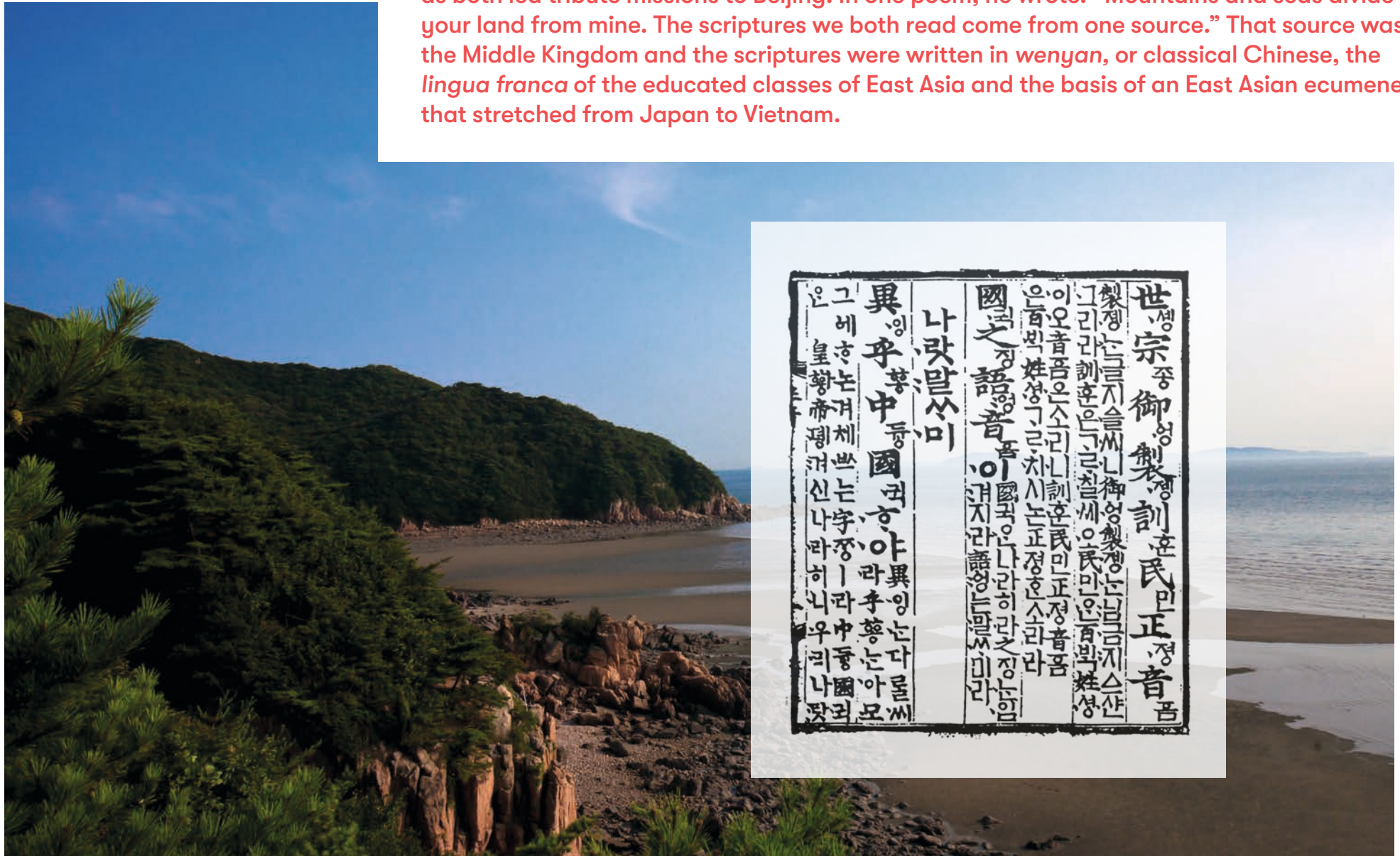


Separated by mountains and seas, united by a common script

Ho Tai Hue-Tam¹

In 1597, Phùng Khắc Khoan (1528-1613), the Vietnamese envoy to the Middle Kingdom (China), exchanged a series of poems with his Korean counterpart, Yi Su-gwang (1563-1628) as both led tribute missions to Beijing. In one poem, he wrote: “Mountains and seas divide your land from mine. The scriptures we both read come from one source.” That source was the Middle Kingdom and the scriptures were written in *wenyan*, or classical Chinese, the *lingua franca* of the educated classes of East Asia and the basis of an East Asian ecumene that stretched from Japan to Vietnam.



Inset: The first page of *hunmin jōngŭm* (lit.: correct sounds for the instruction of the people), or *han'gŭl*, as it is known in South Korea today. In North Korea it is called *chosōngŭl*.

Wenyan as the transnational language for pre-modern Asian literati

By 1597, a vernacular script had been available in both Korea (Chosŏn) and Vietnam (Đại Việt) for over a century. In Chosŏn, in 1443, King Sejong the Great (r.1418-1450) had created the *hunmin jōngŭm* (lit.: correct sounds for the instruction of the people), also known as *han'gŭl*. The Vietnamese demotic script, *nôm*, traced its earliest beginnings to the ninth century, but its flowering came in the fifteenth century. In 1428, the scholar and statesman Nguyễn Trãi (1380-1442) authored the *Great Proclamation of the Pacification of the Wu* [Binh Ngô Đại Cáo] in *wenyan* to celebrate the end of the twenty-year occupation of Đại Việt by the Ming. But he is also known for his poetry in *nôm* (the common script). Emperor Lê Thánh Tông (r.1460-1497) emulated him by writing poetry in *nôm*. Thus vernacular scripts appeared during the same period in Korea and Vietnam and both enjoyed imperial support. Yet, their appearance did not displace *wenyan*, which continued to be the language of officialdom. Both scripts were useful for advancing the imperial project of forging closer connections between the emperor and his officials and spreading neo-Confucian values among commoners.

Wenyan was the language of the educational system culminating in exams through which officials were chosen in China, Korea and Vietnam. The model was the Song-era system. In Korea, such a system was instituted under King Kwangong (r.949-975)

and a *Kukchagam* [Academy for Imperial Sons] was established during the reign of King Sŏngjong (r.1083-1094) during the Koryŏ period. In Đại Việt, the introduction of neo-Confucianism was delayed by the influx of Buddhist monks who had fled China to escape repression in the late Tang era. Their arrival consolidated the influence of Buddhism through the next few centuries. Nonetheless, in 1070, a temple to Confucius was established in Thăng Long (modern Hanoi), followed by an Academy for Imperial Sons, Quốc Tử Giám, thus roughly paralleling developments in Korea. But thereafter, the two histories diverged.

In 1392, the pro-Ming Yi dynasty founded the Chosŏn Kingdom that replaced Koryŏ. In Đại Việt, Hồ Quý Ly wrested power away from the Trần dynasty (1225-1400) and proclaimed himself emperor in 1400. His usurpation gave a pretext for the Ming to occupy Đại Việt from 1407 to 1427. Unlike Chosŏn, therefore, the Lê dynasty (1428-1788) was founded by men who had fought against the Ming. Yet, the careers of King Sejong the Great and of Lê Thánh Tông offer some interesting parallels. By the time Sejong assumed the throne in 1418 at the age of 22, his dynasty was still new. During his 32-year reign, Sejong set about strengthening the state by entrenching neo-Confucianism as the official ideology. At 17, Lê Thánh Tông

was even younger when he became emperor in 1460. The 20-year Ming Occupation had occasioned the destruction or disappearance of documents and forced the new Lê dynasty to depend on Chinese models for restoring imperial control. Lê Thánh Tông sought to extend the reach of the state by expanding the bureaucracy. He also expanded Đại Việt's territory after his victory over Champa in 1471. Control of both territory and population was pursued via the spread of neo-Confucianism as it was reflected in the civil service exam system since 1462 and in the legal code of 1483. Thus, despite his promotion of *nôm*, ultimately his administrative and cultural priorities privileged the use of *wenyan*.

In *Imagined Communities* Benedict Anderson argued that print capitalism displaced Latin as the language of writing throughout Europe and promoted the spread of local languages; by this he meant not just printing, but also the wide distribution of materials by profit-seeking printers and publishers.² Through forging imagined connections among far-flung, unconnected readers, print capitalism was at the origin of the modern nation. Printing had emerged in East Asia long before Europe, but the lack of transportation and distribution networks hindered the dissemination of materials –

whether in *wenyan* or in demotic scripts – in premodern Korea and Đại Việt.

The use of different scripts corresponded not just to distinctions between classes, but also between genders and between private and public writings. *Han'gŭl* was used primarily by women and writers of fiction. Similarly, in Đại Việt, *nôm* was associated with commoners and with women, as well as with the expression of private emotions, hence its use in poetry. Forged through the same *wenyan*-based educational system and imbued with the same neo-Confucian values, appointed to serve outside of their native places, officials were the only social group that transcended the particularistic ties of lineage and locality. They were not just administrators; they were also responsible for spreading neo-Confucian values. The Vietnamese legal code of 1483 was an amalgam of administrative rules and instructions on everyday behavior along neo-Confucian principles. The same amalgam could be found in the *Kyŏngguk taejŏn* [Great Code of Administration], promulgated two years later (1485) in Chosŏn.

In both Chosŏn and Đại Việt, imperial promotion of neo-Confucianism elevated the status of the literati, known collectively as *yangban* in Korea and *sĩ phu* in Vietnam. Comparisons between Vietnamese and Korean strands of neo-Confucianism must be limited to northern Vietnam, the Mekong Delta not forming part of the Vietnamese polity until the eighteenth century. The *sĩ phu* community was concentrated in the Red River Delta, encircled to the north and west by mountainous areas inhabited by non-Viet populations; to the

Mountains and seas divide your land from mine. The scriptures we both read come from one source.

south were Cham lands with their Hinduized culture. After 1600, Đại Việt was divided between the Lê-Trịnh regime north of the eighteenth parallel and the Nguyễn regime in the south. Nearly continuous social unrest and conflicts between the two regimes, culminating in the 30-year war at the end of the eighteenth century, not only taxed the economic resources of the *si phu* community but splintered it as well, as its members took different sides in various conflicts. Đại Việt produced some illustrious individual scholars, yet long-lasting elite lineages or stable alliances were few. The small and economically precarious *si phu* community was unable to sustain a school of thought comparable to the *Silhak* [Practical Learning] School in Korea where the Yi dynasty reigned uninterrupted from 1392 to 1910. The economic differences between the *si phu* and yangban classes were reflected in Phùng Khắc Khoan, who came from a modest background and Yi Su-gwang who belonged to a prosperous aristocratic lineage.

The yangban's ability to maintain themselves was due not only to political stability but also to economic resources, especially to the institution of slavery. Đại Việt society also included slaves, especially soldiers captured in warfare, but they were confined to special villages and thus not available to supply their labor to literati families. The yangban constituted 10% of the population; below was the 'intermediate class' known as *chungin*, made up of workers with the skills necessary to administer the kingdom on behalf of the ruler and the yangban. *Sangmin*, or commoners, formed the third class; at the bottom were the *chônmin*, or outcasts. Slaves were of the lowest standing. Meanwhile, despite claims of also having four occupational classes – scholars, peasants, artisans and merchants – in reality Đại Việt had only two: literati (*si*) and peasants (*nông*). Except for a few specialized villages, the majority of crafts were performed as off-season work. Small-scale trade was the province of women; trade on a larger scale was done by either Chinese or Western merchants, who thus formed no part of mainstream society. Vietnam, like Korea, had its share of outcasts who were similarly banned from taking the exams; but they were not considered a separate social group; neither were slaves.

Tributary relations and transnational encounters

As the capital of the Middle Kingdom, Beijing was the meeting point for envoys from the various states that constituted the cultural ecumene based on *wenyan*. The tributary relationships between these states and the Middle Kingdom we are most familiar with were established under Emperor Ming Taizu in 1368. In response to Ming Taizu's request, Đại Việt sent tribute in 1369, as did Chosôn. On that occasion, Đại Việt was recognized as a 'state of civility' [*văn hiến chi bang*]. Đại Việt was expected to send tribute every three years but sent twice as many missions during Ming Taizu's reign. This increase in frequency was probably occasioned both by recurring conflicts with Champa and by Hồ Quý Ly's maneuvers to seize power. Lê Thánh Tông's campaign against Champa in 1471 caused a disruption in tributary exchanges between Đại Việt and China. Afterward, Đại Việt reverted to sending a mission every three years but this frequency was once more disrupted when Mạc Đăng Dung overthrew the Lê in 1527. Meanwhile, in 1400, Chosôn increased the number of tributes sent to Ming from once every three years to three times each year; in 1531, Chosôn began sending tribute four times each year. The different frequency of tribute missions from Chosôn and Đại Việt must have affected the degree of penetration of neo-Confucianism in the two countries.

Korean missions usually traveled to Beijing, a distance of 950 km. Ordinarily, Vietnamese missions only traveled to the border, the distance from the Vietnamese capital to Beijing being nearly 2,330 km. Even so, internal politics often disrupted travel and therefore tribute. The delegation led by Phùng Khắc Khoan in 1597 was particularly important to the Lê dynasty that was restored to the

throne in 1592, as it was meant to negotiate recognition of its legitimate claim to the throne and the return of territories ceded by Mạc Đăng Dung in 1541. Therefore, the mission traveled all the way to Beijing. The stakes of Yi Su-gwang's mission were also high. In 1592, Hideyoshi had launched the Imjin War against Chosôn. In 1596, Hideyoshi launched a second attack. This was the background of Yi Su-gwang's first of three missions to Beijing.

In 1597, Yi Su-gwang was 29 and intellectually curious. On one of his trips, he met the Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) who gave him a copy of *The True Meaning of the Master of Heaven* [*Tianzhu shiyij*]. Ricci's fusion of Catholic and Confucian concepts deeply influenced Yi Su-gwang. Yi also included what he had learned from the Western books Ricci gave him in his 20-volume encyclopedia *Chibong yusôl*. Christianity was by no means unknown in Đại Việt at that time, thanks to the activities of Portuguese merchants. But how much Phùng Khắc Khoan knew about Catholicism is not known. When he went to Beijing, he was already 64 and of a highly pragmatic bent. He brought back knowledge about silk weaving, cultivation of maize and sesame and new varieties of rice. Whereas Yi Su-gwang left behind observations on Đại Việt in his encyclopedia, we do not know what Phùng Khắc Khoan thought about Chosôn or reported to the court.

The longevity of Chosôn rule and continuing loyalty to the Ming may explain the Korean envoys' reaction to the Tây Sơn delegation at Qianlong's 80th birthday celebrations in 1790. On Lunar New Year 1789, the Tây Sơn, led by Nguyễn Huệ, defeated the Qing army that had been sent in support

of the Lê emperor whom Nguyễn Huệ had deposed a few months earlier. Nguyễn Huệ lost no time in requesting investiture as king of Annam [*An Nan guowang*], which the Qing court granted. At Qianlong's birthday, all tributary states sent a delegation. Ordinarily, delegations were headed by a high-ranking official. The very large (over 100) Vietnamese delegation was headed by a man who appears in Chinese and Korean documents as Nguyễn Quang Bình and who may or may not have been Nguyễn Huệ himself. According to Sô Ho-su, the head of the Korean delegation: "Nguyễn Quang Bình, the king of Annam, asked the Chosôn envoy: 'Does your country also have a precedent for a king to personally pay homage to the Supreme Kingdom [China]?' The Chosôn envoy replied: 'Ever since the founding of our East Kingdom [Korea], there has been no such precedent.' The king of Annam commented: 'There is no such precedent in Annam either. However, I have received enormous mercy and grace from Emperor Qianlong. Therefore, I was eager to present myself before the emperor, regardless of the perilous journey of ten-thousand miles.'"

Sô Ho-su condemned Nguyễn Quang Bình for "abandoning the righteousness between ruler and subjects" by ousting the Lê dynasty. The Koreans, who represented the unbroken Chosôn dynasty and still wore Ming-style clothing, disparaged the Vietnamese adoption of Qing-style clothing and challenged them to explain their reason for doing so. Phan Huy Ích, a member of the Vietnamese mission, explained: "The emperor rewarded our king for personally showing up to pay homage. We were bestowed with costumes and vehicles ... We will wear our traditional attire when we

have an audience with the emperor in the capital or attend sacrificial ceremonies. The clothing we are now wearing is nothing but an expediency. When we return to our country, we will switch back to our traditional attire."

While Korean envoys like Sô Ho-su decried the loss of proper clothing and rituals in Đại Việt, the Vietnamese envoys tried to emphasize cultural commonalities between the two countries. Phan Huy Ích wrote: "We have shared a system of clothing and hats for thousands of years/fortuitously, we have the chance to have conversations day after day/The elegant verses are reminiscent of the exchange of poems between Yi and Phung/ Our friendship is stronger than sweet wine."

Vernacular scripts and imagined communities in Korea and Vietnam

The Sino-French war of 1882 ended Vietnam's tributary relationship with China. French protectorates were established in Tonkin (North) and Annam (Center) in 1885; the Vietnamese south had already become the colony of French Cochinchina in 1867. The Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ended the Sino-Japanese war of 1895, similarly abrogated Korea's tributary relationship with China. In each country, the elite was later criticized for its continued adherence to outmoded neo-Confucian thought, blaming it for the decline in cultural vitality and loss of national independence.

In 1905, the Vietnamese reformist scholar Phan Bội Châu was inspired by the Chinese reformist Liang Qichao to write *The History of Vietnamese Loss of Country* [*Việt Nam Vong Quốc Sử*]. The book was written in *wenyan*, the script in which Phan had been educated. Liang wrote a preface to *The History* and organized its printing and publication in East Asia as a cautionary tale. For Korea, where *The History* was widely disseminated, it was already too late. Korea became a Japanese protectorate in 1905 and an outright colony in 1910.

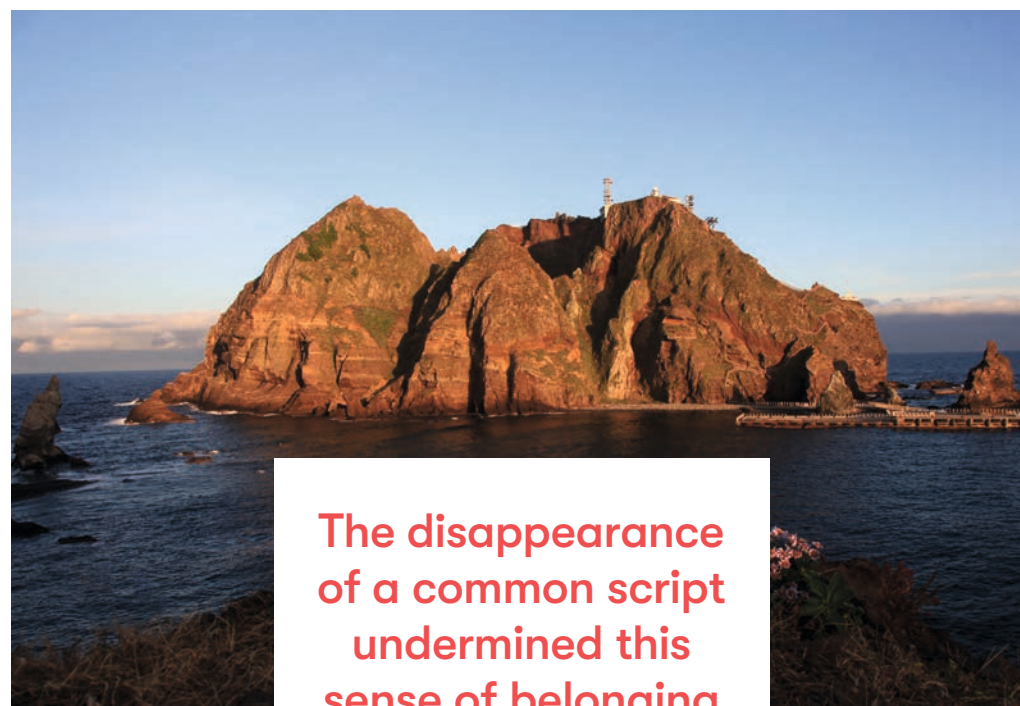
In Vietnam, under French colonial rule, both *wenyan* and *nôm* were replaced by *quốc ngữ* [national language], a script based on the Roman alphabet that had been devised by Portuguese missionaries and merchants in the seventeenth century. The deathblow to both scripts was the abolition of the civil service exams in 1915. In Korea, *han'gul* only became the primary Korean script following independence from Japan in the mid-20th century, though *hanja* (Chinese script) is also still used today. In both countries, journalism in the vernacular enabled the growth of an imagined national community.

The premodern elites of East Asia had been both national (or proto-national) and transnational. They might not have spoken the same language, but they wrote in the same script and shared the same values. What Phùng Khắc Khoan and Yi Su-gwang were celebrating in 1597 was a transnational ecumene. The disappearance of a common script undermined this sense of belonging to the same cultural universe. It became more difficult for citizens of Vietnam and Korea to engage in the kind of brush talk that envoys from both countries had delighted in over the previous four centuries. The rise of mass culture similarly emphasized dissimilarities rather than the shared cultural values that had sustained the premodern elites of the two countries. Whether 21st century globalization can replace this sense of belonging to the same cultural universe remains to be seen.

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Notes

- 1 The author wishes to thank Cai Wenjiao of Harvard University for translations of Sô Ho-su's writings and Kathlene Balanza for discussing Vietnamese relations with Ming China.
- 2 Anderson, B. 1991. *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.



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A page from Phạm Đình Hổ, Chinese-nôm dictionary *Nhật dụng thường đàm* [Everyday Conversations], 1851. National Library of Vietnam.