

“Trấn Tây phong thổ ký”: The Customs of Cambodia

Introduction

This document was written in classical Chinese by a Vietnamese official serving in eastern Cambodia. Li Tana, who has translated it, found the text in the Han-Nôm Institute in Hanoi, Vietnam, in a collection of geographical writings called *Chư dư chí tạp biên* [諸輿志雜編], Its shelf number is VHV 1729. The title of the text seems deliberately modelled on the famous thirteenth-century account of Cambodia written by the Chinese traveller, Zhou Daguan,¹ but this document appears to be much more hastily compiled than its namesake. It was undoubtedly produced to satisfy the 1836 request of the second Nguyễn king, Minh Mạng, for information on Cambodian society, economy, and customs.² At the time, the Vietnamese court had renounced its earlier policy of more or less joint suzerainty (with Siam) over the Cambodian kingdom in favour of its outright annexation to the Vietnamese state. In this text, as in others of the time, the area is thus referred to as “Trấn Tây”, meaning the Vietnamese “western protectorate”. The catastrophic nineteenth-century Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia only finally ended in 1847, after bitter years of struggle had drained the Vietnamese will and ability to keep fighting national uprisings and Thai invasion in the 1840s.

The annotations are by Nola Cooke and Li Tana.

Text

Trấn Tây [the western protectorate] used to be Khmer land. In olden times it was called Chân Lạc³ and was divided into two parts, “Land” and “Water”,⁴ which paid tribute to our dynasty.⁵

¹ Zhou Daguan, *Zhenla fengtu ji* [The Customs of Zhenla]. The book was written before 1312. For an English translation from a French version, see *The Customs of Cambodia* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1992).

² See *Đại Nam thực lục Chính biên* [Chronicle of Đại Nam, Minh Mạng reign] (Tokyo: Cultural and Linguistic Institute, Keio University, 1975), *juan* 145, p.55.

³ Or Chen La in Chinese.

⁴ The “Land” or “Mountain” kingdom was centred on the Srei Santor region, and had close links with Siam, while the “Water” kingdom was centred on Oudong and had close links with Nguyễn Cochinchina and later Nguyễn Vietnam. Chinese merchants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries used these terms to differentiate the power bases of contending Khmer royal factions.

⁵ “Our dynasty” here refers to the nine pre-dynastic Nguyễn rulers, who are always called kings or emperors

Not until our imperial ancestors expanded [the territory] and created the foundations [of the state] in the south did we begin to own “Water” Chân Lạc, which comprised the six present provinces of Biên Hòa, Gia Định, Vĩnh Long, Định Tường, An Giang, and Hà Tiên. “Land” Chân Lạc was called Cao Man. It paid us tribute for generations and asked us for protection. In the Gia Long period [r. 1802-1819] the emperor ordered a garrison set up at the border of An Giang and it was commonly known as Châu Đốc Post. It protected [“Land” Chân Lạc] against Siamese attack. Later the *Phiên Vương*⁶ was moved to the west to a place called Nam Vang.⁷ This is the main town of Trấn Tây today.

In the Minh Mạng period [r. 1820–1841], the king of Cao Man had no heir and four of his daughters stood equal and could not rule the country. [Our king] thus ordered the army of Tham Tán, General Trấn Hộ (Pacify and Protect)⁸ to prepare rice rations and sent it to the [protecting Vietnamese] government,⁹ in order [for it] to [be able to] manage the land and set up [district] administrations there. Eleven prefectures (*phủ*) [are being set up]: Trấn Tây, Nghi Hoà, Nam Ninh, Võ Công, Hà Bình, Mỹ Lâm, Sơn Tĩnh, Hải Đông, Hải Tây, Ninh Thái, and Quảng Biên; and 25 districts (*huyện*): Phong Nhương, Thượng Phong, Nam Thái, Nam Thịnh, Phù Nam, Kỳ Tô, Thái An, Bình Xiêm, Trung Hà, Chân Tài, Phúc Lai, Hải Ninh, Tập Ninh, Trưng Thụy, Mỹ Tài, Hoa Lâm, Quế Lâm, Sơn Đông, Hải Bình, Thâu Trung, Ngọc Bia, Giang Hữu, Nam Thành, and Vĩnh Trường. All these units retain contacts with the [Vietnamese] provinces nearby, the same way that An Biên and Tĩnh Biên were managed by Hà Tiên, and Ba Xuyên was managed by An Giang.

The neighbours of this land are Siam to the west and Laos to the north. It is covered with forests and criss-crossed with

in official nineteenth century court texts.

⁶ Literally, “barbarian king”; in context meaning King Chan, who ruled from 1797 to 1835.

⁷ Modern Phnom Penh.

⁸ The text is referring to Trương Minh Giảng here. He was the Tham Tán and Trấn Tây Tướng Quân [Consular and General of Trấn Tây], however, rather than General Trấn Hộ. See *Đại Nam Chính biên liệt truyện nhị tập* [Collection of the biographies of Đại Nam, second reign] (Tokyo: Institute of Linguistic Studies, Keio University, 1981), *juen* 20, p. 229.

⁹ At this time, Trương Minh Giảng, a senior Vietnamese official had been acting as a sort of protector at the Khmer court since the 1810s.

rivers. The Trường Giang river originates in Yunnan province, and the Cửu Long river¹⁰ passes by [the Vietnamese provinces of] Hưng Hóa, Thanh Hóa and upper Nghệ An (where it is called Không Giang) before it reaches Trấn Tây, where it divides into four.¹¹ Lower downstream are the Tiền and Hậu rivers,¹² while up [another branch] the water becomes Hồ Hải [Tonle Sap lake], which is so large that one can not see the end of it. It can be reached in a day and a night with a good wind.¹³ There are two islands on the way called Cam and Nhãn, and some sandy areas, plus deeps and shallows. The water is sweet and fish are abundant there. Although there is no seawater, plenty of seafood is found there, making the lake [seem] no different from the ocean. Khmer boats and those from Lục Tỉnh¹⁴ all gather there, often numbering in the thousands. The fishermen dry the fish and boil the fish oil.

There are many islets along the lake, on which birds called Lân Cô [marabou] exist in many hundreds of millions.¹⁵ During the breeding season, junk merchants capture them for their feathers that they trade to the North.¹⁶ The country had a tax on feathers, which has now been forbidden so taxpayers are exempted from paying taxes [on this commodity].

Forest products are numerous. Herbal medicines, ebony, *trắc* wood, calambac,¹⁷ rhinoceros horn, elephant tusks, southern ginseng, cardamom, *sa nhơn*,¹⁸ and pepper are the best known, but there are countless other products like coconut oil, lacquer, purple ants, yellow wax, etc. Land is fertile and abundant here and population is scarce. Only 30–40 percent of the land is under cultivation, mainly for cotton and betel nut and a little rice. Merchants come here to trade

¹⁰ The Mekong River, called “Nine Dragons” in Vietnamese.

¹¹ Close to Phnom Penh.

¹² The Vietnamese names for the upper and lower Mekong branches respectively.

¹³ Probably from Phnom Penh.

¹⁴ The “Six Provinces” was the contemporaneous Vietnamese name for far southern Vietnam, known to the French as Lower Cochinchina.

¹⁵ Marabou are a type of stork (*Leptoptilus javanicus*) with soft, downy feathers under their wings and tail used to make fur-like material. A traditional Cambodian trade item to China, the feathers were widely used for decoration by women in the Tang period.

¹⁶ In this context, to China.

¹⁷ A valuable form of aromatic aloes-wood, used widely throughout north Asia.

¹⁸ A forest product very similar to cardamom, which is used in Chinese medicine.

for local products and make big profits. This is why many merchants from Lục Tỉnh come here.

In regard to the population, we find the *thổ dân* [local Khmers], *Hoa* [Việt]¹⁹ and *Đường* [Chinese])²⁰ live intermingled with each other, and there are also *Lam nhân*, who are the off-spring of the *Đường* and of Khmer women.²¹ The *Jawis*²² who live in Trấn Tây build houses along the river to be their shops, and they are filled with Chinese goods and local products. There are hundreds and thousands of boats along the river. At sunset the sound of the Hu violin²³ and Shang flute²⁴ float out over the river under the moonlight.²⁵ The people here are rich, and tend to spend extravagantly on women, wine, and gambling. This was why the country had taxes on gambling. Taxes are levied here on everything—markets, slaughter-houses, wine, prostitution, and gambling, all have to pay tax. Since [our] court issued an edict on this, all other taxes have been abolished except those on prostitution, gambling and opium.

The main Trấn Tây town [Phnom Penh] has two rivers in front of it and three islands nearby, with an immense expanse of water behind it. Its location is truly the throat of the land, and it is a mini metropolis. The locals, men and women alike, all cut their hair short. Their skin is as black as lacquer (local custom favours the colour black). They do not wear bamboo hats when they are out walking, and when they eat they do not use chopsticks. Their clothing has narrow sleeves, and opens at the middle. Their clothes are so tight that it sticks to the skin. For the lower part of their dress they often use a single piece of fabric (the cotton fabric here is quite wide, just like that of the Chinese). The fabric is folded at the back for men, and left

¹⁹ As Viet often mixed with different peoples in the Water Frontier area, Vietnamese records tended to use “Hoa” to refer to Vietnamese people, a usage that became particularly clear in the nineteenth century.

²⁰ “Tang” or “Tang ren” in Chinese, refers to the Chinese overseas.

²¹ Literally “indigo people”. However, this usage may be problematic, as Choi Byong Wook has seen the same term used to refer to Cambodian Cham, rather than Sino-Khmer, in an official history. Thanks for this personal communication.

²² Malays, but possibly also Muslims.

²³ A Chinese stringed instrument originating in the Middle East.

²⁴ A traditional Chinese bamboo instrument. The term “Shang” was used here mainly to contrast with and balance the word “Hu” in the sentence.

²⁵ This probably refers to pleasure boats on the water.

to hang down for women.

People here do not know about using shoulder poles; everything they carry is on their backs. The locally produced sugar is obtained from the sugar palm. The tree is shaped like a lid and the fruit grow under it, like betel nut trees but the fruit is as big as a fist. It has fluid in it, like the coconut, and tastes very sweet and nice. When it is boiled into sugar its colour is purple and [it is] sweet. The pieces are shaped like bowls, like the black sugar made in Bắc Hà [northern Vietnam] from sugar cane. It is called Đường Chúc nôi. [Unlike the black sugar of the north], the sugar is cold and smooth in nature; foreigners to this land who are not yet accustomed to the region should not eat it. When the people eat betel nuts they make lime into cream to eat with betel nuts and leaves.

[People here] like goods from China and from our country, but there are also things made locally, such as big pots . . . that are solidly made. There is good iron ore in the mountains. When ironware is cast there is no need to add any other metal [to it] yet the quality is just as good. There is also local gold and silver here but none of it is pure enough: one *tiền* of silver [3.5 grams] is worth only 40 cash (as it is not pure enough). Families weave brocades and cotton fabrics, which are all as wide as those made in China. Some of them can be very delicate.

Their houses [are built] extending towards the back and the door opens to the front. Human beings occupy the top of the pole houses, with animals below. Canoes are most often seen on the rivers but there are also *Ké bản thuyền*.²⁶ In regard to handicrafts there are also skilful craftsmen.

Their language is different from *Hoa* [Vietnamese], but the *Đường* [Chinese] in Lục Tỉnh often speak it. Some of the locals can also speak Vietnamese. Their script is like tadpoles, and written from left to right. They use . . . palm leaves for paper.²⁷ Official documents use Chinese paper. There are thirty-six characters [in their alphabet] and all of them have local sounds. When they are translated into Vietnamese, one character often

²⁶ Boats built from planks, as opposed to canoes carved from a single tree trunk.

²⁷ The text also commented on what they use for pens, but the character is too unclear to translate accurately.

becomes two or three [sounds]. Their songs are all in the local language and cannot be understood. The tunes are low and go on for a long time. The singing girls wear their hair falling down their backs, and tied with coloured silk fabric or threads. They dance extremely lightly and gracefully. Their dramas are often about the *Tây Du*,²⁸ and their musical instruments are the violin, flute and *Konghou*,²⁹ which is different from ours but fairly close in sound and rhythm. They also build walls from dirt and line them with wooden planks, which everyone then pounds with sticks to make the rhythm.

Everyone worships Buddha. The boys are educated in the temples, which are all magnificent. Some of the temples are covered with gold. The temples are full of monks, all dressed in a golden colour. They never cook. The monks hold out big bowls that are covered with red silk, and households compete with each other to make donations to them. [The monks] bring rice back to offer to the Buddha first, and then they consume it. Eating fish or meat is not forbidden [to the monks], provided the animals involved had not been butchered by the donors personally. The classics are written on palm leaves and are read and recited all the time, as happens in our country. The monks decide every issue, however large or small it might be. Someone who had committed a crime would be exempted from punishment if accepted by a temple. Dead people are burned, and their bones divided into three lots, one is kept in the temple (although if it was the body of the *Phiên Vương* [the king], these bones would be kept in a stupa in a temple); one is thrown into the river, and the rest are put in a tree. When the floods come in autumn and winter, they say that the souls of our ancestors have come back, and go to the temples to give gifts. The *Phiên Vương* would also visit temples and generously grant gold and silver to the monks. The monks can be as rich as millionaires;³⁰ whenever they come out [of the temples] everyone bows to the ground to pay their respects.

²⁸ The “western journey”, or the Tripitaka, relates the legendary journey of a Buddhist priest and the Monkey King seeking Buddhist scriptures in India.

²⁹ A Chinese stringed instrument.

³⁰ Literally, “having millions”.

Whatever monks ask for they get, so the furniture and other belongings they use are as extravagant as those of the king. Those *Lam dân* and *Đường nhân* [Chinese] who live locally share the same customs as the barbarians and only differ slightly in their dress. This is why Khmers like Chinese better than Vietnamese (*Hoa*). The dress of *Jawis* [Malays] is similar to that of Khmers, but their women leave their hair long and worked little at home. They are quite good at sewing and attractive to look at. The men are fishermen. Most are quite rich, and the bronze and tin wares they make are very delicate. The *Jawis* do not worship Buddha; they only pray in the morning and evening. Their language and script are different from those of Khmer. This is a rough [outline of] the customs [of Trấn Tây].

The old king was called Ang Non and his family held the country for many generations. Sometimes a grandfather and grandson were called by the same name. When they began to have contact with our dynasty the king was [also] Ang Non. He passed his throne to the queen. It is customary here that the king has no granaries and the country has no [standing] army. The territory was divided between the king and his senior officials and they eat the land.³¹ All the taxes from the rivers, islands and inlets – taxes from each big inlet go up to several thousand taels of silver – belonged to the king, [while] the officials divided the land. That is why the taxes in the country were particularly heavy; items like areca leaves, and root vegetables were all taxed. The king did not have his own royal kitchen, [and] his subjects presented meals to him in turn (called *Tôn Long*). Royal concubines and their parents were busy accumulating food all the time.

When subjects saw the king they would all bend to the ground. Official posts were acquired by paying money; the more one paid the higher the position he would get. Number ten is the highest in rank and number one is the lowest. The oldest officers are the four officials called the Four Pillars,

³¹ "Eating the land" refers to the Cambodian system of allocating officials customary taxation rights over the people and products of their administrative districts rather than paying them state salaries as happened in Vietnam at the time.

whose power equalled that of the king. The land was divided into prefectures (*phủ*), but the heads of the *phủ* changed often, according to the silver that was paid. The king married within the royal family; intermarriage between uncles and cousins is regarded as the right thing to do. The people regard maternal relatives as close and paternal ones as distant. [This is] the worst aspect of the custom of the country, that they do not know the ethical codes. Although they accept the supreme power of our country, they still keep their own customs. [Lunar] March is their main festival. Those who have committed crimes become the slaves of the rich; silver is offered to get a position in the government; and those who betrayed the king often went to Siam and could not be punished. There is no law in the country, positions are sold, and heavy taxes are levied, these are the weakest points of its policy.

Ah! The expansion of the earth goes from north to south. During the Yu period [2100 BCE] Min and Guang³² were deserted and beyond the reach of [Han] civilisation. Before the Lý³³ and Trần,³⁴ the Đàng Trong region of our country³⁵ was the land of Chams and Khmers. Since our ancestral sages³⁶ began to open it up, it has now become a superior civilized country [*văn minh thượng quốc*], which can be compared equally with Min and Guang. The spread of good customs is one thing, but a brilliant leader is also essential to open the land up, then to civilise uncouth people with writing, to cover fish scales with clothing, to turn unhealthy air into good, and to transform barbarians into *Hoa* [Vietnamese]. From the creation of the earth onwards, only now has our Southern Country become extensive, something our dynasty has achieved beneath the southern skies. The land of Cao Man is not broken up by mountains and unhealthy air; it is flat and fertile, flourishing and rich, located to the west of our country, and

³² Fujian and Guangdong in southern China.

³³ A Vietnamese dynasty that reigned from 1010 to 1225

³⁴ A Vietnamese dynasty that reigned from 1225 to 1400.

³⁵ Literally the "Inner Road", this region was the Nguyễn ruled area from modern Quảng Bình south, ultimately reaching to the Mekong delta.

³⁶ This refers to the nine generations of pre-dynastic Nguyễn rulers of the expanding southern polity. These "sages" were generally calculated in 19th century Nguyễn court sources as beginning with the arrival of Nguyễn Hoàng [1558] and ending with the death of the last ruler at the hands of the Tây Sơn rebels in 1777.

bordered by our Lục Tỉnh. All this [occurs] because Heaven cannot bear that it should be a barbarian desert. Now that our country is changing things in a significant way and registering [Khmer] households, the day of transforming old customs into *Hoa* [Vietnamese] has come!

Postscript: When one is ill, whether from a cold or fever, they do not take medicine, but all bath in the river, and many of them recover. There is one kind of black magic that involves writing curses on a person's heart,³⁷ so that gradually the accursed individual falls ill and dies of a stomach disorder. He or she has to ask a monk for a cure. If, when walking on the road, one sees something lying horizontally at the junction of three ways, he should not step over it, and when one sees a big tree, he should not stop there. Because the thing [at the road junction] is the symbol of a curse, and the big tree is where people bury bones. They are all quite magical, and one should keep far away from them.

Their seals are not in the *Zhuan* style.³⁸ They carve ivory into a round shape, as big as the cover of a large bowl, and carve elephant(s), or a person riding on a dragon, or a person riding on an elephant, or else a person riding in a boat. They all have a human figure, with the difference being the things on which he rides. There are also small seals with quite simple carving that cannot all be recognized.

When a rich person makes a loan and the poor person cannot repay the debt, the debtor, whether a man or woman, becomes a slave of the rich family. The king and his high officers also do this and many people suffer. Sometimes if a father was a slave who did not repay his debt, his son would become a slave also. The way the country manages corvee labour is like this: the poor have to do corvee and the rich can pay money to be exempted. This is why the poor dislike it, while the rich use it to their advantage.

³⁷ Hannah Phan of Cornell University suggests that this passage may refer to the Khmer black magical practice of writing curses onto clay dolls, in this case onto the doll's heart. We are most grateful for this information, and to Lorraine Paterson for facilitating it.

³⁸ A style of Chinese calligraphy often used for characters on seals.

Translation © Li Tana 2007