

A view of the Song refugees in South East Asia at the beginning of the Yuan Dynasty

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It seems that the Mongol campaigns against the southern Song Empire, Nan Song, may have accelerated Chinese immigration in South-East Asia and no doubt also to Japan, and pushed out of the country a certain number of high officials, military as well as civil, who refused to rally round the foreign dynasty. It is probable also that the late thirteenth century Yuan expeditions to Vietnam, Champa, Burma and Java had the same effect, as the majority of troops were made up of Han recruited in the ex-Southern Song empire – then called “the army of new subjects” or xinfujun. Although several authors have mentioned these forced migrations, they have rarely been seriously studied.

Here we would like to reconsider this question in stressing three countries: Vietnam, Champa and Cambodia for which the written sources in Chinese allow us to envisage several types of insertion into local societies. It goes without saying that these three countries, like the insular countries, have sheltered, at least since the Song, more or less sizeable Chinese merchant communities who entertained rather close relations with the provinces of southern China and who have been able, in certain cases, to facilitate the integration of the newcomers. But it should be recognized that the sources on these questions remain quite rare, despite the rediscovery at the beginning of the 1960s of an inscription from the Trần period (1226-1400) emanating from a Song refugee.

Although the sources from the Yuan period are rather fragmentary, they allow us nevertheless to glimpse the size of the flows of immigration to the closest countries of Southeast Asia with which the Song merchants had close relations. They also help us to understand better the refugees’ contribution to the resistance against the Mongols and to the complete halt of the policy of Mongol control of Vietnam and Champa, a fact which is too rarely taken into consideration by modern historians.