When the Periphery Becomes the Center – A New Reading of Hoàng Trìệu Truyện 皇儲傳 (The Tale of a Prince)

Nguyễn Nam¹ and Chang Yufen²

Abstract

The paper focuses on a verse narrative titled Hoàng Trìệu Truyện 皇儲傳 (The Tale of a Prince) originally written in demotic Vietnamese Nôm. Possibly composed under the reign of Emperor Tự Đức (1847–1883) of the Nguyễn Dynasty, Hoàng Trìệu Truyện is one of the truyện Nôm works that tells the story of an obstacle-overcoming love between a Chinese prince and a Vietnamese princess through a lục bát (six-eight) metered narrative of more than 1,500 verses in the Nôm script. Hoàng Trìệu Truyện provides a fascinating illustration of the instability and interchangeability of “center” and “periphery” relations in Imperial China’s tribute system, as “center” could sometimes shift to the “periphery,” and vice versa. Although the tale’s title refers to the Chinese prince, this male protagonist is portrayed as a person coming from the Chinese periphery to the center, now Vietnam. As a fictional work, Hoàng Trìệu Truyện entertains readers with its adventurous story, leading them through a border-crossing journey and letting them experience a world mixed with reality and imagination. Through her reading of the tale, an informed reader can find traces of cosmopolitan trading centers such as Phố Hiến or Hội An of Vietnam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on the one hand, and travel to into an imagined Chinese empire painted by the author(s) of the tale on the other. This imagined world offers a reinvention of China rarely seen in a fictional work from a Southeast Asian country like Vietnam.

Short Biography:

Nguyễn Nam is a lecturer of University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City since 1986. Having earned his M.A. (Regional Studies – East Asia) and Ph.D. (East Asian Languages and Civilizations, Chinese Literature) from Harvard, he worked as the manager of the Academic Program of the Harvard-Yenching Institute (HYI) from 2004 to 2010. His research interests focus on Chinese studies (especially Confucianism), comparative literature (dealing mainly with China and Vietnam), translation studies, and adaptation studies. He has been an associate of the HYI since 2010.

Yufen Chang was born in Taiwan. As a Taiwanese, she always has a keen interest in China’s interactions with its neighboring societies. She is interested in the role translation plays in the nation-building process. After graduating from Michigan in May 2013, she was a postdoctoral research fellow in the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore, and currently is a visiting fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore. With the project on Hoàng Trìệu Truyện, she is expanding the scope of her study on translation from the transitional period of the early twentieth century to the pre-modern era, and she will investigate the role translation played in Vietnam’s vernacular transformation of Chinese cosmopolitan cultural elements. Cf. [http://nsc.iseas.edu.sg/about_us.htm](http://nsc.iseas.edu.sg/about_us.htm).

¹ University of Social Sciences and Humanities of Vietnam National University of Hồ Chí Minh City. He is an associate of Harvard-Yenching Institute.

² Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore.