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**The Inquiring Literatus: Yi Sugwang’s “Brush-Talks” with Phung Khdc Khoan in Beijing in 1598**

WILLIAM F. PORE

The 1597-1598 Korean winter solstice embassy to Ming China is noteworthy for its contact in Beijing with an embassy from Vietnam, and, in particular, for the meeting between the Korean envoy, Yi Sugwang (1563-1628), ana his Vietnamese counterpart, Phung Khac Khoan (1528- 1613). Although the meeting between these two envoys is a relatively well known event in East Asian history, the content of their “brush-talks,” the written dialogue they held in classical Chinese, is not. In his collected works, Chibongjip, Yi Sugwang recorded this dialogue and the several poems the envoys exchanged. As such, Yi’s collected works preserve one of the most detailed accounts of a contact between tribute envoys while on a mission in China. Besides the substance of this dialogue amounting to a virtual late sixteenth century intelligence report on Vietnam, the communication between these two envoys provides a greater [page 2] understanding of the nature of knowledge and identity within the Chinese cultural sphere. Moreover, Yi Sugwang’s probing exchange with Phung Khac Khoan connects him with other broadly learned and inquiring Korean thinkers such as Ch’oe Ch’iwon (859-c. 910)2 and Yi I [Yulgok] (1536-1584),3 whose minds likewise interrogated the world beyond their immediate place.

**The Envoys**

In 1597 Yi Sugwang was appointed chinwisa, envoy for conveying condolences, to the Ming court in the retinue of the Korean annual winter solstice embassy4 to China. The particular duty incumbent in Yi’s appointment was the destruction by fire of the Hall of Supreme Harmony and the Hall of Preserving Harmony, Ming palace buildings in Beijing.5 He was 35 years old, a kinsman of the reigning king, Sonjo

2 Born in Kyongju, at the age of twelve Ch’oe went to Tang to study. After passing the civil examinations, he received official appointments in the Tang bureaucracy. He also served as secretary to Gao Pian, a Chinese field commander, who in the 860s conducted a campaign in northern Vietnam, where he was governor for a time and centuries later was still remembered by learned Vietnamese for his magnanimity and broadmindedness. In 887, Ch’oe returned to Korea and held official posts. His known writings include works on Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, history and official documents. He is sometimes regarded as the creator of Korean literature.

3 Along with Yi Hwang (T’oegye), with whom he famously took part in the Four-Seven Debate, Yi I is considered one of Korea’s foremost Neo-Confucian scholars and a distinguished Choson government official. He was widely read in the learning of the Chinese cultural sphere, including Buddhism. Besides his philosophical works, he also authored treatises on ethics, the economy and the well-being of the people.

4 A discussion in Korean of the purpose of this embassy, Yi’s role in it and the meeting with Phung is in Han’guk kwa Wollam kwa ui gwan’gye, pp. 70-94. For the background information on Korean embassies to China, I have relied upon Gari Ledyard’s comprehensive and detailed summary, “Korean Travelers to China over Four Hundred Years, 1488-1887,” Occasional Papers on Korea, 4, 1975, pp. 1-41.

5 It is not a little ironic that Yi Sugwang was sent as a condolence official in the Korean embassy to Ming in 1597-1598 on the occasion of the destruction of the Ming palace buildings, in as much the already seven-year-long, very destructive Japanese invasions and occupation of Korea and their related popular suffering, had not yet completely come to an end. Further, when their dialogue is examined, it is difficult to understand why the Japanese invasions, which the Ming at great cost had sent forces to counter and which Yi had also helped to defend against, did not enter into his talks with Phung.

[page 3] (1568-1608), the holder of a chinsa degree and director of the Songgyun’gwan.6 It would be his second trip to China, having previously served in 1590 as secretary to the envoy who in that year had led a special Korean delegation to extend birthday felicitations to the Wanli Emperor.

Phung Khac Khoan (1528-1613) was the senior member of the 1597-1598 Vietnamese embassy to China. He was 70 years old, a tien si (the Vietnamese equivalent of chinsa), a very talented literatus and an eminent Le dynasty (1428-1777)7 official, having most prominently served as vice-director on the board of the secretariate of state.8 When the Le dynasty was interrupted by the insurrection and brief control of the northern part of Vietnam by the militant, pro-Ming Mac dynasty (1527-

6 This biographical information on Yi is from Han’guk minjok munhwa taebaekhwa sajon (The Encyclopedia of Korean Culture), Yi Hyonjae, editor (Seoul: Han’guk chongsin munhwa yon’guwon 1991), pp. 26-27

7 There had been a brief, earlier period in Vietnamese history (c. 983-1010), when, after gaining independence, the state was ruled by a dynasty also named Le. The Le dynasty of the early fifteenth to late eighteenth centuries which had recently returned to power is therefore designated the Later Le. The founding date of the Later Le (1428) corresponds closely with the founding date of the Ming and Yi dynasties, but in its longevity extended one hundred and fifteen years beyond the end of the Ming and was replaced by the Nguyen dynasty one hundred and thirty three years before the end of the Yi dynasty.

8 These details of Phung’s career combine his biographical sketch in Tu Dien Nhan Vat Lich Su Viet Nam (A Dictionary of Vietnamese Historical Figures), (Sai Gon: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi 1991) pp. 790-792 and that supplied by Iwamura Namakoto in his Annan toshi (A Comprehensive History of Annam) cited in Han’guk kwa Wollam kwa ui gwangye, p. 90,et passim.

[page 4] 1592), Phung had remained loyal to the Le. Like Yi, Phung had also previously gone to Beijing in 1590 as an envoy on the occasion of the Wanli Emperor’s birthday. It has been suggested that it was at that time that he and Yi may have first become acquainted.9 In 1597-1598 it was Phung’s particular duty during this typically irregular Vietnamese embassy to China10 to inform the Ming of the removal of the Mac and to seek restoration of the legitimacy of the Le king,11 or emperor, as the Vietnamese since their independence in 938 had begun to self-style their rulers.

**Going to China: The Routes of the Korean and Vietnamese Embassies**

According to Gari K. Ledyard’s prior research on Korean embassies to China from 1488 to 1887, these were frequent occurrences. There were not only the annual tribute missions, but also a variety of others for special purposes. The retinues of these embassies could typically include hundreds of people: the chief delegates, secretaries, translators, cooks, a variety of other attendants and merchants. Korean embassies to China followed long-established routes but were slow-moving, and, by present- day standards, they would have seemed decidedly arduous journeys. Although the embassies at times took a land-and-sea route, the usual route seems to have been entirely over land. From Seoul, the embassy party required two to three weeks to reach the Yalu River, and, after crossing the river, two to three more days to reach the Willow Palisade. The Korean embassies formally entered China at a customs station east of Fenghuang. From there they journeyed to Shenyang, turned south, passed through the Great Wall at Shanhaiguan and then traveled east to Beijing. In all, the land journey was about 5,600 li (933 miles) and usually took about sixty

9 Han’guk kwa Wollam kwa ui gwangye, p. 91.

10 Since 954 the Vietnamese had sent delegations to several Chinese states as frequently as annually and as widely separated as ten years. See Nguyen The Long, Chuyen Di Su - Tiep Su Thai Xua (Tribute Missions to China Throughout the Years), (Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Van Hoa Thong Tin 2001), pp. 466-481

11 Tir Dien Nhan Vat Lich Su Viet Nam, pp. 790-792; see also Han’guk kwa Wollam kwa ui gwangye, pp. 89-92.

[page 5] days.12 The combined land and sea route, which may not have taken as long as the journey by land only, departed Seoul, went to P’yongyang, then to Sonch’on and Ch’olsan, where, from the nearby island of Kado, the embassy party boarded ships to cross the Yellow Sea to Dengzhou in Shandong, then went overland to Beijing.13 Since the lunar New Year of 1598 was on February 6 (according to the Gregorian calendar), the embassy to which Yi Sugwang was attached, having gone by land only, would probably have departed Seoul at the beginning of the tenth lunar month (November) of 1597.

Compared to the shorter route of the Korean embassies to the Chinese capital and their well staffed retinues, the Vietnamese embassies, such as that of which Phung Khac Khoan was a member, had to traverse a much longer route and typically seem to have numbered fewer in personnel. One authority has put the number of personnel in the Vietnamese embassy of 1597-1598 at twenty-three.14 Because of the greater distance, the route of the Vietnamese embassies to Beijing covered more varied terrain and was more arduous than the Korean. Based on Liam C. Kelley’s study of Vietnamese embassies to China from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, they followed one of two routes designated eastern and western.15 Both routes entered the south China

12 The number of days for a typical Korean embassy’s land journey to Beijing is from Ledyard, p. 3. The distance in li is provided by the Cambridge History of China, volume eight, “The Ming Dynasty,” edited by Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988), p 282. The length of a li has varied over time and according to place. Here I have given it a value of one sixth of a mile, in order to approximate a reasonably accurate distance that the embassy may have traveled.

13 Cambridge History oj china, p. 282.

14 Han’guk kwa Wollam kwa ui gwan’gye, p. 89

15 Liam C. Kelley, “Whither the Bronze Pillars? Envoy Poetry and the Sino- Vietnamese Relationship in the 16th to 19th Centuries,” (University of Hawai’i 2001) (unpublished dissertation). Kelley’s published monograph, Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino- Vietnamese Relationship (Asian Interactions and Comparisons) (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press 2005), based on his dissertation, provides the same information.

[page 6] province of Guangxi from northeastern Vietnam, passed through what the Vietnamese termed South Holding Pass (Tru Chan Nam Quan) and Ghost Gate Pass (Quy Mon Quan) and made their way to Guilin. From there, the western route, which Phung more than likely took,16 followed waterways through Jiangxi and Zhejiang provinces, went to Wuchang (Wuhan) in Hubei province, then overland to Beijing. A later, alternate, eastern route which came to be favored from late in the eighteenth century, also followed waterways through the same Chinese provinces but went to Hangzhou, where the Vietnamese ambassadorial parties then took the Grand Canal to Beijing. Phung Khac Khoan wrote that his journey was 13,000 li (c. 2,166 miles)17 in length and had taken about eighteen months, having begun in the fourth lunar month of 1596 and ended with his arrival in Beijing in the tenth lunar month (Gregorian November) of 1597.18

By custom, during their stay in China, the tribute embassies were considered to be guests of the Chinese emperor. The Korean embassies are known to have lodged for about fifty days at a permanent hostel established for them by the Ming in the southeastern part of Beijing. In light of the meeting between Yi and Phung in 1597-1598,this hostel also seems to have been used by the members of other embassies, in this case, that of Vietnam. This building was known as the Yuheguan, because it was close to the Jade River Bridge (Yuheqiao).19

16 Alternatively and in less detail, Han’guk kwa Wollam kwa ui gwan’gye, p. 88, states that Phung’s route through China was from Guangxi to Guangdong to Nanjing and from there to Beijing.

17 The length of a li, as above, has here been calculated at one sixth of a mile, in order to approximate a reasonably accurate distance that Phung’s figure of 13,000 li might represent.

18 This schedule is at variance with Yi Sugwang’s statement in his Chibongjip that Phung had departed Vietnam in the seventh month of 1596 and arrived in Beijing in the eighth month of 1597. The more likely schedule presented here is according to Iwamura’s research, as found in Han’guk kwa Wollam kwa ui gwangye, p. 88-89, 90.

19 Ledyard, p. 4

[page 7] **“Korea” and “Vietnam”**

For convenience, I have used “Korea” and “Vietnam” throughout, the names by which these present-day nation-states are known in English. In the late sixteenth century, however, Vietnam was a state that Yi Sugwang and other contemporary, learned Koreans and Chinese would have frequently referred to as Annan/Annam (“the Pacified South”).20 Since 938 when the Vietnamese had gained their independence by defeating the Chinese Five Dynasties kingdom of Southern Han, they had begun to use Dai Co Viet as the name of their state. In 1054 the Ly dynasty (1009-1225) simplified that name to Dai Viet. In the sixteenth century, even though the Chinese and Koreans may have been aware of these name changes, they still often continued to use Annan/Annam, a name originally applied to the Vietnamese homeland during the first period of the long Chinese domination (111 B.C.E.-938 C.E.), when it was made a Han colony. By continuing to use Annan/Annam as the name for the Vietnamese state, the Chinese and Koreans of the late sixteenth century thus perpetuated a name that to its inhabitants was not only passe but also defamatory. In what may have been a certain quid pro quo, it was not uncommon for the Vietnamese of this and later times to continue to refer to Korea, not by its then current dynastic name, Choson, but by its historically early, pre-unified name, Sam Han, the Three Han.

**The Brush Talks**

On a certain winter day, or over a period of days, late in 1597 or early 1598 during their stay at the Yuheguan guest house, Yi Sugwang and Phung Khac Khoan met, exchanged poems and conducted “brush-talks” their written dialogue in Classical Chinese, their sole, mutually understood medium of communication. Here, presented first in English then in the original Chinese, is the text of the exchange between Yi and Phung, as it is found in Yi’s collected works.21 The dialogue appears to

20 The veritable records of the Koryo dynasty indicate that the first official Korean mention of Vietnam/Annam was apparently in the early fourteenth century. See Koryosa (History of Koryo), Ch’unghye Wang cho, 1331-1332.

21 The primary version of the “brush-talks” that I have used for my translation is a copy of Yi Sugwang’s Chibongjip (The Collected Works of Chibong [Yi Sugwang], Han’guk munjip ch’onggan (Reprints of Korean Collected Works)*,* volume 66 (Seoul: Samsong inswae chusik hoesa 1981). The portion of this work in which the meeting with Phung Khac Khoan is recorded appears on pp. 85-92. For comparison, I also consulted the Classical Chinese text and a translation into Korean in Han’guk kwa Wollam kwa ui gwangye, pp. 84-88.

[page 8] have been completely initiated and directed by Yi, since it is he who presents the series of questions to which Phung responds. Yi’s query is clearly, even somewhat relentlessly, an interrogation intended to acquire historical, political, economic and geographic information about Vietnam. Unfortunately, Yi has left only a very summary statement on Phung’s questions to him and his responses.

The questioning begins when Yi asks Phung to verify Yi’s knowledge of early Vietnam’s history, in the process demonstrating that Yi was apparently already quite well informed about his counterpart’s place of origin.22 Phung’s reply to this first question, as to most of the others, is typically terse, or perhaps modest.

(Yi) Question: In ancient times, Viet thirong23 and Giao chi24 were territories of your state, were they not?

問古之越裳交趾是貴國疆域否

(Phung) Answer: Yes. This is so.

*22 Based on the references in the poems Yi exchanged with Phung, his knowledge of Vietnam was acquired from reading Chinese dynastic histories of the Han. Yi is also assumed to have been familiar with information about Vietnam obtained by the previous Korean missions to China.*

*23 This is the name of an obscure kingdom from the time of the Chinese Zhou dynasty (1122-256 B.C.E.), which Medieval Vietnamese historians claimed was the source of the “Viet” used in Dai Viet, the name the state adopted in 1054. See Alexander Barton Woodside, Vietnam and the Chinese Model (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Press 1988) p. 20. Whether accurate or not, the origination of the Vietnamese people in China has been a longstanding and strong element of their national myth.*

*24 This was a circuit comprised of seven prefectures in northern Vietnam, the founding of which is traditionally dated to 111 B.C.E., when it was organized as a Han domain known in Chinese as Jiao Zhi. For further on Giao chi and the related history of early Vietnam, see Keith Weller Taylor, The Birth of Vietnam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1983) pp. 30-37*

[page 9] 答曰是也

The only type of recorded personal question Yi directed to Phung is a detached, routine inquiry concerning his official duties, to which Yi receives another very terse reply. In so far as Confucian “tradition” customarily placed esteem for others ahead of concern for oneself in social situations and autobiography never developed as a literary genre in the Chinese cultural sphere, this sort of reply might not be completely unexpected.

(Yi) Question: What is your official position?

問大人何官

(Phung) Answer: I have long served my humble state in an official capacity.

答曰愚老在賤國參侍郞識

Yi then asks about the government and customs of Vietnam. The answer he receives is disappointing in its lack of detail — even disjointed — but, to Yi, it perhaps was important for its affirmation of one of Vietnam’s similarities to Korea: its Confucian heritage.

(Yi) Question: What is the governing system and what are the customs of your state?

問貴國官制風俗何如

(Phung) Answer: We study the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, The Book of Poetry, The Book of Rites and music. We also use the learning of Tang and Song in the tien si [i.e. professional-level civil] examinations.

答曰習孔孟詩書禮樂之教唐宋進士科舉之文

Because of the fact of Phung’s presence in Beijing as an envoy and his knowledge of written Chinese, Yi could have presumed certain institutional similarities were shared between Korea and Vietnam. The institution he specifically asks about here is the civil and military examinations. In Phung’s reply, the Vietnamese Confucian examination process as he describes it, though at variance from other sources on this period, probably would have revealed to Yi that the Vietnamese examinations, despite some obvious differences, in both the civil and [page 10] military branches were more similar to the Chinese than to the Korean.25

(Yi) Question: Do you choose people [for the bureaucracy] on the basis of their poetry and compositions or on the basis of questions and themes? In addition, do you have a military examination?

問取人以詩賦乎以策論乎亦有武舉不

(Phung) Answer: We do choose people on the basis of examinations. There is a provincial examination in two parts. The provincial examination is the first stage. In the first part, the examination is on the Five Classics and Four Books. In the second stage, one of the parts of the examination is on evaluating imperial decrees and royal edicts. In the third stage, poetry forms a part In the fourth stage, the theme requires a response on the best way to rule the country. For the general examination, there are first, second, third and forth stages. It is like the provincial examinations. In the fifth stage, there is the palace examination, which requires composition and the reply to questions. As for the military examination, the examinees’ use of strategy is most important. There are talent competitions in horseback riding, elephant riding and shooting from horseback. Candidates are chosen every five years.

答曰科舉取人法有鄉試科有會試克鄉試科第一場試五經四書 各一通第二場詔制表文各一通第三場試科一通第四場策文古今治道一題會試科第一第二第三第四場同鄉試第五場廷試策文武可以前爲 主有騎馬騎象騎設之財五年一選

Sugwang was not only relatively well informed about Vietnam’s early history, but he was also evidently conversant with some of its more recent events, as his next question concerning the Mac dynasty interregnum demonstrates. Through information obtained by its embassies to China prior to 1597-1598, the Korean government had already become aware of the circumstances of the earlier Ming invasion and occupation of Vietnam (1407-1427), as well as the Mac coup in 1527- Indeed, the Veritable Records of the Choson Dynasty for the seventh year of the reign of T’aejong (1401-1418) describe at some length the overthrow of the Tran dynasty (1225-1400) by one of its officials, Ho Qui Ly (1336-

25 See Woodside’s Vietnam and the Chinese, pp. 169-233,”Education and Examinations in Nguyen Vietnam.”

[page 11] 1407),26 who then established his own very brief dynasty, as well as how an appeal to Ming by a descendent of the removed Tran king had led to the twenty-year Chinese occupation of Vietnam.27 From later envoy reconnaissance in Beijing, and in nearly as much detail, the Korean Veritable Records for the thirty-second year of the reign of Chungjong (1506-1544) recount the Mac insurrection28 that Yi refers to in his next question. These accounts of events in Vietnam collected by prior Korean envoys while in Beijing very likely supplied Yi with much of the information he knew about recent Vietnamese history and could have been the inspiration for the recording of his own interrogation of Phung. Of note in Yi’s question is his interest in civil unrest having been a part of the restoration of the Le, since this was a topic that had been dealt with in the two previous Veritable Records entries on Vietnam. Of some further interest, it is worth noting that, despite the militant nature of the Mac

26 Vietnamese sources frequently note that Ho Qui Ly was descended from a family that was originally Chinese, and that his surname was changed when he was adopted by a Vietnamese family named Le. He served as a minister during the Tran dynasty (which itself is often said to be Chinese in origin), and his aunt and daughter were married into the king’s family. When the last Tran king abdicated, Le Qui Ly seized power as regent for the king’s son, whom he soon removed and made himself sovereign in 1400. At this point, he reverted to using his original surname, Ho, hence the name of the dynasty. After the Ming invasion of Vietnam in 1406, the Ho dynasty came to an end in the following year and for the next twenty years Vietnam was again under Chinese domination. For an account of Ho’s life in Vietnamese, see Tu Dien Nhan Vat Lich Su Viet Nam, pp. 279-282. In Korean, an abbreviated biography is in Han’guk kwa Wollam kwa ui gwan’gye, pp. 123-125. In English, see Victor Lieberman, Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003), pp. 352-365. He is also treated at some length in all standard Vietnamese history texts which include the fifteenth century.

27 Veritable Records of the Choson Dynasty, Taejong,seventh year, fifth month (Choson wangjo sillok, T’aejong taewong, 7 nyon, 5 wol cho); cited in Han’guk kwa Wollam kwa ui gwan’gye, pp. 115-125.

28 Veritable Records of the Choson Dynasty, Chungjong, thirty-second year, forth month ( Choson wangjo sillok, 32 nyon, chong’yu, 4 wol cho; cited in Han’guk kwa Wollam kwa ui gwan’gye, pp. 125-138.

[page 12] takeover of Vietnam, this family had been an eminent Dong Kinh (northern) literati family.

(Yi) Question: I have heard that the surname of the former king of your state was Mac. Has the Le family now resumed its duty as head of state? Was there a disturbance or a coup?

問舊聞貴國王是莫姓今黎氏乃創業之主耶 由何變亂而革命耶

Since he was in Beijing to seek the restoration of the legitimacy of the Le, Phung’s reply to this question amounts to his mission’s statement of purpose.

(Phung) Answer: Our state was formerly ruled by the Le kings. The Mac family carried out an insurrection and ruled after them. Now the Le house has resumed its former position and is seeking investiture [from the Chinese emperor].

答曰前者賤國是黎王管封後為莫氏篡僣今黎氏復舊業再請封

Still wishing to pursue the events surrounding the Le restoration, Yi asks for further information and adds a second question. Phung’s answer, though again brier, is approximately accurate.

(Yi) Question: For how long did the Le house lose the kingship of the state? When did they regain their former position?

問黎王失國幾年始復舊物

(Pnung) Answer: It was for a period of fifty years.

答曰經五十年

In his next question, Yi inquires about a particular title bestowed by the Ming on the Mac rulers of Vietnam. When the Mac came to power, even though they submitted to the Ming, Vietnam’s status within the tribute system was reduced from that of a monarchy to a form which harkened back to the Han colonial designation “the pacified south,” i.e. Annan/Annam. This form, known in Chinese as dutongshi si, was in effect a “pacification system,” which imposed a lower status on Vietnam, but still recognized that Vietnam was above an aboriginal office, in that it was administered by Confucian literati, not by tribal chiefs, such as were the Burmese, Shan, Tai and Lao.29

(Yi) Question: Does your state have a “pacification commander”

29 Cambridge History of China, “The Ming Dynasty,” pp. 282, 330

[page 13] (Chinese: dutongshi)30? What duties does this officer have?

問貴國有都統使是何官職

Phung’s reply implies that the Ming authorities may have denied the stated purpose of his mission to obtain the investiture of the restored Le monarch as king of Vietnam. This was, in fact, the case. Vietnam was to remain in its lowered position within the hierarchy of Ming tribute states until the end of the Le dynasty, even though the Mac were overthrown and the Le were restored in 1592.

(Phung) Answer: Ever since we have had a state, the title of “pacification commander” had never existed. That title was a special feature of the Mac insurrection and their rise to power. The Celestial Dynasty was generous in not putting them [the Mac] to death. The title is temporary and carries a second grade status, because it is dependent upon the holder’s abilities. Now the [Le] king is seeking deliberation and a decision regarding the disposition of this title.31

答曰賤國自古有國以來未嘗有都統使之職特以莫氏僣逆天朝 育以不死權置都統師秩從二品以待报臣耳如今要王方議定思賞

Yi, having displayed that he is Knowledgeable even about the Mac dynasty, next asks about one member of that family in particular who had

30 A footnote in the Cambridge History of China, p. 330,states: “Charles O. Hucker, in A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China (Stanford 1985), p. 545, suggests the tu t’ung as a military title equivalent to campaign commander. This title, however, was not regularly used during the Ming, when Vietnam’s status may have been demoted. I suggest that the context was one comparable to that of the Burmese and the Shan-Tai-Lao hsuan-fu or hsuan-wei-fu (pacification commissioner), but higher. Therefore, I think ‘a superior form of pacification commissioner’ is appropriate.”

31 According to Iwamura’s Annan tsushi (A Comprehensive History of Annam), Han’guk kwa Wollam kwa ui gwangye, p. 90, Phung Khac Khoan declared that he had come to China to seek the re-enfeoffment of the Le as kings of Vietnam and that the Ming emperor Shenzong (Wanli) had presented the restored and then reigning Le king (The Tong) with the title of dutongshi. Iwamura states that this was a provisionary military title in Ming China. I have not been able to ascertain whether the granting of this title was tantamount to the accomplishment of Phung’s stated mission to Ming, was an adjunct to it or granted instead of it.

[page 14] recently been a king of Vietnam. Phung simply affirms the existence of this person. It could be assumed that Phung did not want to dwell on this person’s life and career because, as a Le dynasty loyalist, Phung would have regarded him as a usurper.

(Yi) Question: Is there a Mac Mau Hap32 who is a member of this Mac family of whom you have been speaking?

 問莫氏是莫茂洽耶

(Phung) Answer: Government officials were uneasy with him for

a long time. But the name, Mac Mau Hop, is that of the former king. I am surprised that you knew of him.

答曰使臣乃駑視良久然莫茂洽及其故王姓名蓋訝其知之也

At this point, Yi inserts a comment stating that, because of his (Yi’s) curiosity about this person, Phung had offered the information that Mac Mau Hop was the name of one who had recently been the king of Vietnam.

Yi then once again pursues his previous questioning on the issue of civil unrest and whether there had been any in connection with the resumption of Le rule.

(Yi) Question: When the Le king retook control of the state, did he have to put down a disturbance, or did he simply resume his position?

問黎王得國是討亂逆耶抑出推載耶

(Phung) Answer: The Le king succeeded the Tran family, but he did not perform the sacrifices. The people all pressed for his advancement and accession.

答曰黎王是代陳氏不祀國人共推載

Yi’s following question is seemingly straight-forward, but it is one which in effect sounds out Phung on dynastic loyalty. For contemporary Vietnamese literati, however, this question would have presented some ambiguity as regards their position in Vietnam just a few years before.

(Yi) Question: In what capacity did you serve the Mac family and their court?

32 Mac Mau Hop (1563-1592) was a great-nephew of two Mac kings and was later himself king. In battle, he was defeated by Le-Trinh forces, captured and beheaded. See Tu Dien Nhan Vat Lich Su Viet Nam, pp. 434-435*.*

[page 15] 問大人在莫氏朝仕衛何官

Phung’s reply is constructed to fit with the sense of Confucian morality that both he and Yi largely shared. As a Le official, Phung would have been assumed to be loyal to that dynasty. The ambiguity that Phung does not divulge is that most of the Dong Kinh literati had supported the Mac usurpation, just as perhaps most of their predecessors had supported the Ming occupation in the early fifteenth century.33 It should also be pointed out that when Phung went to Ming as an envoy in 1590, he would have to have gone under the auspices of a Mac, not a Le, ruler.

(Phung) Answer: Having for a long time been a subject of the Le house, even when it was out of power, I did not serve the Mac in any official capacity.

答曰愚老是黎氏瀢臣未嘗仕莫

As a relief from the inquiry into high, state-related matters, in his next two questions Yi’s interest shifts to Vietnam’s natural environment and agriculture. Such an inquiry is arresting, because Yi was later to be regarded as one of Korea’s leading Sirhak, or “practical learning,” scholars, who took natural phenomena and the improvement of agriculture as among their primary interests.

(Yi) Question: In your state, the winter is as warm as spring. It is said you have no ice or snow. Is this to be believed?

問貴國冬暖如春無冰無雪云信否

(Phung) Answer: In the south, the days are mostly like spring and the winter is brief.

答曰南天春多冬少

(Yi) Question: In addition, your state has a rice harvest twice a year and produces eight kinds of silk from your sericulture. Is this to be believed?

問貴國有再孰之稻八蠶之絲信否

In this instance, the spare, but adequate, reply that Phung offers to Yi’s question might be interpreted as indicative of a mind here turned to the ponderous state of Vietnam’s agriculture. One historian has found that,

33 See Victor Liebermann, Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003), p. 396.

[page 16] due to agricultural failures and severe pestilence, the fourteen-year interval from 1561 to 1610 “was perhaps the longest period of disaster in

Vietnamese history.”34

(Phung) Answer: From our fields, we harvest rice and barley twice a year. We do have eight kinds of silk.

答曰歲有再熟之稻麥有八蠶之絲痲

After this exchange, Yi turns to questions about Vietnam’s land area and geolocation in regard to China

(Yi) Question: What is the size of your state?

問貴國地方幾許

(Phung) Answer: Our state measures more than 5,000 li.

答曰地方五千餘里

(Yi) Question: How many li is it from your state to Yunnan?

問貴國距雲南幾里

(Pnung) Answer: We are separated [from Yunnan] by numerous mountains where our borders adjoin.

答曰隔山千重接壤一界

It would seem that, given the knowledge about Vietnam that Yi has already demonstrated and has just received from Phung, he should have been able to surmise its general geographic location, including the fact that it was far removed from Japan, Given that, his question to Phung about the proximity of Japan to Vietnam seems probing or more relevant to Korean and Chinese concerns than to Vietnamese ones. Phung’s answer may simply have assured Yi of what he already knew.

(Yi) Question: How many li distant is your state from the Ryukyu Islands and Japan?

問距琉球日本幾里

If other than official contact between Japan and Vietnam is considered, Phung’s reply to this question is disingenuous, in that since at least the early 1400s Vietnam had been trading far and wide in ceramic wares with a number of countries including Japan.35

(Phung) Answer: We are divided from them by the sea. They are

34 Quotation from Li Tana, in Lieberman, pp. 396-397

35 Lieberman, pp. 383-384

[page 17] distant and we do not have contact with them.

答曰隔海道遠不通

Finally, Yi asks Phung about the legendary bronze pillars which may have been erected in northern Vietnam by the Han general Ma Yuan in 43 C.E. This is something of an astonishing display of knowledge of Vietnamese history on Yi’s part, but is again probably a result of his having read Han dynastic history. According to several accounts, the intent of the placement of these pillars, the exact location, size and number of which is unclear, was to commemorate General Ma’s suppression of a revolt in what was then the southern extreme of the Han empire, but well within the territory of what is now the northern part of Vietnam. Reflecting on this much earlier event and Yi’s question concerning it, the implication of this question to his sixteenth century Vietnamese counterpart can only be conjectured, but it suggests the reach and military might of China.

(Yi) Question: As to Ma Fubo’s36 bronze pillars, where are they located?

問馬伏波銅柱竪在何地

(Phung) Answer: According to old legends, they were in Me Linh.37 They are not there now.

答曰古傳在於梅領今無矣

Yi closes the transcription of his written conversation with Phung by briefly summarizing the questions the Vietnamese envoy had asked of

36 Fubo (“wave calming”) was Ma Yuan’s courtesy title.

37 The pronunciation in Vietnamese of the Chinese characters for this place name is various, but previous scholarship and the historical context very strongly suggest that they should be read as rendered here. This is because this is the district in which the rebellion against Han rule led by the Trung sisters originated and where it was defeated by Ma Yuan. It would, therefore, seem likely that the Chinese general placed the bronze pillars at this location. For further background on the Trung sisters, this rebellion and its place in early Vietnamese history, see Taylor, The Birth of Vietnam, pp. 37-41. For a much more detailed account of the placement and existence of the bronze pillars, as well as their significance in Vietnamese history, see Liam Kelley’s dissertation, pp. 1-14 or his published monograph.

[page 18] him:

The [Vietnamese] envoy asked what the laws and system of our state were. I answered that we are governed by officials and regulations. In accord with the Celestial Empire, our officials are arranged in three ranks and six departments in ascending levels. As for our other laws and systems, they all respect the usages of China. The [Vietnamese] envoy commented, “Korea has long been regarded as a state gifted in the literary arts. My humble state cannot dare to approach its respect.”

其使臣問我國制度如何答以官制傲 天朝置三公六部臺省 自餘法度悉導用華制 使臣曰貴大國舊稱文獻之國賤國非敢望也

In a commentary which serves as a postscript to his exchange with Phung, Yi adds the following self-assured, perhaps even proud, but nonetheless factual, statement on the Chinese emperor’s morning audience for the foreign envoys. It might be possible to regard Yi’s comment as expressing either sympathy toward Vietnam or as suggesting that competition for imperial favor existed between Korea and Vietnam. Yet, Yi should undoubtedly have been aware that the hierarchical ranking of tributary states that he is commenting on at this particular audience was not an imperial whim, but followed a preset arrangement of longstanding that the Ming was simply perpetuating.

At the morning audience [with the emperor], our state’s delegation took a position at the front of the procession. According to the way in which the envoys were arrayed, those from Annam were placed more distantly. I determined that the significance of this was that their tribute was humble.

朝會時我國使臣為首立於前行安南使臣次於後行相接之條每 致恭遜意

**Concluding Remarks**

The meeting between Yi Sugwang and Phung Khac Khoan is significant not because of the two participants themselves. Primary source materials specifically on the two envoys are not extensive and largely stereotyped. Given that, even if a deeper analysis of the content of their [page 19] poems and dialogue were attempted and an imaginative construction of their milieu devised, we would still only be able to conjecture what they may have been like individually. It is far more beneficial to try to understand them and their meeting holistically, as parts of the historical setting. This approach, unlike the Western emphasis on the individual, conforms closely to the “traditional” East Asian conceptualization of history as a tableau in which people and their actions are meaningful, not separately, but contextually. By way of summary, then, it is useful briefly to consider the historical context.

Because of China’s early and long influence on East Asia, it has long been accepted that states on its periphery, such as Korea and Vietnam, developed as more or less pronounced microcosms of the macrocosmic Chinese cultural sphere.38 However, since Korean and Vietnamese literati, the local representatives of the macrocosm, both accepted and from time to time had to negotiate their status within that macrocosm, they periodically came to question its epistemology, their role in it and even, at times, themselves.

While both Korea and Vietnam in their early histories had similarly experienced periods of direct Chinese rule, notably during the Han dynasty (Korea: 108 B.C.E.-314 C.E.; Vietnam: 111 B.C.E.-938 C.E.), in the course of their later historical development, by their own efforts, they had been successful in avoiding absorption into China. However, because their separate autonomy was at times so precarious, China remained the power and the “other” that Koreans and Vietnamese had to lean toward, or deal with or appease the most, until a different order was introduced by outside pressures in the late nineteenth century. Until then, as states territorially separate from China, Korea and Vietnam quite willingly remained within its macrocosmic cultural and political orbit, in the process satisfying Chinese pride and maintaining their autonomy.

Datong, “the great unity,” suggests it as the plausible conceptual

38 Japan is not included in the macrocosm because, although it is geographically and culturally an East Asian nation, its formal participation in the Chinese cultural sphere through tribute relations ended in the Heian period in 894 corresponding to China’s Tang dynasty.

[page 20] underpinning which held the macrocosm together. Both inside and outside of China this unity was likely derived from the perceived universality of the cultural sphere’s concept of ren (i.e. humane benevolence or reciprocity; Korean: in; Vietnamese: nhan) reinforced by literati who were connected to the sphere mainly through the written classical language. However, in states politically separate from China, this unity was more symbolic than real, or, as expressed in the form of embassies, more ritualistic than concrete.39 Korea and Vietnam remained self-governing states, they did not become provinces of a greater China. Yet, to classically educated Koreans and Vietnamese, such as Yi and Phung in the sixteenth century and to others like them later, their states’ separate national identities were not marked by a narrow self-absorption such as that associated with nationalism, but by a consciousness of being Korean or Vietnamese and, at the same time, by valuing the cosmopolitanism they had acquired as participants in the Chinese cultural sphere. The significance of General Ma’s bronze pillars in the Han province of Zhao Zhi in northern Vietnam, like the stelae and artifacts from the Han Lelang commandery in northern Korea, was that they were physical representations of the extent, interaction and spread of Chinese civilization into those areas. Such areas, according to Hyung Il Pai, “had an indelible impact on the surrounding regions, for [they] introduced such highlights of Han dynasty civilization as bureaucracy, administration, writing, and metal technology to Japan and Korea.”40 The impact on Vietnam was very similar and nearly as pervasive.41 Although the state boundaries with China were rather well defined, the Han bronze pillars in Vietnam and the stelae and artifacts in Korea (nearly forgotten though they may have been in later times) served as symbolic markers of the boundaries of the Chinese cultural sphere and its overspread of state

39 On the Korean embassies to China as ritual, see Ledyard, pp. 11-13.

40 Hyung Il Pai, Constructing Korean Origins: A Critical Review of Archeology, Historiography, and Racial Myth in Korean State-Formation Theories (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press 2000), p. 130

41 See Taylor, The Birth of Vietnam, pp. 27-44, for a description of this same process in Vietnam.

[page 21] borders.

These boundaries of the cultural sphere were indicative of its “civilization” and learning. Besides Confucianism, this learning came to encompass Mahayana Buddhism, Daoism and other beliefs and practices in combination that were frequently modified through indigenization. In other words, this learning was diverse and had never been based on Confucianism alone, the “innerworldly morality of laymen” that sought “adjustment to the world,”42 as Max Weber judged it, and the importance of which he and some others since have often over-interpreted.43 Moreover, Confucianism and the Chinese, or modified-Chinese, religio- philosophical systems did not override practical realities that extended to state interests. As inhabitants of autonomous states, a practical part of being Korean and Vietnamese became knowing the “other,” whether China or other states on its periphery. As the dialogue between the two envoys demonstrates, knowledge of Confucianism was a means of marking and affirming membership in the Chinese cultural sphere, but it also demonstrates, especially when regarding the breadth of Yi Sugwang’s inquiries and astuteness of Phung’s replies, that the world in which they lived was complex and did not necessarily follow a single, universal pattern.

Because Yi’s questions to Phung are far ranging, well informed and specific, he seems to have understood this complexity and they give his inquiry a modern sensibility. It is also evident that Yi was captivated by the varied otherness of Vietnam. In fact, in another testimony to the lack of nationalistic concerns, Yi was able to avoid crudely turning his questions about Vietnam into mere referents in a solipsistic endeavor

42 Max Weber, The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism, translated and edited by Hans H. Gerth (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press 1951), p. 203

43 Tony Mitchell’s article, “Generational Change and Confucianism: Organization and Interaction in Korea” Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Korea, volume 61, 1986,pp. 15-33, offers a critique of the use and interpretation of Confucianism in modern Korea. On the way in which Confucianism has been overemphasized in Vietnamese history, see Shawn Frederick McHale’s Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 2004).

[page 22] intended to make Korea the true subject. Overall, the dialogue suggests that Yi, and Phung as well, may have been approaching a synthesizing mode of thought comparable to that which arose later in the West out of

Enlightenment inquiry.

In a final analysis, however, it would have to be conceded that the information Yi Sugwang derived from his dialogue with Phung Khac Khoan, while interesting as a period piece, had little or no intelligence value, in the way that such value is assessed today. Vietnam was not a military threat to Korea or China, nor did the information Yi derived on Vietnam compromise its security, lead to innovation or find application in Korea or anywhere else.

Perhaps the true value of the dialogue between Yi and Phung rests mainly in it being a tribute to the value of intercultural contact, to curiosity about the world one inhabits, and, however illusive it might be, to the knowledge gained from history. In this latter sense, the last word belongs to Phung Khac Khoan. In the concluding lines of one of his poems to Yi Sugwang, Phung writes:

The Kingly Way has its conformity and universalism, But in the emperor’s realm, the compilation of annals, The writing of poetry, and even the writings of envoys, Are as the radiance of a sunset, sea clouds and mist.

王道車書共

皇朝志紀編

詩成聊使寫

霞燦海雲煙

**Glossary**

Annan/Annam 安南

Annan tsushi 安南通史

“brush-talks” 筆談 (Korean: p’iltam; Vietnamese: butdam)

The Book of Poetry 詩經

The Book of Rites 禮經 [page 23]

Chibongjip 芝峯集

chinsa 進士

chinwisa 進慰使

cho 條

Ch’oe Ch’iwon 崔致遠

Choson 朝鮮

Choson wangjo sillok 朝鮮實錄

Ch’unghye Wang 忠惠王

Chungjong 中宗

Dai Co Viet 大[瞿] 越

Dai Viet 大越

datong 大同

dutongshi si 都統使司

Dong Kinh 東京

Giao chi (Jiao Zhi) 交趾

Guangdong 廣東

Guangxi 廣西

Guilin 貴林

Han 漢

Ho 胡

Ho Qui Ly 胡季犛

Iwamura Shigemitsu (?) 石村成允

Jiangxi 江西

Jiao Zhi (Giao chi) 交趾

Koryosa 高歷史

kwon 卷

Le 黎

Lelang 樂浪

li 里

Ly 李

Ma Yuan

Mac 莫

Mac Mau Hop 莫茂洽

Me Linh 梅嶺

Ming 明 [page 24]

Nguyen 阮

nyon 年

Phung Khac Khoan 馮克寬

ren 仁

Ryukyu (Islands) 琉球 (島)

Sam Han 三韓

Shenzong (Wanli) 神宗 (萬曆)

Sinmi 辛未

Sirhak 實學

Songgyun’gwan 成均館

Sonjo 宣祖

T’aejong 太示

The Tong 世宗

Thi tap loai ban 詩集類本

tien si 進士

Tran 陳

Trinh 鄭

Trirng 徵

tu t’ung (dutong) 都統

Viet 越

Viet thuong 越裳

Wanli (Shenzong) 萬曆 (神宗)

wol cho 月條

Yi Hwang 李湟

Yi I 李琪 (Yulgok)

Yi Sugwang 李睟光

Yuheguan 玉河舘

Yuheqiao 玉河橋

Yunnan 雲南

Zhejiang 浙江

Zhou 周

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The Author: A visiting professor in the Global Studies Program at Pusan National University during the spring semester of 2009, William F. Pore has a Ph.D. in Southeast Asian History with a concentration on Vietnam. He previously held a unique Fulbright grant in Korea and Vietnam (2001- 2002) and has conducted research in Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese and French sources.