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East Asian Landscapes and Legitimation: Localization Tactics of Political and Religious Authority in China and Adjoining Empires

Objective of Research

My research concerns the similarities and differences in the localization process of political and religious authorities in the areas of Vietnam and Sichuan during the second millennium. It will show the importance of spatial reconfigurations – through the example of sacred spaces – for transcultural ideology transfer and ideology reassignment. Both exert great influence on the success of centralizing political power.

The indigenous cultures of Sichuan and Vietnam differed from the Chinese Central Plains culture.

Once conquered, the colonization process in both areas took centuries due to the difficult terrain and a lack of initiative towards cultural assimilation by the Chinese. The government solely invested in economically relevant locations, that the imperial court was linked through the responsible ministries solely to those locations creating demanded goods was typical for the tribute system. Several times, both territories attempted building their own empires with the aim to become independent political units. Both used Buddhism to consolidate local popular religion and to reassign transregional authority (a localization process) to their own independence movements. In both areas this was followed by a systematical Neo-Confucianization, which in Sichuan was led by the Chinese government to secure its hold over the province. In Vietnam it was enforced by its own *imperial* government competing with China. This is one factor for why only Vietnam managed to become independent from China in the long term and to build its own empire. This process is reflected in the reconfigurations of sacred sites, that show layers of local religion modified by Buddhism once again rearranged by Neo-Confucianism. Although Sichuan's attempts at independence failed, it amalgamated local identity into a unique "Guanyin Culture" to protect it from transregional pressures. In contrast, Vietnam employed Sinitic tactics during empire building to consolidate the realm and conquer Champa – to the detriment of original Viet identity. Thus, Sinitic concepts of religious control, legitimation and state building permeated Sichuan and Vietnam with startling different results.

Sichuan and Vietnam both have strong water cultures. Water culture is an emerging concept in cultural studies describing the relationship between humans and water in environmental, technical, economic and spiritual dimensions, searching to explain how people dealt with lack or surplus of water. In East Asia, local dominance hinged on the ability to make or stop rains and floods, to irrigate the land and keep it fertile. Groups of popular religion, Daoism, or Buddhism had to provide effective methods of aid to gain local support. Since the emperor's legitimacy to rule also depended on his ability to avoid water calamities, various religions competed for the ruler's patronage by offering water controlling measures in addition to those entertained by their officials. The appropriation of water-related religious sites was thus of immense importance since it facilitated ritual behavior towards water control and thus secured localized authority and transregional legitimation. However,

in Sichuan and Vietnam, the water culture and its deities played an important role for their local identities: In the face of transregional powers seeking to ascertain their spiritual and political superiority through sacred water sites. Water-religious sites in these areas became strongly contested. Because of different means of water control for different interests between local and transregional powers, the contestation led to social frictions which become highly visible when several religions contest the same sacred place. Therefore, my focus will be on the religious aspect of water control through rituals and the treatment of deities which materialized in the reconfiguration of water-religious space. I surveyed water-related temples of Sichuan and Vietnam in comparison to known patterns from the Chinese Empire. The occupied sites were reconfigured to inject transregional cultural symbolism – including means of transnational legitimation – into local culture. If the superiority of the transregional authority was accepted into local identity and practice, ideology was transferred successfully. The transfer, though, could also lead to unwanted outcomes like subversion or independent movements. From a transregional viewpoint, the question was how to localize authority without causing social unrest.

From my survey of 42 water-religious sites, in context with historical sources, emerged a set of reconfiguration tactics which can be separated into (a) physical; (b) representative and (c) authoritative, the latter referring to appellation, patronage and interpretation (e.g. in maps) of a site. Local authorities also used reconfigurations in order to defend their identity against transcultural intrusion. Local data set into the context of the political development of either realm, indicates different preferences for the types of reconfiguration tactics in Vietnam, Sichuan and China, and the exact choice of reconfiguration practices seems to determine the outcomes.

Methods

Part of the thesis is to create a functional method of dealing with architectural material evidence in historical research settings called Experiential Architecture Analysis (EAA). It contextualizes the survey of material evidence – the structural arrangement and contents of a site – with cultural symbolisms. The material analysis is then enhanced by conventional sources regarding renovations, destructions and most importantly reconfigurations. This results in educated insights into socio-political local developments and the level of acceptance towards transregional pressures. The context with larger trends of religious-geographic representation in China and Vietnam will achieve an evidence-based understanding of transcultural ideology transfer in East Asia and provide a fuller picture of the history of contested spaces.

Hypotheses

The research on transnational spatial ordering and religious transfers in empire building can be

enhanced by looking at the role of Buddhism as a consolidating force in transcultural political use, employed to pave the way for Sinitic concepts of unity and centralized imperial rule. Evidence from my temple surveys illustrates how political power reassigned space, superscribed extant beliefs and pushed narratives that supported centralized statehood in order to stabilize imperial control. The treatment of local water culture by religious and political authorities was and still is a determining factor for the failure or success of ideology transfer and long-term establishment of transregional rule. First results imply that Confucian mindsets favored intervention and superscription, aggressive methods that easily lead to subverting behavior. Meanwhile Sichuan and Vietnam employed different but more integrative reconfigurations that supported a pluralistic yet unified local identity. Reconstructing the behavior of and relation between religious and political authorities in Sichuan and Vietnam will lead to a better understanding for the conditions that supported the localization of Sinitic concepts with or without the acceptance of Chinese political dominance. So far, it seems that integrative reconfiguration tactics are a necessary precondition to secure stabilized, long-term political dominance, but not sufficient for thorough ideological transfer. Aggressive reconfigurations may successfully lead to political dominance and complete ideological transfer, but also pose a great risk – they easily provoke revolutions.

Aim and Significance

The aim is to explain the treatment of legitimizing water sites in the interaction between ideology transfer and political dominance with manifold outcomes like in Vietnam, contrasted by Sichuan. The successful project will introduce a new methodology that can be applied to material evidence in historical research. This gives a better view into local historical developments by emphasizing processes of local identity negotiation which has been left out of representative official documents. The project will enhance the knowledge about the dissemination of Sinitic ideology into and beyond the Chinese Empire's borders and shed light on the necessity of separating political dominance from ideological transfer. This is not only relevant for historical situations of long-term conquest: The physical representation of transregional authority in interaction with consolidating pluralistic localities continues to be one relevant transnational process in our globalizing world. The reconfiguration tactics uncovered by the EAA in these cases thus can be further refined towards a more general interdisciplinary analysis of ideological transfer that may help to explain how to enforce transregional ideologies in multicultural areas and how much intervention by transregional authorities may be tolerated by local communities until backlashes, opposition and social unrest occur.