Thụ then inscribed a quatrain in jest:

生自黎衰莫盛時	He was born when the Lê were in decline, and the Mạc thrived;
經綸老慣未施為	In old age, he was accustomed to never putting the threads of
許多讖語渾好許	his wisdom to use.
媒得奸雄藥口碑	So many of his prophetic words were all in fine agreement
	[with future reality].
	Enticing thieves and heroes to delight in oral inscriptions. ⁸³¹

After Thụ finished his poem, a “traveling scholar,” who happened to be passing through, chimed in:

可惜生來不遇時	What a pity that he was born without meeting his time!
雖然救敗已經為	Although he did save us from defeat.
後人着問先生讖	If later men inquire about the former master's prophecies,
應問中津主人碑	Then they should ask about the inscription of the master of
	Centered Mooring. ⁸³²

This exchange, which took place more than a century after Nguyễn Văn Đát's passing, demonstrates Đát's enduring legacy and the longevity of the style of reclusion poetry that he cultivated during his life. Poets still visited him and honored him with their own poems about Centered Mooring Shelter, only now they conversed with him in memory. The poets' remembrance of Đát continued to revolve around the poetics of prophecy and reclusion, and they still saw him suspended in a place “outside it all”

⁸³⁰ Trương Đăng Thụ was the son of the advanced scholar (*tiến sĩ*) Trương Đăng Quỳ 張登揆 (1733–?, *t.s.* 1766). Thụ was invested as Marquis of Thanh Xuyên under the Lê-Trịnh regime. As Lê loyalists, Thụ joined his father in resisting the Tây Sơn uprising, which was eventually responsible for ending the Lê Dynasty. In 1788, Thụ was poisoned by an assassin of the Tây Sơn general Võ Văn Dũng 武文勇 (1750–1802). Most of what is known about Thụ is gleaned from a eulogy for him by his close friend Phạm Thái 範泰 (1777–1813), who later married Thụ's sister. For Phạm Thái's eulogy, which was inscribed at Thụ's grave, see Phạm Thái, *Sở kinh tân trang*, ed. Hoàng Hữu Yến (Hà Nội: NXB Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội, 2002), 138–144. See also Nguyễn Văn Xang, *Phạm Thái và Sở kinh tân trang* (Sài Gòn: Lửa Thiêng, 1972), 29, 157–162; Ngô Gia Văn Phái, *Hoàng Lê nhất thống chí*, ed., Nguyễn Đức Vân and Kiều Thu Hoạch (Hà Nội: NXB Văn học, 2005), 294–298.

⁸³¹ There is a pun here on the words *khẩu bi* 口碑. They literally mean “oral inscription,” but they can also mean “praise” or “acclaim” as well as “oral aphorisms.” Thus, Trương Đăng Thụ collapsed several meanings his final line, suggesting that many praise Nguyễn Văn Đát, consider his inscription, and take stock of his oral prophecies.

⁸³² *Bạch Vân tiên sinh thi tập* (VHv.188), 58b.

between officialdom and reclusion. Trương Đăng Quỹ and the anonymous traveler both lived during the final days of the flagging Lê Dynasty (1533–1789), the dynasty that Đat had opposed as a servant of the Mạc. Reflecting on the Lê Dynasty's eventual defeat of the Mạc only six years after Đat's death and their own dynasty's impending decline, Quỹ and his interlocutor lamented that a hero like Đat was born at an importune moment in history that, in this misfortune, resembled that of the two eighteenth century poets. In the grand space of time, the fates of the two poets and the former worthy converged in this unhappy constant of the scholars' profession. As Quỹ and his fellow poet knew, legend had it that Đat renounced the Mạc after retirement, recognized that the Lê would rightfully win out, and cryptically prophesied this future eventuality.⁸³³ Thus, the poets imagined that Đat, centered in equanimity to observe the changing times, at once *never* served (the Mạc) and *did* serve to save them (the Lê). With this exchange, the poets took solace in the thought that they, too, could suspend themselves outside the *xuất xử* question through the immortalizing power of poetry and, encountering the Abiding Scholar of White Cloud Hermitage, took stock of their destinies, their moment in the coursing of history.

Conclusion

In 1542, after retreating from the frustrations of official life at Thăng Long, Nguyễn Văn Đat sought what he regarded as a more genuine, simple life among the locals of his native region in the littoral eastern. He collaborated with his local community to carry out charitable projects, village functions, and public works. Among these activities was the construction of Centered Mooring Shelter at the central ferry along Cold River. The manner in which Đat alluded to the former luminary Nguyễn Trãi when he retired

⁸³³ As Trương Đăng Quỹ and the traveler alluded to in their poems, generations of rebels and rulers alike appealed to apocryphal prophecies attributed to Nguyễn Văn Đat to legitimize their efforts.

solidified his reputation as a moralizing character, a role he performed in his participation in community activities. In particular, Đat called for a shared sense of goodness rooted in the practice of equanimity inspired by the *Trung Dong*, which entailed resisting greed and self-interest as well as a spirit of impartial non-contention. This is the meaning he inscribed in stone at Centered Mooring Shelter.

By retiring as a recluse, Nguyễn Văn Đat elevated his moral bearing to a degree that was impossible as an official. The irony of this was that Đat's moral authority only increased his value to the Mạc regime during the crises of 1550–1551 and 1559–1561. As a result, Đat was recalled, in part, to sure up the loyalty of key Mạc subjects with whom Đat had a personal connection. This was especially true in 1550–1551, when a number of important Mạc partisans defected en masse. In addition, Đat's reputation as a recluse was particularly valuable in dealing with the Bàu Lords of Đại Đồng, where the lords had cloaked their upriver territories in the literary image of a refuge for principled recluses opposed to Mạc rule. Đat's appearance on the rivers leading through Đại Đồng signaled that it was the Mạc rather than the Bàu Lords who commanded the loyalty of the realm's greatest recluse.

Once he completed his missions, Nguyễn Văn Đat quickly went back to his hometown and returned to life as a disengaged scholar. However, in order to reassume his posture as a recluse, he had to reformulate what that would mean for him after having dutifully heeded the dynasty's beckons. Returning to Centered Mooring Shelter in 1551, Đat began articulating a literary voice that infused his signature image of snowy whiteness with new meaning. He evoked the late-blooming chrysanthemums and persistent evergreens, whose true worth became known only in late winter. With these "old friends," Đat, as the elder teacher of Snow River, displayed the nobility of aging and the

genuineness of his idyllic, albeit undecorated, life “in the cold.” Đat contrasted himself with younger men, who vied with one another in the arena of power at the capital Đat left behind. At the same time, Đat began to express some regret about having originally decided to participate in the civil service examinations and enter officialdom over a decade earlier.

After the exigencies of 1559–1561, Nguyễn Văn Đat returned again to his home village and wrote poetry about Centered Mooring Shelter. This time, Đat began describing his remaining years at his shelter and hermitage “outside it all.” He separated his remaining years from his life in officialdom and distanced himself from worldly affairs by locating himself in reclusion apart from outside troubles conceptually, temporally, and physically. He thought of his place in reclusion as a sequestered universe unto itself that was suspended between bustling activity and undisturbed leisure, the urban market and remote landscapes. In this sense, Đat’s shelter was centered between *xuất* and *xử* in accord with proper timing just as the skilled boatman meticulously steers his vessel to moor at Cold Ferry. Furthermore, from the vantage of Centered Mooring Shelter, Đat presented himself as a keen observer of the people and activity that constantly passed through, while he himself stood still. The late-blooming elder had discovered the wisdom of contemplating time and changes in a meditative space kept vigilantly in the center and yet conceptually outside it all.

Nguyễn Văn Đat did not come to these insights in isolation, but rather he cultivated them in conversation with travelers to Centered Mooring Shelter. Whenever visitors fond of literature paid their respects to Đat, they honored him with poetry that mimicked Đat’s style of reclusion poetry, and Đat would reply in kind. These ongoing exchanges led to the social construction of a poetic style associated with Đat, his shelter,

and his hermitage. After Đạt's lifetime, successive generations of poets continued to produce poems in conversation with Đạt's memory. By creating such literature, later poets perpetuated Đạt's literary voice while ventriloquizing their present. White Cloud Hermitage poetry became a medium for meditation about fate, and the vestiges of Centered Mooring Shelter remained a site for reflection on the whims of time.

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