

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

A History of Court and Commoner Clothing in Vietnam

Trần Quang Đức. *Ngàn năm áo mũ: Lịch sử trang phục Việt Nam giai đoạn 1009–1945* [One thousand years of caps and robes: A history of Vietnamese clothing in the period 1009–1945]. TP Hồ Chí Minh: Nhã Nam, 2013. ISBN: 1467557900.

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The year 939 C.E. is very important in Vietnamese history, for it was in that year that Ngô Quyền declared a kingdom in the Red River Plain. For roughly a thousand years prior to that moment, the Red River Plain had been a part of various empires to the north, in the area we refer to today as China. However, after 939 the Red River Plain was, with the exception of a brief Ming occupation in the early fifteenth century, governed by local rulers.

Ngô Quyền’s establishment of a kingdom in 939 is thus often viewed as the beginning of Vietnamese “independence” from Chinese rule. While it is true that the various ruling houses that governed the area of what is today Vietnam from the time of Quyền onward were politically autonomous from direct Chinese rule, Quyền’s establishment of a kingdom in 939 can also be seen as marking the beginning of a deliberate effort on the part of the Vietnamese ruling elite to actively *connect* themselves to symbols of power in the Chinese world.

The caps and robes worn by the emperor and his officials were one of the most potent symbols of Chinese power. It is thus not surprising to find that one of Quyền’s first acts as king was to designate the color of robes for his officials. Indeed, this is one of the only acts that the official Vietnamese chronicle, the fifteenth-century *Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt* (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*), records Quyền as performing in the momentous year of 939. The brief entry for that year states that, “In the spring, [Ngô Quyền] first started to call himself king. He made Lady Dương queen, appointed the various officials, established court rituals and designated the color of robes” (Ngô Sĩ Liên [1479] 1697, chap. 5, 20b–21a).

Most historians, I would argue, have viewed this act as a sign of the Vietnamese effort to become independent of Chinese rule, for it shows that Quyèn was making his own decisions and ruling unilaterally. On one level, this is true. However, if we look more closely and try to determine how and why Quyèn designated the color of robes for his officials, then this act becomes an example (the first of many to follow) of a Vietnamese ruler's effort to connect himself to Chinese symbols of power. This is precisely what Trần Quang Đức has done in his *One Thousand Years of Caps and Robes: A History of Vietnamese Clothing in the Period 1009–1945*.

According to Trần Quang Đức, the use of color in the robes of officials to differentiate their ranks was a practice established by the Tang dynasty. Thus, although Quyèn declared himself king in the years following the collapse of the Tang dynasty, he also appropriated a key Tang symbol of power. In the centuries that followed, many other rulers would do the same. Indeed, in Đức's monograph one encounters repeated efforts on the part of Vietnamese rulers to examine the regulations for court clothing of whatever Chinese dynasty was in power at the time, in order to compare them with regulations from earlier dynasties and reform their own practices as they deemed appropriate.

In deciding which style of cap and robe to wear, Đức argues that the Vietnamese ruling elite was influenced by two streams of thought: an "imperial ideology" (*tu tưởng Đế quốc*) and a "civilized-barbarian ideology" (*tu tưởng Hoa Di*). The imperial ideology reflected the Vietnamese ruling elite's belief that their ruler was an "emperor" like the emperor of whatever Chinese dynasty was in power at the time and that, therefore, it was necessary for their ruler to dress like an emperor and for his officials to dress like they were serving an emperor. How did an emperor and his officials dress? For the Vietnamese elite in the roughly one thousand years that Đức's book covers, the model for the clothing of emperors and officials existed somewhere in the Chinese present or past, and this is where the civilized-barbarian ideology came into play.

Like the educated elite in China, members of the Vietnamese ruling elite saw themselves as a civilized people who were surrounded by barbarian neighbors. However, they saw the Mongol Yuan and Manchu Qing as barbarian as well. Therefore, when considering which clothing was appropriate for the court, their task was relatively easy when Han Chinese dynasties such as the Song and the Ming were in power, but became more difficult when their northern neighbor was under the rule of "barbarian" dynasties such as the Yuan and Qing, as this required

one to decide between current or older practices. In general, when confronted with this decision, Vietnamese officials chose to follow the styles of the Song and Ming—that is to say, they always chose to be “civilized” rather than “barbarian.”

Đức documents in incredible detail the history of the sartorial decisions made at various Vietnamese courts, from Quyền’s time until the end of the Nguyễn dynasty. Based on an extensive examination of Vietnamese, Chinese, European, and even Korean sources—most of which only briefly mention clothing in various periods—Đức has succeeded in producing a comprehensive overview of the clothing of Vietnamese rulers and their officials; when possible, he also comments on the dress of other segments of society, such as the military and commoners.

One Thousand Years of Caps and Robes devotes a chapter to each Vietnamese dynasty: the Lý, the Trần, the Lê, the Tây Sơn, and the Nguyễn. Đức begins each chapter with an overview of the history of that dynasty’s styles of court dress and then goes into a detailed description of exactly which types of cap and robe the ruler and his officials wore, and in what ways these caps and robes extended previous practices or were innovations. He follows his examination of court dress with a discussion of military and commoner attire. The chapter introductions provide a concise history of changes in court clothing across time, while the detailed discussions of the caps and robes from each period offer a deeper level of understanding.

Đức does not engage with English-language scholarship on Vietnamese history; however, *One Thousand Years of Caps and Robes* does offer a nice intervention into some of the scholarly debates in that literature. First, in contrast to Alexander Woodside’s argument in *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (1971) that the Nguyễn dynasty somewhat clumsily attempted to place a “Chinese” model of administration onto a “Southeast Asian” reality, Đức provides a millennium’s worth of evidence that demonstrates that Vietnamese rulers had no interest in any Southeast Asian reality; instead, they defined themselves in opposition to that reality, which they considered the world of “barbarians,” while they were “civilized.” What is more, Đức notes that while they were willing to follow various administrative and legal practices, including some adopted from the “barbarian” Qing dynasty, they turned to the Ming for their core caps and robes. This is a clear sign that the Nguyễn were deliberate in their adoption of the “Chinese model.”

Then there is the body of scholarship produced by Keith Taylor (1993), Tana Li (1998a; 1998b), and Nola Cooke (1997) that argues that the southward expansion of the Vietnamese

people over time led to a “new way of being Vietnamese” (Li 1998a, 99). These scholars contend that this new way was less Sinitic, and they trace its development from the time that Nguyễn Hoàng established an autonomous realm in the sixteenth century in what is now south-central Vietnam, a political entity that persisted for some two hundred years in parallel with a realm based in Hanoi under the control of the Lê dynasty and Trịnh clan. Later, in the early nineteenth century, one of Nguyễn Hoàng’s descendants went on to establish the Nguyễn dynasty. Woodside argued that this dynasty was the most Sinitic in Vietnamese history, but Cooke (1997) challenged this view with an assertion that the Nguyễn maintained certain “southern” (i.e., more Southeast Asian and less Sinitic) practices during this period. In relation to these studies, Trần Đức has a detailed examination of a reform that the Nguyễn clan implemented in the eighteenth century to bring their dress more in line with Ming dynasty practices as opposed to what they saw as the more heterodox practices in the north at the Lê dynasty capital, the area that this body of English-language scholarship sees as the most culturally Sinitic region in Vietnam at that time. What is more, Đức argues that this model of dress was maintained to a large extent by the Tây Sơn and the Nguyễn dynasty. As such, Đức’s scholarship calls into question the idea that there was a “new way of being Vietnamese” in the south, at least at the level of the ruling elite, and that the Nguyễn dynasty sought to maintain an alternative way of being.

While Đức is not compelled to engage with the abovementioned English-language scholarship, the ways in which his work challenges what has been written in that literature about the Vietnamese past points to an issue at the center of *One Thousand Years of Caps and Robes* that the author does not directly address. While it is true that, in deciding which style of cap and robe to wear, the Vietnamese ruling elite was influenced by an imperial ideology and a civilized-barbarian ideology, I would argue that Vietnamese rulers were motivated first and foremost by a desire to show that they were better than their local competitors—namely, fellow Vietnamese who desired power. The various reforms in the styles of caps and robes worn at the court occurred at key times, such as when a ruler wished to consolidate power and demonstrate that his court was worthy of obedience. While, as Đức demonstrates, the imperial ideology and the civilized-barbarian ideology clearly served as an intellectual foundation for each ruler’s choice of which caps and robes to wear, this decision was never undertaken in a vacuum; instead, it was always made with the deliberate goal of informing a local audience of the ruler’s legitimacy.

A discussion of such internal dynamics is unfortunately missing in *One Thousand Years of Caps and Robes*, but Đức provides much of the evidence that one needs to present such an argument. Indeed, he has brought together enough evidence for scholars to produce numerous arguments about the past, as this is clearly the most comprehensive study of the history of clothing in Vietnam that we can ever expect to see produced. It is without doubt a masterful piece of scholarship that offers an overview of the history of clothing in Vietnam into which one can delve more deeply to obtain a detailed understanding of clothing styles in individual periods.

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