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Sino-Vietnamese Relations

The An-nam chi-luoc, or Essay on Annam, was written in the fourteenth century by a Vietnamese named Le-Tac. Composed originally in Chinese, the Essay offers a compendium of information, historical and geographical, about Vietnam prior to 1339. Below are two documents taken from this work. Part I is a letter from General Le-Hoan, posing as the legal heir to the Vietnamese throne, seeking investiture in 980 from the Sung emperor. Part II consists of a letter of congratulations from the ruler of Annam to Emperor Ch’eng-tsung (Timur Khan) of the Yüan Dynasty upon the latter’s ascent to the throne of China in 1295. It expresses in barely veiled terms the fervent hope that the new emperor would inaugurate a peaceful reign, in sharp contrast to that of his immediate predecessor, Kublai Khan, who had invaded and devastated the coastal regions of Vietnam without succeeding in subjugating the country.

[1]

My ancestors have received favors from the Imperial Court. Living in a far away country at a corner of the sea [Annam], they have been granted the seals of investiture for that barbarian area and have always paid to the Imperial ministers the tribute and respect they owed. But recently our House has been little favored by Heaven; however, the death of our ancestors has not prevented us from promptly delivering the tribute....

But now the leadership of the country is in dispute and investiture has not yet been conferred by China.

My father, Pou-ling, and my eldest brother, Lienn, formerly

enjoyed the favors of the Empire [China], which endowed them with the titles and functions of office. They zealously and humbly protected their country, neither daring to appear lazy or negligent, nor having the opportunity to win great merit in the eyes of the Emperor for performing their duty. Suddenly events changed our fate. While still in mourning clothes, the good fortune of our House began to crumble. The mandarins [officials], the army, the people, the court elders, and members of my family, all who came to my home to mourn, entreated with me to lead the army. I refused repeatedly, but they begged me with all the more force and insistence. It seemed to me that to appeal to the Emperor would delay a solution even more. My people, who are wild mountain-dwellers [i.e., uncultured, rather than real inhabitants of the mountains], have unpleasant and violent customs; they are a people who live in caves and have disorderly and impetuous habits. I feared that trouble would arise if I did not yield to their wishes. From prudence I therefore assumed power temporarily, assuming the role of supervisor of the military affairs of the country. I hope that His Majesty will place my country among His other tributary states by granting me the investiture. He will instill peace in the heart of His little servant by allowing me to govern the patrimony my parents left me. Then shall I administer my barbarian and remote people. I shall take care of the land of the bronze column. I shall send tributes of precious stones and ivory, and before the Golden Gate I shall express my loyalty.

May His Majesty only have indulgence for my shortcomings and may He grant me His pardon.

[II]

The Dragon flies in the heavens; new life has come to the Golden Throne. Many embassies have flocked to the Palace to express their sincere congratulations.

One man has ascended the Throne and ten thousand kingdoms are at peace. In great awe I observe that, under His Imperial Majesty’s rule, peace and culture flourish within the Empire. His
benevolence and virtue permeate the lands beyond the sea as they do at home. Always faithful to the kingly way, He embraces with the same kindness far lands and near. He lays aside military concerns and promotes cultural achievements. He restrains the ardor of His troops and puts an end to all combat. He enlarges His own indulgence and benevolence. He illuminates the virtue and merit of His Ancestors. The sound of thunder has ceased; it has changed into a rain of Imperial blessings. His investiture of tributary kings has been granted with a heavenly generosity. For the people it is a true rebirth, for the Universe a true springtime. I and my people happily live in peace and rejoice to hear the news of His ascendance to the Throne. My glances are directed toward the Northern sky; my heart also turns toward the extreme North, toward the Imperial Dwelling. From this country so remote in the South which I govern, I wish and desire that the longevity of the Emperor may be as great as the mountains of the South are high.