

Review Essay

A Literary View of Early Modern Southern Vietnam

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Claudine Ang. *Poetic Transformations: Eighteenth-Century Cultural Projects on the Mekong Plains*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019. 308 pp.

A body of scholarship that began to emerge in the 1990s examined the southern half of Vietnam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an area known variously as Đàng Trong or Cochinchina. Those works depicted Vietnamese society in that region as different from the society in the North, one distinction being that there was supposedly less scholarship and literature in the South. Although that may have been true on a quantitative level, Claudine Ang's new book, *Poetic Transformations: Eighteenth-Century Cultural Projects on the Mekong Plains*, demonstrates that literary writings were important in the South during that period, and that we can learn a good deal about the region and its society through those writings.

Ang is currently Associate Professor of Humanities at Yale-NUS College in Singapore. *Poetic Transformations* grew out of the doctoral dissertation that she completed at Cornell University in 2012. In a nutshell, this work examines the literary output of two powerful men—"statesmen," as Ang labels them—who lived in the Mekong Delta during the eighteenth century. What is now Vietnam was nominally under the control of a single dynasty, the Lê (1428–1788), but the land was actually divided into two parts—North and South—each of which was ruled over by a powerful clan: the Trịnh and the Nguyễn, respectively. These two clans fought each other in the seventeenth century, but they left each other alone during much of the eighteenth century. The Nguyễn took advantage of this period of peace to expand its control farther southward. Here the clan was assisted by a powerful Vietnamese general by the name of Nguyễn Cư Trinh (1716–1767), the first of Ang's two statesmen. Meanwhile, in the far southwestern corner of the Mekong Delta at a place called Hà Tiên, a settlement of diasporic Chinese was led for much of the eighteenth century by Ang's second statesman, Mạc Thiên Tứ (1718–1780), the son of a Ming loyalist.

Nguyễn Cư Trinh and Mạc Thiên Tứ were both military men who spent much of their lives expanding and defending the areas under their control. Both were also literate and produced literary works. Nguyễn Cư Trinh is most famous for having written

a play—*The Monk and the Nun* (*Sãi vãi* 仕媿)—in vernacular Vietnamese using the demotic script, Nôm. Mạc Thiên Tứ composed ten poems about Hà Tiên, *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên* (*Hà tiên thập vịnh* 河仙十吟), to which Nguyễn Cư Trinh and certain diasporic Chinese later wrote responses. In *Poetic Transformations*, Ang examines these literary works in detail and argues that we can see in them two rival “cultural projects” by two men seeking to use their literary writings to transform the frontier regions that they inhabited. Ang argues that although of Nguyễn Cư Trinh’s drama on the surface is an amusing dialog between a monk and a nun, on a deeper level it transmits ideas that served to create a sense of difference between Vietnamese lowlanders, the main audience for the play, and their upcountry neighbors. Similarly, although Mạc Thiên Tứ’s poetry is about the landscape around Hà Tiên, Ang argues that it served a larger purpose in seeking to establish a sense that Hà Tiên was a kind of new home or stronghold for Ming loyalists. To make these points, Ang discusses both works in great detail.

The Monk and the Nun was reportedly first drafted in a very specific context. According to the entry on Nguyễn Cư Trinh in a nineteenth-century collection of Nguyễn-dynasty biographies, in 1750, while serving as an official in Quảng Ngãi in what is now central Vietnam, Nguyễn Cư Trinh became aware that people referred to as the Stone Cliff Savages (*thạch bích man* 石壁蠻) had been plundering the border area. Government troops had fought these people on various occasions but had not been successful in defeating them. Nguyễn Cư Trinh tried to engage the Stone Cliff Savages in dialogue, but they refused to come out of their mountain home. In seeking to lead an expedition into the mountains, he was met with resistance from those who felt that such an excursion into the miasmatic mountain terrain would be too arduous and dangerous. He then reportedly composed *The Monk and the Nun* as a means to incite people to action. This tactic apparently succeeded; Nguyễn Cư Trinh led troops into the mountains and drove the Stone Cliff Savages away (Trương et al. [1852] 1961, 5/5b).

Ang devotes three chapters to examining this 270-line text and includes her translation of the entire play in an appendix. In the process of examining this work, which takes the form of a conversation between a monk and a nun about a wide variety of topics, Ang not only discusses the content of the dialogue but also explains in detail the many arcane references—from Buddhist and Confucian concepts to numerous proper nouns and phrases—that appear in this work.¹ Almost all such names and terms

¹To give a sense of the range of names, terms, and phrases in this work, here is a partial list: Tổng Đạo Quân, Lương Võ Đế, the army of Châu, the ruler of Tề, Vương Khâm, Nghiêu and Thuần and Vũ and Thang, Châu Thái Tì, Tổng Tuyên Nhon, Tạ Đạo Uân, Thái Văn Cơ, Đường Huệ, Hán Đê Oánh, Tần and Hán, Mãng and Tào, Mr. Cô Tâu, Tù Dương, Mr. Nhan Tử, Thạch Sùng, Lã was waiting for the nobles, Doãn was dreaming of Nghiêu and Thuần, Cam La wore an official’s head wrap, Khương Tử had long awaited generalship, Bồng Lai Mountain, the scenery of Sơn Nhạc, Prajña, the waters of Ma Ha, Three Sovereigns, Five Rulers, King Nghiêu, King Thuần, King Võ, King Văn, Duke of Châu, Phu Tử, Gia Cát, Nhạc Phi, King Kiệt and King Trụ, King Lệ and King U, the state of Sở, the state of Tề, Đồng Trác, Hà Tấn, Khuyển Nhung, the marquis of Thân, the waters of

come from “Chinese” history and yet they appear in a “vernacular Vietnamese” drama, which raises many questions. Ang sees the initial audience for this drama as the soldiers whom Nguyễn Cư Trinh sought to incite to attack the Stone Cliff Savages, as well as the Vietnamese who lived in the frontier region between the Việt lowlands and the highland region of the Stone Cliff Savages. It is only in the final lines that we see a clear call to action to fight the Stone Cliff Savages. Ang divides the text into different sections that she feels address separate issues in *The Monk and the Nun*: “To Be Free from the Mundane,” “Don’t Forget about the Women,” “Stories That Cannot Be Told,” and “A Moral Compass: Happiness, Compassion, Hatred, Love, and Anger.” Reading such section titles, it is difficult to see how any of these topics could inspire someone to march off into the mountains to engage in battle with an adversary.

Did the soldiers and Vietnamese frontier population understand the arcane topics and references in this text? If not, then who was the audience for that information and what was its purpose? Is *The Monk and the Nun* as it exists today a composite text that began as a call to fight the Stone Cliff Savages but was then added to in the years that followed, becoming a different text entirely? These questions came to my mind while I read Ang’s detailed discussion and translation. Her meticulous scholarship enabled me to see the details of every line, but I still find myself struggling to understand what all of those individual lines mean. To her immense credit, Ang has produced a pioneering translation and study of this text, and anyone who wishes to examine this, or any other, vernacular verse will be indebted to her hard work. However, because Ang has taken us into uncharted territory in her examination of this difficult text, we will need to explore more before we can fully map out its meanings.

By contrast, in reading the three chapters that are devoted to an examination of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*, I could not imagine that any scholar would follow in Ang’s footsteps and still have something to say about these writings. In examining Mạc Thiên Tứ’s original ten poems and the various responses to them, Ang again delves into great detail, explaining virtually every phrase and nuance. Through her meticulous reading of these poems, Ang argues that although Mạc Thiên Tứ interacted with other Ming loyalists, his poetry did not display nostalgia for a lost past, as one might expect, but optimism for a new future in which people like himself and his Ming loyalist friends were developing a cultural home far beyond the bounds of the Chinese world.

Although I remain unsure about how we can fully understand *The Monk and the Nun*, Ang has examined that work to the limits of my own current linguistic ability. Meanwhile, I feel totally at ease with her understanding and explanations of the *Ten Songs of Hà Tiên*.

Thus, *Poetic Transformations* contributes richly to the subfield of Vietnamese history focused on the Nguyễn-controlled southern area of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Ang offers a needed corrective to the emphasis that earlier

Vị, the city of Trường, Thương Quân, Bạch Khởi, Empress Lữ, Empress Võ, Lôi Âm Tự, and Thiên Thai.

scholarship placed on ways in which Vietnamese in the South were less Sinitic.² In demonstrating the existence of a cultural world that encompassed diasporic Chinese and Vietnamese frontier officials, Ang provides a more sophisticated view of the past. What is more, she has achieved this by working with difficult texts—a vernacular Vietnamese text in the demotic script and classical Chinese poetry—and by examining those texts closely and with great care.

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² See, for example, Taylor (1993, 2013), Li (1998a, 1998b), and Cooke (1997, 1998).