

Beyond The Bronze Pillars Envoy Poetry And The Sino-Vietnamese Relationship

Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship, by Liam C. Kelley. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005. xiii, 267 pp. \$45.00 (cloth).

This book analyzes poetry written by late 18th and 19th century Vietnamese envoys in their journeys to China. Differing from the existing translations from Chinese into Vietnamese, Kelly has taken the critical step explaining the authors' literal words in the context of East Asian poetic, intellectual and cultural traditions. Kelly avoids using the modern concepts of "Vietnam" and "China", as he believes such nationalist and rigid compartmentalization was foreign to the pre-modern world of East Asia, of which Vietnam was a part. For Kelly, and the 18th and 19th century Vietnamese literati in his book, China was less a place and an overwhelming political power, then a civilisation shared by scholars in the places far beyond the borders of the Central Kingdom. In such a context border crossings meant little, and moreover, in the minds of the Southern (Viet) envoys, Kelly argues, the journey to the North (China) was an integral component in the way their world was structured. They were like stars revolving around the fixed North Star (pp.94-96).

Kelley thus confronts a major narrative in the field of Vietnamese history since the 1960s, the "particular view" which asserts that despite Chinese conquest a Vietnamese cultural essence persevered, and was crucial in making Vietnam "Vietnam". If from the 1990s Vietnamese nationalist historiography has been undermined by the works of historians like Keith Taylor, the question of how we evaluate the historical Sino-Viet relationship has remained untouched, and it is central to our understanding Vietnamese history. Kelley now addresses this question. He has painstakingly worked on the 18th and 19th century literary texts to reveal the minds of the Vietnamese envoys and, through them, the position of the pre-modern Vietnamese elite in the East Asian cultural world.

While Kelley's effort in reintegrating Vietnam into the East Asian world is much appreciated, one is still left wondering how much did the two sides, the Southern envoys and their colleagues in North, share a "universal" East Asian worldview, in the late 18th and early 19th century. In the first place, even if these visiting literati knew little of such things as loyalties and allegiance to the nation, and their shared sense of common civilization was of supreme importance, surely an embassy to China would be a most unlikely occasion on which to expect any exhibition of patriotic feelings. Timing was also important: Chinese scholars of this period were particularly discontented with the heavy load of too many recent interpretations and reconstructions imposed on the classical texts and learning, while their Vietnamese counterparts of the 18th and 19th century, as Woodside points out, were "saddened, not by an overly rich, but by a too poor diet of national scholarship which civil and national wars had bequeathed them." Kelley also describes this sad situation, quoting the prominent Viet scholar Le Quy Don as "sighing repeatedly" over the lack of interest and failure of the Southern literati in producing and preserving verses and scholarly works. (p.34) In such a context we can legitimately ask how much intellectual vitality these Vietnamese literati drew from or contributed to the supposedly universal Han civilisation to which all such men, whether Viet, Korean or Japanese, were said to belong? Did these scholars interact with those of the North in any deeper way than the exchanging of poems?

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