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Introduction

Scholars of China and of Vietnam have for too long been separated from one another by both the “area studies” paradigm and nationalistic historiographies, which divide the two countries along stark political, cultural, historical, and even continental lines. Recent interest in borderlands history has started to chip away at such divisions, including the largest division – that between Southeast Asia and East Asia. Historians, linguists, and scholars of literature and culture have begun to uncover productive seams of research by examining migration patterns and diasporas, along with the greater trade and communications networks among various regions of southern China and the coastal areas of Southeast Asia and beyond. One area of research that has been especially fruitful in recent years involves recovering and highlighting connections between the maritime cultures of South China and those of the Gulf of Tonkin.

This special issue of *Asia Major* foregrounds developments in the fields of Vietnamese and Chinese history – or, coastal South China Sea history – from approximately the tenth through nineteenth centuries CE. The contributors approach Sino-Viet relations from new angles that generally eschew such culturally and nationalistically-laden categories of “Vietnam” and “China” to give a more nuanced reading of transregional and transnational interactions in, between, and along the southern coastal and borderland spheres.

By homing in on regional conflict, cross-border negotiations, elite agency, rhetoric vs. reality, and piracy, the authors highlight ways in which the borderlands acted as a coherent system. We see how elites of various backgrounds, representing a plethora of local interests and voices, interacted with migrants from the North at home as well as various actors from abroad (Chinese courts or other regions of China), and we gain a more vivid sense of how such figures along the borderlands helped shape Sino-Viet history. In the larger sphere of foreign relations, neither the Vietnamese nor Chinese state could consistently exert exclusive control over their respective borderlands. At times they availed themselves of powerful local partners to impose order, while at other times they harnessed the maritime prowess and commercial power of pirates and mercenaries to accommodate their own needs.

Some of our authors explore the role of elites in various networks of southern trade. In “Simple Natives and Cunning Merchants: Song Representations of Frontier Trade in Guangxi,” Sean Marsh highlights the main modes that scholar-officials used to depict frontier indigenes and Chinese traders along the border between Song Guangxi and northern Dai Viet. Analyzing descriptions of southern trade in three Southern Song geographies, he shows how Confucian paternalism and critiques of merchant communities reduced the complexities of southern trade through the categories of simple natives and corrupt, cunning Chinese merchants. At the same time, Marsh shows us how the same passages that flatten and caricature the indigenous other also hint at how their clever management of trade provided certain protections against outright exploitation. It is through such hints in the scholar-official record that we might gain a better sense of the contrast between the formulaic descriptions and condemnations of traders on the southern periphery and the messy realities of trade that they were enmeshed in.

Trade between Song-Yuan China and Dai Viet is also explored by James Anderson in “Commissioner Li and Prefect Huang: Sino-Vietnamese Frontier Trade Networks and Political Alliances in the Southern Song.” This essay examines the changing activities of a particular clan – the Huang (Hoang) – in the border regions of China and Dai Viet. Anderson shows how the clan vied for local dominance by adapting their activities according to more general patterns of change in trade across the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands. We see how, with the receding importance of such trading networks later in the Song, such a clan was able to successfully negotiate a transition to political service and positions of power through strategic alliances between the two courts. Through his analysis, Anderson is able to shed light on the degree and type of local power and autonomy the Huang clan garnered as an effect of large-scale changes in trade along the border.

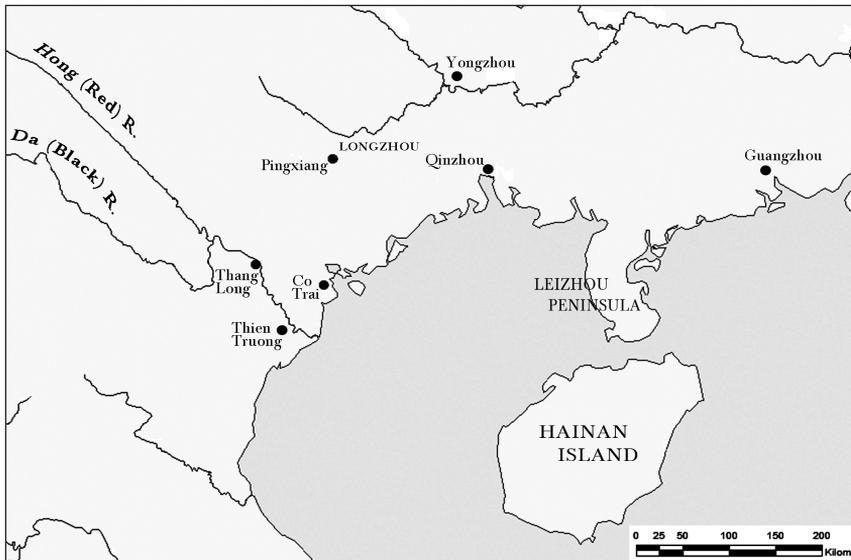
Stories of trans-border clans vying for local power and authority continue into the Ming era and beyond. John K. Whitmore’s article on “Ngo (Chinese) Communities and Montane–Littoral Conflict in Dai Viet, ca. 1400–1600” focuses on tensions within different topographical regions of Dai Viet that have had deep implications for Sino-Viet history. Rather than focus on state-to-state conflict between the Ming and Dai Viet, Whitmore illustrates the intense regional conflict between hybrid Sino-Vietnamese (Ngo/Wu) coastal dwellers – who maintained strong regional ties with Fujian and the Ming state – and the Kinh, a group from the mountainous inland regions. Such conflict, Whitmore meticulously shows, shaped Vietnamese state formation in the nine-

teenth century. Intriguingly, Vietnamese resistance was directed not just against northern (Chinese) regimes, but also against ethnic and cultural pockets of Ngo within Dai Viet, a “community that spanned both Chinese and Vietnamese coasts.” Whitmore’s illustration of these strong links between Southeast China and the Lower Delta of Dai Viet goes a long way toward recovering the multiethnic and transregional forces that shaped the history of Vietnam. His contribution contextualizes Li Tana’s and others’ work on the South by delineating the regional tensions that pushed Ngo communities to the southern coast. These displaced Ngo communities welcomed Chinese newcomers, contributing to the growth of robust international and cosmopolitan trading centers from the eighteenth century forward.

Robert Antony reveals a world with loose and at times even non-existent borders in the fluid society of the Gulf of Tonkin. His piece, “Violence and Predation on the Sino-Vietnamese Frontier, 1450–1850,” describes the shadow economy and rough-and-tumble lifestyle of pirates operating in the Gulf. Indigenous people recognized no borders, created their own frontier culture, and defied ethnic and national categories. Transregional and multiethnic gangs of pirates, both large and small, operated beyond the control of Chinese and Vietnamese states. Conducting history from the bottom up, Antony shows that beyond the lawlessness of the region, there was “a highly integrated political economy” that transgressed borders. Illegal trade and violence persisted well into the nineteenth century.

In the fifth and last essay of the group, the theme of recovering the agency of local leaders and various other actors is continued in Kathlene Baldanza’s piece, “Perspectives on the 1540 Mac Surrender to the Ming.” Her essay shows how Mac Dang Dung carved out a place for his state between hostile regimes. In 1527, Mac Dang Dung, a military leader with roots in the Lower Delta Ngo community of Dai Viet, emerged and created his own dynasty, the Mac. Although Mac origins in the Lower Delta Ngo community probably increased montane resistance to his state, it did not gain him the support of the Ming state. The Ming state stars as the main actor in most retellings of the story. However, contrary perspectives from Chinese and Vietnamese official sources, minor state actors, and poetry show various stakeholders competing to legitimate their own actions. By availing herself of such materials, Baldanza restores the complexity of an event that has for too long been understood as yet another example of Chinese regional dominance.

In all of these essays, the authors attempt to recapture either the voices, agency, or stories of southern peoples on the border between China and Vietnam. Every essay questions, criticizes, or goes against the grain of the stories and views that became standardized based on many decades of simplistic and uncritical readings of the Chinese and Vietnamese sources. Many of the authors fill out the picture of southern trade or politics by highlighting messy or complicated relationships among actors, explaining activities in terms of a plethora of possible local and transregional motivations, and giving a certain amount of agency back to actors such as pirates and local clans or chiefs, rather than abstract states and their policies. The results are eye-opening. By fleshing out on-the-ground, human concerns, these histories of Sino-Viet relations and the maritime, southern borderlands ultimately reveal that a dramatic blurring of the boundaries had been the order of the day between state officials and local entrepreneurs, between local allegiances and transregional interests, not to mention a blurring of the more basic, nationalistic boundaries of “Vietnam” and “China.”



Schematic Map. Gulf of Tonkin Area: Traditional Placenames

The places shown here will aid the reader in discussions found in several of the articles in this special issue. Chinese placenames are one-word, and Vietnamese are two-word.