

REVIEW

MORALIZING MONSTROSITIES: *VIỆT SỬ TIÊU ÁN* 越史標案 AND  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY TONKINESE HISTORIOGRAPHY

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**Abstract**

In this essay, I perform a close reading of Ngô Thì Sĩ's 吳時仕 (1726-1780) commentary on the “Annals of the Hồng Bàng Lineage” (*Hồng Bàng thị kỷ* 鴻龐氏紀) as found in *Việt sử tiêu án* 越史標案 [Salient Comments on Việt History]. I argue that Ngô Thì Sĩ's commentary reveals a historiographical mindset which presupposed the historicity of certain non-human entities while rejecting various details in the historical record regarding these entities and their role in Việt antiquity. Thus, Ngô Thì Sĩ's historiography in *Việt sử tiêu án* represented an eclectic variety of approaches which improved on existing modes of historical inquiry prevalent in eighteenth-century Tonkin without radically altering their underlying methodology. This allows us to contextualize *Việt sử tiêu án* alongside other eighteenth-century critiques of *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 大越史記全書 and its primary compiler, Ngô Sĩ Liên 吳士連 (fl. fifteenth century).

**Keywords:** Ngô Thì Sĩ, *Việt sử tiêu án*, Hồng Bàng lineage, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, Ngô Sĩ Liên

**1. Introduction**

Eighteenth-century Tonkin witnessed an outpouring of historical writing, both among annalists working in service of the court and scholar-officials who penned private disquisitions into various facets of antiquity. The most widely recognized product of this exundation of historiographical vitality is a corpus now known as the “Supplementary Annals” (*Tục biên* 續編) to *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 大越史記全書. Beyond the “Supplementary Annals,” scholarly engagement with these eighteenth-century sources remains comparatively limited: their fragmented remains and ambiguous provenance having only compounded the difficulties of archival research. Among fully extant eighteenth-century histories, *Việt sử tiêu án* 越史標案 [Salient Comments on Việt History], authored by Ngô Thì Sĩ 吳時仕 (Thế Lộc 世祿, 1726-1780), stands out both in scope and erudition.

A scion of the Thanh Oai 青威 Ngô Thì 吳時 clan, Ngô Thì Sĩ led a tumultuous career spanning diverse assignments, both civil and military, beginning under the patronage of prince Trịnh Doanh 鄭楹 (Nghị tổ 毅祖, 1720-1767, r.1740-1767).<sup>1</sup> Trịnh Doanh was keenly appreciative of Ngô Thì Sĩ's literary prowess and entrusted to him the tutelage of the heir apparent, Trịnh Sâm 鄭森 (Thánh tổ 聖祖, 1739-1782, r.1767-1782). Following the death of Trịnh Doanh, Ngô Thì Sĩ's latter years were marked by a series of demotions and reassignments to peripheral posts. The circumstances of his death in 1780 remain a mystery.

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<sup>1</sup> My biographical sketch of Ngô Thì Sĩ is based on the “précis of record of conduct” (*hành trạng lược thuyết* 行狀略說) found in *Ngô gia thế phả* 吳家世譜 (Vhv.1345, 26b-31b).

While some contemporaneous sources cite illness, others assert that he committed suicide in protest of his son's involvement in a factional debacle which resulted in the 1780 succession crisis within the Trịnh court. Ngô Thì Sĩ boasts an enormous corpus of extant works which offer vivid windows into the social, political, religious, and literary culture of late eighteenth century Tonkinese elite. Strangely, his life and works have commanded little attention, whether in Vietnam or the West.

Although occasionally mentioned in Western and Vietnamese scholarship, *Việt sử tiêu án* has not been as extensively studied as other histories such as *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* or *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* 欽定越史通鑑綱目. It is sometimes cited in Vietnamese translation from an edition first published in 1960 in the Republic of South Vietnam. This translation is largely serviceable but—at least in readily available reprintings—omits several key passages.<sup>2</sup> We know little regarding the circumstances surrounding *Việt sử tiêu án*'s composition or its intended readership. John K. Whitmore has described it as a “private history” (Whitmore 1976, 193). At first glance, this is a reasonable assessment. In 1771, Ngô Thì Sĩ was accused of accepting bribes in a regional examination held in Nghệ An 乂安. He was subsequently dismissed from officialdom and reduced to commoner status. A biographical account found in his clan records notes that, in the aftermath of this affair, Ngô Thì Sĩ found solace in writing books and giving lectures (*trước thư giảng học* 著書講學). It is conceivable that work on *Việt sử tiêu án* was initiated during this period of forced rustication. More likely, in my opinion, *Việt sử tiêu án* represents a culmination of various official duties assigned to Ngô Thì Sĩ following his rehabilitation into the Trịnh court in the mid-1770s. In 1776, having been restored to a position in the Hanlin Academy, Ngô Thì Sĩ was ordered to edit and correct (*hiệu chỉnh* 校正) the dynastic histories. The scope and systematic organization of *Việt sử tiêu án* corresponds fittingly to what could be expected of this project.

Having established this, we can understand *Việt sử tiêu án* as an example of late eighteenth-century official historiography: one which increasingly assumed a position of special authority as the views espoused by its author were gradually incorporated into other imperially sanctioned histories, both in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth. Most notably, Ngô Thì Sĩ's critical commentary and historiographical interventions were incorporated into a state-sponsored edition of *Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên* 大越史記前編 undertaken during the Tây Sơn 西山 period (1778-1802) and printed in 1800 (Dutton 2005, 169-170). Ye Shaofei has described in detail the process through which views espoused by Ngô Thì Sĩ in *Việt sử tiêu án* came to supplant older historiographical commitments expressed by Lê Văn Hưu 黎文休 (1230-1322) and Ngô Sĩ Liên 吳士連 (fl. fifteenth century) in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (Ye 2021, 134-139). In brief, Ye argues that Ngô Thì Nhậm 吳時任 (Hy Doãn 希尹, 1746-1803), a son of Ngô Thì Sĩ, introduced an expanded version of his father's commentary into the official dynastic histories during his tenure in the Historiography Bureau of the Tây Sơn regime (Ye 2021, 138). This enshrinement of *Việt sử tiêu án* within the canon of official historiography effectively ensured that Ngô Thì Sĩ's commentary would be viewed by latter readers as normative. I concur with Ye's conclusions and would only venture to emphasize that the influence of Ngô Thì Sĩ's historiographical writings only grew in relevance during the Nguyễn 阮 period (1802-1945). Besides being referenced within the scrupulously critical *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục*, *Việt sử tiêu án* was also copiously cited in massive treatises of institutional history such as *Lịch đại chính hình thông khảo* 歷代政刑通考, compiled by Vũ Phạm Khải 武范啟 (Đông Dương 東陽, 1807-1872). Although the extent of its importance has sometimes been obfuscated by an

<sup>2</sup> A recent 2022 reprinting of this translation has omitted passages from the translator's preface as well throughout the text. Coincidentally, several such passages will be analyzed in this paper (Ngô 2022, 13-15, 21). It should be noted that there are minor errors scattered throughout the translation.

assumption of its private—and therefore idiosyncratic—origins, a broad survey of now available primary sources should convincingly dispel any lingering doubt regarding the prominent place of *Việt sử tiêu án* in late eighteenth-century Tonkinese historiography.

In this paper, I will perform a close reading of select passages from Ngô Thì Sĩ's commentary on the "Annals of the Hồng Bàng Lineage" (*Hồng Bàng thị kỷ* 鴻龐氏紀). The base text which this commentary sought to amend and annotate was drawn from the "Outer Annals" (*Ngoại kỷ* 外紀) of *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*. The historical personages and events covered in this section of *Việt sử tiêu án* contain a variety of non-human entities and anomalous phenomena allegedly unique to remote antiquity. In a now classic paper, Liam C. Kelley has argued that these narratives were a medieval invented tradition, likely of fifteenth-century provenance (Kelley 2012, 88-89).<sup>3</sup> Both the fifteenth-century compilers of *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* and Ngô Thì Sĩ regarded this segment of the historical record as suspect and, at times, freakish. Neither were comfortable excising it from their exposition of Việt antiquity. Ngô Thì Sĩ's treatment of this historiographical conundrum was not entirely elegant: nor was it representative of the more incisive interventions attempted elsewhere in *Việt sử tiêu án*. I argue that Ngô Thì Sĩ's handling of these problematic records reveals a historiographical mindset which tacitly accepted the historicity of certain non-human entities while rejecting various details in the historical record regarding these entities and their role in Việt antiquity. Although this intellectual position can be located somewhere between the exuberance of fifteenth-century Lê historiography and the skepticism which came to characterize late nineteenth-century Nguyễn historiography, it did not necessarily mark a transition between these extremes in a teleological sense. Ultimately, Ngô Thì Sĩ's historiographical concerns can be contextualized among those of other late eighteenth-century Tonkinese literati who had grown increasingly critical of the "old histories/historiographers" (*cựu sử* 舊史)—a term they used in collective reference to *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* and its compilers. While Ngô Thì Sĩ's views departed from those of his contemporaries, his scholarly interventions were fundamentally arbitrary, based as they were on his subjective adjudication of what constituted a "reasonable" (*cận lý* 近理) event or detail in the historical record. As such, we can speak of *Việt sử tiêu án* as improving on historiographical approaches to Việt antiquity prevalent in pre-Restoration Tonkin, but not necessarily revolutionizing or overturning them.

I will be referencing *Việt sử tiêu án* in its Literary Sinitic original. All quotations are taken from the manuscript copy held in the Institute of Sino-Nôm Studies (Hanoi), call number A.11.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the corresponding sections as printed in the Tây Sơn edition of *Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên*, while essentially the same, are written in a more refined

<sup>3</sup> This argument has provoked many of the more controversial and enduring debates among historians of medieval and early-modern Vietnam, both in Vietnam and the West. Much of this debate has stemmed from Kelley's usage of the term "invented." Although borrowed from the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm's coinage of "invented tradition," Kelley never fully elaborates on his usage of this term. This was pointed out by the historian Keith Taylor in his response to Kelley's article, but has largely fallen by the wayside in responses to Kelley penned by Vietnamese scholars (Taylor 2012, 135). Recent Vietnamese scholarship, most notably that of the anthropologist Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến, has concentrated on exploring the complex relationship between the fifteenth-century Lê 黎 rulers and their Mường and Tai neighbors (Nguyễn 2021, 16-47). The influence of these diverse traditions and constituencies on Ngô Sĩ Liên's treatment of the "Outer Annals" is a topic which is only beginning to come into focus (Nguyễn 2021, 48-53). I am not entirely convinced that, in light of these recent findings, we can justify a tacit assumption of the "Outer Annals" as fifteenth-century invented tradition, particularly since the Hobsbawmian usage of the term requires the rapid establishment of said tradition within a "brief and datable period" at odds with the complex and prolonged origins suggested by Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983, 1-2).

<sup>4</sup> Apart from A.11, the Institute of Sino-Nôm Studies has two other manuscript copies under the call numbers A.1311 and A.2977/1-4. Of these, A.1311 is an incomplete manuscript while A.2977/1-4 is slightly disorganized and abounding in scribal errors. The overall content of all three manuscript editions is recognizably similar with A.11 being the best organized manuscript. Unless otherwise noted, all translation and punctuation is my own.

and noticeably embellished register. It is possible that these reflect emendations of later compilers or of the author himself.<sup>5</sup> There is no definitive evidence to suggest that the manuscript copy of A.11 is the older text (indeed, only the Tây Sơn printing of *Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên* has a traceable dating). I will draw from A.11 while cross-referencing the Tây Sơn printing when it provides significant elucidation of obscure passages.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The Cosmological Question

Ngô Thì Sĩ prefaced his commentary on the “Annals of the Hồng Bàng Lineage” with a brief exposition of issues related to cosmology and the rise of human civilization. This exposition as presented in A.11 is brief and does not clearly present Ngô Thì Sĩ’s framework for critiquing the historical record of remote antiquity. Fortunately, the same comment in the Tây Sơn *Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên* is significantly expanded and gives us a better understanding of Ngô Thì Sĩ’s concerns. Both versions begin by tracing the origins of mankind. Following the cosmological framework of Song 宋 period (960-1279) philosopher Shao Yong 邵雍 (Yaofu 堯夫, 1012-1077), Ngô Thì Sĩ stated that human beings emerged during the *yin* epoch (*dần hội* 寅會), that is, the third period in the formation of the cosmos.<sup>7</sup> According to Ngô Thì Sĩ, once mankind had reached a certain level of proliferation, figures of “extraordinary endowment” (*xuất loại giả* 出類者) would naturally emerge to assume the mantle of leadership.

In the wider historiographical context, Ngô Thì Sĩ also accepted the Tang 唐 period (618-907) framework of Sima Zhen 司馬貞 (Zizheng 子正, 679-732) with regard to the “Basic Annals of the Three August Ones” (*Tam Hoàng bốn kỷ* 三皇本紀). Following the “Basic Annals of the Three August Ones,” Ngô Thì Sĩ noted that the rule of Shennong 神農, a demigod associated with the invention of agriculture, corresponded to the Shantong 禪通 epoch, i.e., the ninth of the ten primordial epochs (*kỷ* 紀). Although the old historiographers traced the primordial origins of the Việt realm to the Fire Sovereign (*Viêm đế* 炎帝) lineage descended from Shennong, this would still leave unaccounted eons of human history preceding the Shantong epoch:

Prior to the Shantong epoch, tens of thousands of years had already passed. How could these have all been periods of complete obscurity and ignorance? [Although] geographically remote, the southern zone had its own territory—therefore human beings must have populated it. By the time of the fourth-generation descendant of Shennong, it was practically the beginning of the Shuyi epoch. How could it be that only then did the first ruler emerge? Moreover, during the time of Shennong, the histories describe [his territory] as bordering Jiaozhi to the south. Certainly, this means that a polity had already formed on its own [in Jiaozhi]. [Such a polity] could not have been without [a ruler] to wield the reins of power. Authoritative documents are lacking. Written transmissions are silent. Should we regard the period prior to the Hồng

<sup>5</sup> If the text of Ngô Thì Sĩ’s comments as presented in *Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên* did not emerge from his own pen, his son, Ngô Thì Nhậm, would be a plausible editor.

<sup>6</sup> Ye Shaofei believes that A.11 represents an earlier version of *Việt sử tiêu án* that was gradually emended and expanded until it reached the form presented in the Tây Sơn *Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên* (Ye 2021, 138). I agree with this assessment. Quotations from *Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên* are drawn from the printed edition held in the Institute of Sino-Nôm Studies, call number A.2/1-7.

<sup>7</sup> In Shao Yong’s cosmology, one epoch (*hội* 會) is equal to ten-thousand eight-hundred years. For a detailed treatment of Shao Yong’s model of cosmic cycles, see Anne D. Birdwhistell’s monograph *Transition to Neo-Confucianism: Shao Yung on Knowledge and Symbols of Reality*, particular Chapter Six, “Concepts of Change: Human Beings and the Universe” (Birdwhistell 1989, 72-91).

Bàng lineage as one without rulers? As one with rulers? Wherein could we investigate the matter?

禪通以前，歷幾萬年，豈其皆冥冥然者？悠悠南服，有山川，必有人物。乃至神農四世孫，幾為疏仡十紀之始，然後有首出之帝王耶？況神農時，史所云南撫交趾，固已自成一國，不應無所統屬。文獻不足，傳記無聞。鴻龐之先，以為無君耶？以為有君耶？將何所質焉？(*Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên*, 1:2a)

As Kelley has noted, the name Hồng Bàng is obscure and never explained in the fifteenth century sources in which it first appears (Kelley 2012, 96).<sup>8</sup> Kelley understands the fifteenth-century creation of this mythical lineage as an attempt on part of Việt elites to project their own localized politico-cultural prestige and identity into the distant past (Kelley 2012, 119). This is a keen observation. The above passage from Ngô Thì Sĩ provides us with more information specific to an eighteenth-century understanding of the historiographical issues at stake.

For Sima Zhen, the entire logic of inserting the “Basic Annals of the Three August Ones” into the *Shiji* 史記 of Sima Qian 司馬遷 (Zichang 子長, 145-85 BC) was to extend the social institution of ruler and subject (*quân thân* 君臣) and the technologies of civilizing influence (*giáo hóa* 教化) into the dimmest reaches of history, even, as it were, pre-human antiquity.<sup>9</sup> This concern was echoed, albeit faintly, by Ngô Thì Sĩ. Because his historical framework was informed by Shao Yong’s cosmology, Ngô Thì Sĩ was evidently troubled by the seemingly arbitrary emergence of recorded history detailing the rulers of the Việt domain at a period so far removed from the genesis of human society. According to his loosely empirical observation, once human beings had aggregated in sufficient number, the emergence of rulers (*quân* 君) among them was a fundamentally inevitable development.<sup>10</sup> Ngô Thì Sĩ understood the historical records as implying the area corresponding to the Việt domain to have been inhabited during the time of Shennong. This being the case, he argued, some form of leadership and statehood must have existed pre-dating the Hồng Bàng lineage descended from Shennong. This does recall the localist projection described by Kelley. However, Ngô Thì Sĩ mused on this theoretical civilization in decidedly non-doctrinaire terms.<sup>11</sup> He made no attempt to draw continuity between it and any post-Hồng Bàng iteration of Việt civilization. As I shall explore below, Ngô Thì Sĩ was aware that later accretions had crept into the historical record regarding the Hồng Bàng lineage and that, perhaps, the narrative was irretrievably corrupted by unscrupulous historiography. However, we must appreciate this in the context of his troubled rumination on pre-Hồng Bàng societies extending tens of thousands of years into unrecorded history. By the eighteenth century, as problematic as the “Annals of the Hồng Bàng Lineage” were, they had already amassed a body of written transmissions (*truyện ký* 傳記) through which a discerning scholar was expected to sift and

<sup>8</sup> In his published response to Kelley’s paper, the late diasporic Vietnamese historian Tạ Chí Đại Trùng claimed that Hồng-Bàng “alludes to a sacred or magical bird.” (Tạ 2012, 142). I find this etymology unconvincing. The Sinitic compound *hồng bàng* 鴻龐 simply means great (either in number or stature) and does not appear to be a compound associated with any venerable ancients or classical allusion.

<sup>9</sup> The Three August Ones are associated with different mythical figures, depending on the source. Sima Zhen identifies them with Fuxi, Nüwa, and Shennong. All are described as chimerical beings: Fuxi and Nüwa as serpent-bodied with human head and the lineage of Shennong as human-bodied with ox head.

<sup>10</sup> Within the exegetical tradition of the classicist canon, there is an early and longstanding etymological association drawn between the leader (*quân* 君) and the ability to aggregate (*quần* 群) peoples to oneself (Zong, Chen, and Xiao eds. 2003, 333-335).

<sup>11</sup> The terms Ngô Thì Sĩ uses to describe leadership and authority—*quân* 君, *quân trưởng* 君長, *đế vương* 帝王, *thống thuộc* 統屬—are general and do not denote any specific form of ancient or post-classical statecraft or political organization.

postulate general observations on antiquity. The same could not be said of the prior period. Hence, while we, as moderns, may judge Ngô Thì Sĩ's inclusion of the "Annals of the Hồng Bàng Lineage" as credulous, in his own context, this decision suggested a degree of restraint and willingness to remain agnostic regarding the remote past.

### 3. Of Faeries and Dragons

Considering this context, it is easier to understand why Ngô Thì Sĩ, despite his reproof of the old historiographers, was not entirely revisionist in his treatment of the "Outer Annals," particularly regarding the "Annals of the Hồng Bàng Lineage." Let us now examine Ngô Thì Sĩ's treatment of Lộc Tục 祿續, i.e., Lord Kinh Dương 涇陽王. Ngô Thì Sĩ agreed with the traditional appraisal of Lord Kinh Dương as the ur-sovereign (*thủ quân* 首君) of the Việt. According to Ngô Thì Sĩ and his predecessors, Lord Kinh Dương was a fourth-generation descendant of Shennong. His birth was attributed to the union of Diming 帝明 and a presumably non-human faerie. In turn, Lord Kinh Dương also married a non-human aquatic entity, the daughter of Lord Dongting 洞庭君, a union which produced Sùng Lãm 崇覽, i.e., Lord Lạc Long 貉龍君.<sup>12</sup> Described as an aquatic dragon, Lord Lạc Long married a land-dwelling faerie named Âu Cơ 嫫姬.<sup>13</sup> This marriage resulted in the oviparous birth of one-hundred offspring. The eldest of the land-dwelling half of this issue became the head of the Hùng King 雄王 lineage.

While a precise description of Lord Kinh Dương is never given, a brief glance suffices to notice the largely non-human makeup of this ancient lineage. Kelley has noted that figures like Lord Kinh Dương and Lord Lạc Long are unmentioned in Chinese sources (Kelley 2012, 99). In a critical note explaining the rationale underlying his admittance of these figures into official historiography, Ngô Thì Sĩ made a striking admission concerning the glaring lack of textual bases to sustain various historical narratives associated with Việt antiquity:

[Although] the foundation of our Việt domain was posterior to [the age] of Fuxi and Cangjie, writing had yet to disseminate, and written records remained lacking. The generational order, reign titles, methods of governance, and customs [of Việt antiquity] whether transmitted as trustworthy or suspect are all unsubstantiated. [...] The old historiographers began with the *nhâm tuất* year, but on what basis was this point in the sexagenary cycle calculated? The taboo name of Lord Lạc Long is given: why are only those of the Hùng Kings omitted?<sup>14</sup> Why was the realm established with a name like Xích Quỷ? This is all wild nonsense deserving excision. In general, the old historiographers went out of their way to reference ancient traditions, weaving them into a coherent pattern to fill the generational charts of various eras.<sup>15</sup> The texts they selected like [*Lĩnh nam*] *chích quái* and [*Việt điện*] *u linh tập* are comparable to [citations of] *Nanhua* [*jing*] or [*Huainan*] *Honglie* [*jie*] in the northern histories. If one vehemently insists that unofficial histories are unworthy of

<sup>12</sup> The correct Sino-Vietnamese reading of the character 貉 would be *hạc*. The reading of this character, as well as its subsequent confusion with the character 雄, has been the subject of considerable debate among modern scholars (Kelley 2012, 106; Tạ 2012, 144).

<sup>13</sup> The traditional Sino-Vietnamese reading of 嫫 is also corrupted. Note that the individual characters that comprise this name both denote a female consort.

<sup>14</sup> The Sinitic of A.11 is somewhat obscure. The *Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên* is more intelligible: 涇、貉記諱，何獨略於雄王 (*Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên*, 1:3a).

<sup>15</sup> As Tạ Chí Đại Trùng has noted, Ngô Thì Sĩ's comment, as it appears in *Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên*, mentions the "Biography of Liu Yi" 柳毅傳 as a source from which the fifteenth-century historiographers drew details with which to embellish their narrative of Lord Kinh-Dương and Lord Lạc-Long (Tạ 2012, 143). Kelley's paper contains a detailed analysis of the relationship between this Tang period text and narratives found in medieval Vietnamese historiography (Kelley 2012, 99-105).

trust, where could one turn to comprehensively detail the civilizational apparatuses essential to statecraft? Hence that which stands to reason should be preserved; that which is unfounded should be removed.

我越肇邦，雖在羲、頡之後，而文字未行，記載仍闕。其世次、年紀、政治、風俗，傳疑傳信，總屬無徵。[...] 舊史壬戌紀年，何所起其甲子？貉龍紀號，何獨略於雄王？赤鬼何名，乃以建國？一般荒誕，盡屬可刪。蓋舊史旁搜古傳，織繪成文，務足數代世表。凡所取之《撫怪》、《幽靈》，亦猶北史之《南華》、《洪烈》也。若慨以野史為不足信，又何所從以備制作之大典乎？故近理者存之，無稽者削之。(Ngô n.d., 2a-2b)

Here, we can detect an internal tension between conflicting historiographical impulses which characterized not only Ngô Thì Sĩ's appraisal of Việt antiquity, but also that of his younger contemporaries. On one hand, Ngô Thì Sĩ admitted that these accounts of ancient history were "unsubstantiated" (*vô trung* 無徵); on the other, while he obliquely criticized the tendency of the old historiographers to embellish ancient accounts into a coherent narrative, Ngô Thì Sĩ also implied that a certain suspension of disbelief was required to gain a comprehensive view of ancient institutions. Ability (or lack thereof) to substantiate or attest to the ritual institutions of ancient dynasties was a longstanding concern in the classicist tradition and is usually traced to Confucius himself. In *Analects* 3.9, Confucius remarked that he was unable to attest (*trung* 徵) to the ritual institutions of the state of Song.<sup>16</sup> This was due to that state's lack of authoritative records and exemplary personages (*văn hiến* 文獻). By invoking this classicist terminology, Ngô Thì Sĩ highlighted the spurious nature of these accounts and the incertitude of any conclusions drawn therefrom. It is implied that these lacunae could be attributed to the fact that the technologies of writing created by the primordial demigods Fuxi 伏羲 and Cangjie 倉頡 had yet to spread to the Việt domain in antiquity.<sup>17</sup>

We should pause to interrogate the actual import of Ngô Thì Sĩ's historiographical interventions, at least in respect to this episode of antiquity. Those details which he dismissed as "wild nonsense" (*hoang đản* 荒誕) are, all things considered, relatively minor. His expurgation of the kingdom name of Xích Quỷ 赤鬼, i.e., "Red Ghost," was given no justification other than its apparent unpalatability. Neither was his evaluation of ancient sources entirely novel. Ngô Sĩ Liên—the implicit target of Ngô Thì Sĩ's revisions—made similar observations in his 1479 preface to the "Outer Annals" of *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*:

The Great State of Việt is located south of the Five Ridges. Heaven has established this demarcation between north and south. Its earliest ancestor arose from the line of Shennong. Heaven initiated its true ruler. Due to this, together with the northern court, it was able to wield imperial authority over its respective quarter. Alas, the historical records lack documentation, and past achievements are recounted based on hearsay. The [historical] writings touch on the weird and freakish; events are sometimes lost to memory. Hence, the scribal transmission [of the histories] has become inaccurate and the records are overflowing with superfluous details. These are striking to the eye, but how can they be used as a mirror into antiquity?

大越居五嶺之南，乃天限南北也。其始祖出於神農之後，乃天啟真主也。所以能與北朝各帝一方焉。奈史籍闕於記載，而事實出於傳聞。文

<sup>16</sup> This understanding of *Analects* 3.9 is based on the exegesis of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), the Song period philosopher whose interpretation of the classicist canon were regarded as the authoritative standard in eighteenth century Tonkin.

<sup>17</sup> According to some traditions, Fuxi was associated with the invention of the eight trigrams, whereas Cangjie was associated with the invention of writing. In others, both are associated with the invention of writing.



涉怪誕，事或遺忘。以至謄寫之失真，記錄之繁冗，徒為巍目，將何鑒焉。(Chen 1986, 55)

Modern scholars have suggested that Ngô Sĩ Liên's historiographical writing was characterized by a desire to neatly demarcate the politico-cultural cosmos into a dyadic model of co-equality between north and south (Yu 2006, 62; Nguyen 2023, 34-39). Hence, while he was noticeably bothered by various anomalous reports abounding in ancient chronicles, he was also, in a sense, bound to preserve them with mind to maintaining the coherency of his greater historiographical project. For Ngô Sĩ Liên, demarcation and parity between north and south had fundamentally cosmological dimensions. As illustrated above, he asserted that the historical development of Đại Việt was guided by Heaven (*Thiên* 天) in such manner as to suggest a certain divine mandate or providential solicitude regarding its geopolitical position and civilizational pedigree. Were this conception of divine mandate limited to the narration of a specific dynasty's temporal ascendancy and political legitimation, it would be expected and, therefore, unremarkable. Ngô Sĩ Liên, however, understood it as a fundamentally transdynastic given guiding the totality of Việt history.

I have elsewhere suggested that this historical imagination, while characteristic of early Lê rhetoric, was later subject to scathing epicrises by post-Restoration literati, particularly in the latter half of the eighteenth century (Nguyen 2023, 39-49). Constrained by historiographical commitments, Ngô Sĩ Liên accepted the historicity of figures such as Lord Kinh Dương and Lord Lạc Long. Rejecting the same, eighteenth-century Tonkinese literati like Phạm Nguyễn Du 范阮攸 (Háo Đức 好德, 1739-1786), Bùi Bích 裴璧 (Hy Chương 希章, 1744-1818), and Bùi Dương Lịch 裴楊歷 (Tồn Trai 存齋, 1757-1828) often avoided mentioning these extra-canonical figures entirely. Ngô Sĩ Liên does not fit neatly into either camp. While he hinted at a metaphysical framework similar to that of his younger contemporaries, unlike them, he used it to dismiss the problematics of non-human and, indeed, monstrous characters figuring into Việt antiquity:

As for the marriage of Lord Kinh Dương to daughter of Lord Dongting, and that of Lord Lạc Long to Âu Cơ, these involved marriages between aquatic and land-dwelling entities and co-mingling between daemons and humans. These descriptions seem outlandish. In my opinion, the unfolding of the cosmos occurred by gradual advance. The emergence of human civilization in our state occurred last after that of the Central Land. Before the floodwaters of Yao had been quelled and the cauldrons of Yu forged, the vast expanse of the Southern Wastes was a bog populated by dragons, serpents, goblins, and daemons. What sort of weird and monstrous phenomena could it not contain? If a woman could be generated from dragon spittle, what else could have occurred in the time of Lord Kinh Dương and Lord Lạc Long?<sup>18</sup> Some events appear strange when they are not. One should not assume for oneself the limited capacity of a summer insect.<sup>19</sup> This should suffice.

至於涇陽之娶洞庭，貉龍之娶嫗姬，水陸通婚，神人雜處，語似不經。竊以為天地開闢以漸，我國人文最後於中州。堯水未平，禹鼎未鑄，茫茫桂海，固龍蛇魑魅之藪澤也。般般奇怪，何所不有？龍螭生女，尚且有之，況涇陽、貉龍時乎！事有似異，而非異者。亦不當自小於夏蟲可也。(Ngô n.d., 2b-3a)

The model of “gradual advance” (*khai tịch dĩ tiêm* 開闢以漸) here elaborated proposed that human civilization first arose in certain regions before gradually spreading to

<sup>18</sup> The woman here referenced is Bao Si 褒姒, the concubine of King You of Zhou 周幽王.

<sup>19</sup> “Summer insect” (*hạ trùng* 夏蟲) refers to an insect whose lifespan is limited to the summer and, therefore, unable to comprehend discussion of ice. The expression originates in *Zhuangzi* 莊子.



others. This process was attributed not to human effort, but the natural migration of animating *yang* energy (*đương khí* 陽氣). In the brevity of human history this seemed to follow a linear progression; however, it was fundamentally conceived of as cyclical and operating beyond human influence. Although this model supported a Sinocentric worldview—at least in a broad sense—its naturalistic aspects allowed eighteenth-century Tonkinese literati to explain their civilization’s recent origins (compared to the ancient Chinese dynasties) without acceding to any intrinsic inferiority or defect (Nguyen 2023, 44-46).

The logic of this argument does not entirely conform to Ngô Thì Sĩ’s previously articulated understanding of Việt antiquity. Although he did not share Ngô Sĩ Liên’s burden of preserving the historicity of Lord Kinh Dương and Lord Lạc Long in service of a larger historiographical argument, Ngô Thì Sĩ did seem obliged by a residual assumption of historicity eventually discarded by his younger contemporaries who simply followed the implications of his cosmological and metaphysical framework to their natural conclusion.<sup>20</sup> Ngô Thì Sĩ previously argued that the Việt domain must have been populated by human societies, even long before recorded history. In order to make sense of narratives involving the non-human originators of the Việt domain, he here suggested the opposite—that human civilization (*nhân văn* 人文) had yet to arise in the ancient Việt lands and that they were populated by a menagerie of monstrous entities whose conduct and mode of existence operated beyond human logic.<sup>21</sup> Incredulity towards seemingly strange occurrences proper to this period of antiquity was unfounded. Similarly anomalous phenomena had been recorded in even later Chinese history.

#### 4. Moralizing Monstrosities

The commentary in *Việt sử tiêu án* covering the reigns of Lord Lạc Long and the Hùng Kings contain numerous characters and events which cannot be treated comprehensively within this essay. Before concluding, it should suffice to cover several themes which arise in Ngô Thì Sĩ’s treatment of this period, as well as in the “General Survey” (*thông luận* 通論) which conclude his commentary on the “Annals of the Hồng Bàng Lineage.” Ngô Thì Sĩ’s handling of the attendant issues which emerge due to his insistence on the historicity of Lord Lạc Long and the Hùng Kings offers a window through which we can discern his differences with Ngô Sĩ Liên. While the historicity of the “Annals of the Hồng Bàng Lineage” was a tacit assumption for both Ngô Sĩ Liên and Ngô Thì Sĩ, the former did not comment extensively on specific details within the narrative. Although he recognized the problematic nature of the various marriages and unions described between terrestrial and aquatic non-human entities, Ngô Sĩ Liên declined to critique the problematic moral implications of these unions. Skirting the issue that, according to some traditions, Lord Lạc

<sup>20</sup> Writing in 1782, Phạm Nguyễn Du seems to have borrowed from Ngô Thì Sĩ in his description of the primordial south as a “bog inhabited by dragons and serpents 龍蛇之藪” (Nguyen 2023, 44-45). Ngô Thì Sĩ’s exact verbiage was essentially canonized in the early Nguyễn compendium *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí* 歷朝憲章類志: “Previously our Việt domain bordered the controlled and wild zones. Its societal development came after that of the Central Land. Prior to the Shang and Zhou periods, it was still a bog infested with dragons and serpents. 我越從前界在要、荒，風氣後於中州。商、周以前，尚為龍蛇藪澤。” (*Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*, 1:4b). Note how Phan Huy Chú 潘輝注 (1782-1840) repeated *ad litteram* Ngô Thì Sĩ’s description. The *locus classicus* of this expression seems to be *Mencius* 3b.9, wherein cataclysmic floods are described as inundating the Central States in the time of Yao. Serpents and dragons (*xà long* 蛇龍) inhabit the floodwaters and displace the human beings living in the Central States. Note, however, the inversion of the compound in the Tonkinese usage.

<sup>21</sup> This understanding is further elucidated in Ngô Thì Sĩ’s commentary as it appears in *Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên*: “From the unfolding [of the cosmos], our state was far flung in the wild zone. 開闢以還，我國遠在荒服” (*Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên*, 1:3b). The “wild zone” (*hoang phục* 荒服) here mentioned refers to the peripheral zone furthest removed from the center of civilization.

Long and Âu Cơ were implied to be patrilineal cousins, Ngô Sĩ Liên simply remarked that latter-day societal norms forbidding such marriages had not been established in the primordial (*hồng hoang* 鴻荒) age (Chen 1986, 98). Similarly, the association he drew between the various marriages of non-human entities and foundation of the social relation of husband and wife (*phu phụ* 夫婦) central to the classicist tradition was almost reductionist in its simplicity.

The extent to which Ngô Thì Sĩ was concerned with asserting the historicity of Lord Lạc Long led him into a literalistic critique of *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* which simultaneously necessitated pronouncing moral judgements on the questionable behavior of various historical figures. Ngô Thì Sĩ firmly maintained that Lord Lạc Long was a non-human aquatic entity of “dragon birth” (*long sản* 龍產). This detail was never denied by Ngô Sĩ Liên but became attenuated by the trajectory of his historiography, particularly in his treatment of the parting of Lord Long Quân and Âu Cơ. Detecting the internal contradiction in one unspecified transmission (*truyện* 傳) of this narrative, Ngô Thì Sĩ remarked:

When Lord Lạc Long and Âu Cơ divided their children, one half followed each parent, whether into the mountains or into the water. They would call each other in times of need. Âu Cơ led fifty children to take up residence in Phong châu. The eldest male was promoted and called the Hùng King. The [old] historiographers wanted to select the children who followed their father to be the origins of the orthodox succession. Hence, they altered the writing, claiming that fifty children followed their father and dwelt in the south. The title of Hùng King was thereby affixed to their lineage. Hence the historical events became muddled and arbitrary. The reader cannot help but harbor suspicion. If Lord Lạc Long was not truly the offspring of [the dragon of] Lake Dongting, then truly there would be no room for debate. If he truly was the offspring of [the dragon of] Lake Dongting, how could an aquatic being dwell on land? Of the children who followed their mother, which one did not take leave of Lord Lạc Long?<sup>22</sup> Why should it be insisted that those who followed their father must have become kings, while those who followed their mother become savages?

貉龍君與嫗姬分其子，各半從父母登山入水，有事相聞。嫗攜五十子居峰州，推其雄長，世號雄王。史欲以從父者為正統，因變其文，曰五十子從父居南，而以雄王繫其下。遂使事實錯亂。讀書者不能無疑。若其龍君而非洞庭之產，誠無容辨。龍君而果洞庭之產，水也不能居原。從母之子，孰不離屬於龍君？豈必從父之可為王，而從母之可為蠻乎！  
(Ngô n.d., 3b)

Unlike Ngô Sĩ Liên, Ngô Thì Sĩ delved into the discrepancies that arise from a literalistic reading of the narrative. While this may seem bizarre to our modern sensibilities, Ngô Thì Sĩ's literalism made him acutely alert to inconvenient details which disappear in the moralistic harmonization attempted by Ngô Sĩ Liên. Ngô Thì Sĩ saw no reason to alter or disguise these details in order to accord with latter-day conceptions of morality or political organization. Detecting the old historiographers's discomfort with the association of the Hùng King lineage with their mother Âu Cơ, Ngô Thì Sĩ made a brilliant observation: the narrative,

<sup>22</sup> The Sinitic is obscure. *Ly thuộc* 離屬 is not a standard compound; while I have rendered it as to take leave, this act of leave-taking emphasizes a previous state of belonging or attachment to Lord Lạc Long. It is possible that *ly* 離 be interpreted according to its less common classical sense of clinging. Alternatively, it may be a misprint for the character *lệ* 隸: in which case the compound *lệ thuộc* 隸屬 would convey the same sense of subservient dependency. No matter the precise meaning, the implied emphasis is on the initial relation of the fifty land-dwelling offspring to their father: their subsequent abgregation having in no way diminished this connection.

even if unaltered, did not explicitly describe a matrilineal succession.<sup>23</sup> In their scrupulosity, the old historiographers unwittingly introduced contradictions and confusions into the narrative, making it even more suspect to the attentive reader.

This does not mean, however, that Ngô Thì Sĩ refrained from criticizing certain events from his latter-day perspective. In a sense, Ngô Thì Sĩ's commentary on the "Annals of the Hồng Bàng Lineage" represented an attempted resolution to the challenge of evaluating the actions of non-human and semi-human actors operating within a moral universe alien to his own. Immediately preceding the above passage, Ngô Thì Sĩ strongly condemned both the marriage of Lord Lạc Long and Âu Cơ and the old historiographers's attempts to lessen its moral gravity:

At that time, wherever Dilai went, he would tour the mountains and rivers and examine the scenery. His beloved consort remained alone in the temporary imperial palace. The kingdom subjects suffered from the harassment of the Northern King and called upon Lord Lạc Long. Lord Lạc Long emerged, saw the consort, and took pleasure in her. He took her and returned into the ocean. The historiographers abstained from mentioning this taboo, hence they said that Lord Lạc Long married the daughter of Dilai. They were ashamed of licentious behavior but spoke instead of animalistic actions. Neither of these are matters which should be spoken of: it would have been better to omit them entirely.

時帝來所至，遊山川，閱風景。幸姬獨留行宮。國人苦北王之擾，呼龍君。君出，見姬，悅之。攜歸海中。史諱其事，言娶帝來女。恥鶉奔而談獸行。均不可道，不如闕之。(Ngô n.d., 3b-4a)

Without citing a specific textual tradition, Ngô Thì Sĩ argued that the old historiographers attempted to disguise the scandalous origins of the union between Lord Lạc Long and Âu Cơ. According to him, Lord Lạc Long abducted Âu Cơ, the consort of his uncle Dilai. The old historiographers disguised this detail by claiming that Âu Cơ was the daughter of Dilai and that Lord Lạc Long married (*thú* 娶) her in a normative fashion. However, Ngô Thì Sĩ found this solution equally problematic—replacing, as it did, one ethical transgression with another.

Ngô Thì Sĩ's comment that the entire episode should have been omitted touches on an issue which extends beyond the passage at hand. The inclusion of such passages in official dynastic historiography was, in his estimation, inappropriate. In the case of Lord Lạc Long's union with Âu Cơ, both the original narrative (at least that which Ngô Thì Sĩ deemed to be original) and its attempted revision were morally odious. This was, presumably, Ngô Thì Sĩ's primary objection. However, elsewhere in the "Annals of the Hồng Bàng Lineage," Ngô Thì Sĩ waged similar criticisms regarding narratives with no significant ethical import. Ngô Thì Sĩ identified the textual basis for narratives regarding daemonic entities such as the Mountain Essence (*San tinh* 山精) and Water Essence (*Thủy tinh* 水精) in popular texts, slightly embellished in style and purged of their more fantastical elements. Interestingly, Ngô Thì Sĩ regarded these narratives as folkloric in nature and suggests that a possible intent of their original authors was to instantiate (*thực* 實) their descriptions of natural phenomena within a narrative form. This was unproblematic. The issue lay in the importation of these narratives into official historiography as if they represented authentic records (*thực lục* 實錄). While not morally insalubrious (as in the case of Lord Lạc Long's marriage), Ngô Thì Sĩ judged these accretions to be confusing and excessive (*phiền đố* 煩瀆) departures from the sober economy of expression and narration expected in this mode of dynastic historiography:

<sup>23</sup> According to Ngô Thì Sĩ's understanding, the title Hùng King arose in reference to the male (*hùng* 雄) sex of its original holder.

As for the two Essences vying for marriage: busybodies observed how floodwaters destroyed<sup>24</sup> mountains and eroded shores and took it to be a mutual combat between mountain and water. Whereupon they wrote a tale to instantiate [their observations]. To that and compile it into an authentic record: would it not be confusing and excessive? [...] To describe events but not hold them to the standard of reason, to discuss freakish happenings and digress into outlandishness—how could a dynasty’s authentic histories be thus treated as a record of anomalies? However, because Tản Viên is the ancestral mountain and the Heavenly Prince [of Phù Đổng] a famed god, I have followed the old historiographers in detailing their accounts in order to transmit my doubts.

至於兩精爭娶，蓋亦好事者以漲潦壞山嚙磯為山水相鬪，便寫出一傳以實之。編為實錄，豈不煩瀆。[...] 語事而不揆之理，談怪而至流於迂，豈可以一國信史抵一部志怪！惟傘圓為祖山，天王為名神，姑因舊史分註以傳疑云耳。(Ngô n.d., 7a)

As with his reluctance to deny the historicity of Việt rulers like Lạc Long Quân, Ngô Thì Sĩ exhibited caution when dealing with deities who enjoyed long-established cults fully integrated into the spiritual cosmos of post-Restoration Tonkinese court religion. Political prudence alone would fail to explain the complexity of this position. Neither would a presumed fidelity to classicist orthodoxy. Ngô Thì Sĩ, like many of his colleagues, was religiously eclectic: his personal writings included a sizeable number of Buddhist prayer texts; in his latter-years, he assumed the religious name (*đạo hiệu* 道號) Nhị Thanh cư sĩ 二青居士 [Layman Nhị Thanh]. Along with other paragons of eighteenth-century Tonkinese intellectuality such as Lê Quý Đôn 黎貴惇 (Doãn Hậu 允厚, 1726-1784) and Trịnh Huệ 鄭穗 (Chuyết Phu 拙夫, fl. eighteenth century), Ngô Thì Sĩ avidly promoted doctrinal syncretism of the sort which bypassed serious intellectual engagement in favor of a pseudo-fideistic reductionist approach to the Three Teachings (*Tam giáo* 三教), i.e., Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism (Nguyễn 2021, 239-241). The objection here raised pertained not so much to the purview of rationalistic skepticism as it did to the realm of rhetoric. It is the ability to internally balance these seemingly contradictory *mentalités*—one refusing to deny the historicity or plausibility of these anomalous events; the other, outraged at their enshrinement within official historiography—that remains intractably confusing, ever frustrating any facile attempt to reconcile eighteenth-century minds to the confines of our epistemological categories.

This division is not merely a modern projection onto the past. In his concluding comments on the “Outer Annals,” Ngô Thì Sĩ observed that the issues he attempted to address were essentially twofold in nature. The “Outer Annals” could be approached from two different vantage points: one which contextualized its narratives in a cosmological framework, thus allowing the student of history to treat them as describing the natural unfolding of civilizational energy (*phong khí* 風氣); and the other which, recognizing the faulty historical premises underlying many of the chronologies in the “Outer Annals,” called for close scrutiny (*sát* 察) in order to discern the authorial mind (*tác giả chí tâm* 作者之心) behind the weaving of such elaborate accounts (*Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên* 1:11a-11b). What exactly was this authorial mind? Ngô Thì Sĩ understood it as an attempt to impose the logic of human historiography and latter-day societal structures onto a period during which these factors were of dubious relevance. Read in isolation, Ngô Thì Sĩ’s “General Survey” appears to partially deconstruct the Hùng King lineage. From a broad reading of his commentary, we know that, while he found the historiographical method of the “Outer Annals” absurd, he

<sup>24</sup> Reading 懷 as 壞.

maintained that the content of the “Outer Annals” was not to be unscrupulously excised from the historical record. The stark contrast between Chinese and Việt antiquity implied by a close reading of the “Outer Annals” spoke to patterns of civilizational advancement and retardation which Ngô Thì Sĩ argued could be “corroborated” (*chứng 證*) by comparing the developed state of contemporary Việt civilization with the tribal customs of highland aborigines (*khê động chi phong tục 谿崗之風俗*)—like the peripheral constituencies of eighteenth-century Tonkin, it was possible that the Lạc and Hùng states persisted in an unaltered state of primeval simplicity for thousands of years (*Đại Việt sử ký tiền biên* 1:9b-10b).

## 5. Coda

It is intriguing that, despite his ostensible distrust of the narratives which constituted the “Outer Annals” of *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, Ngô Thì Sĩ allotted a disproportionately liberal amount of space to discussing their minutiae in *Việt sử tiêu án*. Perhaps for Ngô Thì Sĩ and his contemporaries, determining whether or not this tradition was “invented” paled in relevance to correcting the corrupted and contradictory narratives which they had inherited as an historiographical burden. This seems especially true of Ngô Thì Sĩ. *Việt sử tiêu án* abounds in examples such as those explored above. It is tempting to tease a Hobsbawmian connection here. The tortuous repetition with which Ngô Thì Sĩ declaimed his reservations regarding the historiographical meetness of a certain episode, only to later treat it under the assumption of its literal historicity is puzzling and recalls the “quasi-obligatory repetition” that Hobsbawm associated with institutionalized invented tradition. But for Ngô Thì Sĩ, the ultimate utility of the historical record did not entirely hinge upon the exactitude of its historiography, nor even upon the veracity of its content. While the unruliness of the “Outer Annals” was a headache for the seasoned historiographer, it also provided an efficacious exercise for the student. Guided by Ngô Thì Sĩ’s commentary, a student of the historical chronicles could be slowly inculcated into specific modes of historical thinking and criticism. This would explain Ngô Thì Sĩ’s point of acceding to the transmission of dubious narratives and adjections, despite being oppositely inclined. His task was not to refashion the dynastic histories according to his liking, but to correct them in such a manner that students could approach the histories with a critical apparatus superior in quality to that provided by Ngô Sĩ Liên.

*Việt sử tiêu án* does appear to accomplish this—at least to a degree. Among the few contemporary scholars who have attempted to contextualize Ngô Thì Sĩ and *Việt sử tiêu án* in their eighteenth-century milieu, Nguyễn Kim Sơn has described Ngô Thì Sĩ’s historiography as “rationalistic” (*duy lý*) and representative of the evidential methodology (*khảo chứng*) allegedly practiced by eighteenth-century Tonkinese classicists in emulation of their Qing counterparts (Nguyễn 2018, 126-132). However, as demonstrated above, Ngô Thì Sĩ’s historiographical practice was influenced by a multitude of assumptions, many of which fall beyond the pale of empirical methodology as presently conceived. Almost certainly, the dominant tenor of *Việt sử tiêu án* does not operate according to a hermeneutic of suspicion (*ngghi ngờ*) as suggested by Nguyễn Kim Sơn. When such a hermeneutic was adopted by Ngô Thì Sĩ, it was sustained, not by thoroughgoing textual comparison or any objective criteria of historical plausibility, but by astute observation regarding the absonous departure of certain details from the internal logic of the received tradition. It is plain that the insights and arguments expounded in *Việt sử tiêu án* are more robust and convincing than anything proffered by Ngô Sĩ Liên or his fellow commentators in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*. Despite these advantages, Ngô Thì Sĩ operated according to a largely similar methodology of intuition and extrapolation. In some cases, his deductive interventions loosely align with what we anticipate to be a text-based critical methodology; in others, they do not. Divesting *Việt sử tiêu án* of these adscititious labels and recovering the ambiguities inherent to the text and its underlying methodology are essential to understanding the historical imagination of Ngô Thì Sĩ and

contextualizing it alongside that of his contemporaries. And it is precisely towards this discernment of “authorial mind” that *Việt sử tiêu án* invites its readers.

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