

Creating a Border between China and Vietnam

By: [James A. Anderson](#)

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Abstract:

Borders and their older cousins, frontiers, receive a great deal of attention in East Asian studies these days, but such political divisions can mask the "true" relations between communities on either side of the partition. The editors of this volume have stressed that a border is less a fixed line drawn in the sand, and more "a zone of interconnectivity" (Walcott and Johnson, Introduction). I agree with this contention, and argue that any study of the Sino-Vietnamese border must also take into consideration the web of both localized and region-wide political, cultural, and economic relationships that permeate the boundary between these two polities. A corollary to the argument is that the border appears solid only from the distant Chinese and Vietnamese centers of power, where the textual records of border history were maintained. For the chroniclers of the dynastic histories for both courts, the physical divide between China and Vietnam could even be imbued with epidemiological qualities. The common belief of northern scholars of northern (i.e. Chinese) regimes was that the Sino-Vietnamese frontier region was susceptible to deadly clouds of miasmatic malaria, which marked the true division between the civilized North and the uncivilized South (Zhang 2005, 68-77).

Keywords: China | Vietnam | Sino-Vietnamese relations

Book chapter:

Mountains and rivers have demarcated the border [of our country]. The customs of the North [China] and the South [Vietnam] are also different. We find [in antiquity] that the Triệu, the Đinh, the Lý, and Trần [dynasties] built our country. Alongside the Han, Tang Song, and Yuan [dynasties], the rulers [of our dynasties] ruled as emperors over their own part [of the world represented by the North and the South]. Nguyễn Trãi (1428) "The Great Declaration of the Wu's (China's) Pacification."

(Wolters and Reynolds, 2008, 209)

INTRODUCTION: THE SINO-VIETNAMESE FRONTIER AS TRIBUTARY GATEWAY

Borders and their older cousins, frontiers, receive a great deal of attention in East Asian studies these days, but such political divisions can mask the “true” relations between communities on either side of the partition. The editors of this volume have stressed that a border is less a fixed line drawn in the sand, and more “a zone of interconnectivity” (Walcott and Johnson, Introduction). I agree with this contention, and argue that any study of the Sino-Vietnamese border must also take into consideration the web of both localized and region-wide political, cultural, and economic relationships that permeate the boundary between these two polities. A corollary to the argument is that the border appears solid only from the distant Chinese and Vietnamese centers of power, where the textual records of border history were maintained. For the chroniclers of the dynastic histories for both courts, the physical divide between China and Vietnam could even be imbued with epidemiological qualities. The common belief of northern scholars of northern (i.e. Chinese) regimes was that the Sino-Vietnamese frontier region was susceptible to deadly clouds of miasmatic malaria, which marked the true division between the civilized North and the uncivilized South (Zhang 2005, 68-77).

Although the creation of the Sino-Vietnamese border was many centuries in the making, this political divide was first accomplished 800 years before the colonial French authorities surveyed the Sino-Vietnamese frontier, dissolved the remaining tributary bonds between the Chinese Qing (1644-1911) and the Vietnamese Nguyễn (1802-1945) courts, and inscribed their own partition between China and Vietnam.¹ The border established by French surveyors was in fact very similar to the existing premodern boundary, first established in the late 11th century. In this chapter I will describe this unusually resilient borderline, as well as examine the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands in the larger context of premodern Sino-Vietnamese relations.

Early developments along China and Vietnam’s shared frontier were deeply influenced by the relationship fostered by these two polities (Anderson 2007). At the highest levels of leadership, the physical boundary played less of a role in delineating the two spheres of authority than did ritual acts that, as dictated in ancient texts, re-affirmed the mutual obligations of the long-standing bond between China and Vietnam. The frontier may have divide two states, but it also often served as a gateway for material and cultural exchange. Interregional trade will be examined later in the chapter, but I will first discuss court-to-court interaction in a political context commonly known as the “tribute system.” The acts of offering and receiving tribute, the performances of roles assigned to both guests and hosts, and the processions of tribute embassies were all part of the tribute institution (Hevia 1995). Some scholars have argued that emperors and their officials were required to overlook the tangled state of *Realpolitik* on their empire’s periphery to allow room for the ideal Chinese world order implied in the tribute system (Wang 1983, 62). I would add that, beyond the greatest military threats faced along the northern frontier, Chinese adherence to a universalistic notion of rulership actually required hegemonic expression.

¹ Please note that prior to the 20th century modern names for the countries examined in this chapter and their inhabitants are not relevant. However, as a shorthand to simplify our discussion of various geographical regions, I have used the terms “Vietnamese” and “Vietnam” to describe persons and places located near or to the south of the Red (Hồng) River delta, and the terms “Chinese” and “China” to describe persons and places associated with courts and political centers north of the Red River delta.

Coercion and hegemony could be considered tools of harmony and order, and in the intersection of purposes, a Chinese emperor found the means to project both political power and moral authority (Anderson 2007, 25). In this case, virtue and coercion were both essential components of the authority of a Chinese emperor. However, when the situation dictated a withdrawal from a position of universal superiority and even the acceptance of bi-lateral equality, the Chinese court could make these accommodations in policy without permanently subverting adherence to the conventional world order.

THE EARLY SINO-VIETNAMESE FRONTIER AND THE NAM VIỆT LEGACY

The earliest evidence in the Chinese court chronicles of a distinct political order emerging in the region of the modern Sino-Vietnamese border points to the Warring States Period (403-221 BCE). This was a politically dynamic time, and 333 BCE was a pivotal year in the development of the Sino-Vietnamese political divide, although the frontier itself had not yet moved to its current location. In that year, as Sima Qian recorded in the Han period annalistic history “Record of the Historian” (*Shiji* 史記), the Chu 楚 state (770-220 BCE), located in the central Yangzi Valley, invaded the Yue 越 (Việt) state, then situated at the mouth of the Yangzi River. In the midst of continued turmoil in the region, the Yue elite moved south and separated into several smaller kingdoms known collectively in traditional sources as the “One Hundred Yue (*Bai Yue* 百越)” (Taylor 1983, 14-15). The *Shiji* account listed the kingdoms as the Southern Yue (Nan Yue 南越 or Nam Việt), centered on the banks of the Xi River near modern-day Guangzhou, the Min Yue 閩越 in modern Fujian province, Eastern Ou (Dong Ou 東甌) in southern Zhejiang, and the Western Ou (Xi Ou 西甌) in modern Guangxi. The Western Ou kingdom’s territory included the Red River Delta of northern Vietnam. Imperial period Chinese and Vietnamese historians further argued that the southward migration en masse of political refugees had produced the Yue or Việt people. Keith Taylor has argued more convincingly that the Việt elite and a standing military force fled the chaos of the north for greater security in these particular regions of southern China and northern Vietnam, and then established themselves among the existing population (Taylor 1983, 16). Moreover, Cindy Churchman contends that the Tai-speaking Li and Lao peoples inhabiting the modern-day southern Guangxi region were fiercely resistant to subjugation by outside authorities, leading to the development of an “interior frontier” in the Red River Delta and North China Plains. Inhabitants shared cultural ties and yet remained separate politically (Churchman forthcoming). Such an explanation reflects early textual accounts that reference regional identities. From the perspective of the Chinese early imperial chronicles, the Việt migrants represented an outer layer of Zhongyuan 中原 society, less civilized than the “core” communities of the North China Plain, but not fully peripheral to the civilizable whole. From the perspective of late Vietnamese elite, the link to Western Ou and the collective “Hundred Yue” gave them access to the cultural heritage of the Central Plains without insisting on the political subjugation of the southern region to any particular northern political order. The boundary between these two spheres was in this manner recorded in the region’s collective history and through the textual accounts given permanency.

The Nam Việt (*nanyue* 南越) kingdom (207 BCE-111 BCE) along the southern frontier of the Qin and early Han empires would be the first regionally powerful state to solidify the political divide. The Nam Việt was a strong example of a state informed by the “zone of

interconnectivity” that was the Sino-Vietnamese frontier, having emerged from a violent interaction between northern and southern powers. In 180 BCE the Vietnamese Âu Lạc kingdom’s (ca. 220 to 180 BCE) ruler King An Dương (An Dương Vương 安陽王) was defeated by Triệu Đà (Zhao Tuo 趙佗: r. 207-137 BCE), the former Qin military commissioner sent by the newly unified Chinese empire. When the Qin empire quickly crumbled after the death of its founder, Triệu Đà consolidated local power in the region around modern-day Guangzhou, and only re-established ties with the new Han Dynasty after naming himself the “Martial King of Nam Việt (*nanyue wu wang* 南越武王)” (Chen 1986, 107-108). Once peaceful relations were established with the Han court, Triệu Đà turned his attention to southern expansion. With the conquest of the Âu Lạc kingdom, Triệu Đà’s kingdom stretched from Guangzhou along the South China coast all the way to the southern reaches of the Red River Delta. This southern coastal kingdom, with exclusive control of trade through a region well north of the modern-day Sino-Vietnamese border, would remain for Chinese rulers a worrisome historical reminder of how prosperous their Vietnamese neighbor could become with a strategic foothold in southern China.



Figure. Sino-Vietnamese frontier region.

The strength of the Nam Việt kingdom, although short-lived in comparison to Chinese dynastic power, also provided an example for subsequent generations of Vietnamese leaders who sought confirmation for their own political legitimacy. When the Han court finally re-established relations with Triệu Đà in 179 BCE, the Nam Việt ruler sent a tribute mission laden with luxury items from both the Tongking Gulf region and beyond, including “a pair of white jades, 1,000 kingfishers’ feathers, ten rhinoceros horns, 500 purple-striped cowries, a vessel of (edible) cinnamon-insects . . . , forty pairs of kingfishers and two pairs of peacocks” (Wicks 1992, 28). Triệu Đà’s successors, his grandsons, initially enjoyed strong relations with the Han court, which

in turn enhanced the kingdom's volume of regional trade. It was during this period that the frontier, as gateway to desired exotic commodities, first started to play a significant parallel role. With access to trade passing through the Tongking Gulf, rulers on the North China Plain engaged with a commercial maritime network of emporia across Eurasia. In fact, prior to the 7th century the region of northern and north-central Vietnam was the most important maritime trade partner of central China for channeling goods and ideas, such as Buddhist teachings, from Indian Ocean-based merchants (Li 2011, 48). However, close ties between the Chinese and Vietnamese leadership led to an eclipsing of Nam Việt authority by Han interests, both inside and outside the leadership in Guangzhou. After political turmoil within the Nam Việt court led to the assassination of the ruler Triệu Hưng (Zhao Xing 趙興) in 112 BCE, the Han made a concerted effort to bring the region back under their central control.

In the era of Han administrative control (111 BCE-40 CE) the Sino-Vietnamese political divide was officially erased to absorb the former Nam Việt territory into the Han empire, placing the boundary well south of the modern-day borderline. The Han court assigned new administrative prefectures to the south: Giao Chỉ (Jiaozhi 交趾) extending from modern-day Guangxi to the Red River Delta, Cửu Chân (Jiuzhen 九真), extending from the southern Delta to modern-day Nghệ An province, and Nhật Nam (Rinan 日南) as the southernmost region bordering on the kingdom known to Chinese chroniclers as Linyi 林邑 (Lâm Ấp), located on the southern edge of modern-day Quảng Bình Province (Hardy, Cucarzi, and Zolese 2009, 62). This region would form the general outline of the autonomous Đại Cồ Việt kingdom which emerged in the mid-10th century. The Han court planned to introduce administrative practices modeled on the rest of the empire, but the regional rule was adjusted to produce maximum political stability and to minimize disturbance to the flow of trade through the region. As Churchman contends, a common bond of culture and education between this Han-administered region of northern Vietnam and the inland Han empire led within several generations to two very similar societies separated by a wide swath of culturally dissimilar and fiercely independent communities comprised of the Li and Lao peoples of South and Southwest China (Churchman forthcoming). The accepted modern Vietnamese narrative presupposes that the local elite, the Lạc lords, struggled collectively to break free from Han oppression in this period. However, experiences under Han domination likely provided the lessons required to eventual independence. The Lạc lords in turn accepted titles from the Han court to enhance their prestige. By submitting tribute from their region, they built up an institutional relationship with the central court. The failure of anti-Han resistance such as the Trưng sisters' rebellion (39-43 CE) points to a lack of cohesion among the local aristocracy, a cohesion that didn't develop until centuries of evolving institutions through contact with successive northern regimes had passed.

The legacy of the ancient Nam Việt kingdom lingered in the memories of local leaders on the South China coast prior to the emergence of an independent Vietnamese kingdom in the 10th century. A self-governing polity which straddled the boundary of the Chinese state at the height of its imperial power, and which could monopolize the South Seas trade passing through the region, was an affront to the Chinese central court but a desired goal of any frontier official with political ambitions. The local strongman Sĩ Nhiếp 士燮 (137-226) and his family made just such an attempt in the late Han period. Sĩ Nhiếp's forebears originally fled to the south from the regime of the Han usurper Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 9-23 CE), so he was among the Sino-Vietnamese elite with roots on both sides of the frontier (Holcombe 2001, 155). In 196 the

governor of Giao Chi, Zhu Fu, was murdered, and in the name of restoring order Sĩ Nhiếp took control of Giao Chi, Cuu Chan, and the South China region of Nanhai 南海, delegating the administration of the region to various family members (Wu 1995, 171-172). The territory Sĩ Nhiếp and his family controlled reached from modern-day Guangzhou to the frontier with the Linyi kingdom in central Vietnam, closely resembling the Nam Việt's kingdom at the height of its authority (Anderson 2013, 268).

The late Han empire was no longer strong enough to overcome assertion of local autonomy, so the court attempted to reassert central control in 203 by promoting the status of Giao Chi to that of a province (Taylor 1983, 72). However, Sĩ Nhiếp and his family held real power, using their strategic control of regional trade in luxury items to enhance their political resilience when the Han finally collapsed. As the passage in the *Cefu Yuanguai* notes,

When the Wuda Emperor 吳大帝 (i.e. founder of the Wu kingdom, Sun Quan 孫權, 182-252) . . . came to the throne, the person in charge of Giao Chi 交趾, the prefect Sĩ Nhiếp, sent an emissary to the Wu court with a variety incense and bolts of fine hemp cloth, numbering in the thousands, as well as such treasures as bright pearls, large cowries, colored glass beads, jade, tortoiseshell, rhinoceros horn and elephant ivory. The envoy also brought strange goods such as various fruits including bananas, coconuts, and longan. Sĩ Nhiếp's younger brother was prefect of Hepu (the well-known trading port), and at the same time he presented several hundred tribute horses. The Emperor made a note of these generous gifts, and bestowed titles upon the local leaders as a sign of his gratitude for support. (Wang 1960, 197: 2380-2381)

Although the pearls may have been local to the Tongking Gulf region, many of these products such as the glass beads, cowries, and ivory came from regions well south of the area controlled by Sĩ Nhiếp, perhaps even as far west along the Indian Ocean network as the Indian Sub-Continent or, in the case of the glass beads, the Persian Gulf region. The appeal of the Sino-Vietnamese frontier region in this era, therefore, depended on access to trade articles from throughout the southern rim of Eurasia, marking this “zone of connectivity” both a political boundary and a commercial gateway for interregional exchange.

BUDDHISM AS A CULTURAL UNIFIER AND A POLITICAL DIVIDER

Beginning in the post-Han period, Buddhism's spread into East Asia provided another factor that unified the region culturally and intellectually. However, Buddhism's influence in political life would eventually highlight another division between China and Vietnam. During the Period of Disunion (220-589) when China was no longer unified, Buddhism provided a kind of solace in a chaotic world. Buddhist activities centered on Buddhist temples and provided social stability. Chinese religious practice before Buddhism was limited in scope and highly cultist, but Buddhism in its many manifestations linked worshippers to much larger communities of believers and provided satisfying answers to life's big questions. Buddhism, particularly Mahayana Buddhism, also had a profound influence on Vietnamese society. The strongest source of influence came from the north, with local adaptations. As Antoine Nguyen Tan Phat wrote,

The Chinese also brought ancestor worship and the stress on the collective family to their southern neighbors; but to the Vietnamese, more than the spirits of one's ancestors must be propitiated: There is a vast world of spirits, good and bad, that must be dealt with as the situation requires and for these occasions a Buddhist monk or a (Daoist) priest or an astrologer may be utilized. (Nguyen 1982, 84-85)

The transmitters of Buddhism to Vietnam were 2nd-century religious refugees from China and religious missionaries from South Asia. The first person credited with bringing Buddhism to Vietnam was the Chinese monk Mouzi 牟子 (b. 167 CE), a Daoist convert forced to flee China in 189 CE, and whose text *Mouzi's Removal of All Doubts* (*Mouzi Lihuolun* 牟子理惑論) included the first known defenses of Buddhism against its earliest critics (Thakur 1986, 169-170). The second most important figure was the son of a Sogdian merchant, known in the Chinese and Vietnamese sources as Kang Senghui 康僧會 (Khương Tăng Hội, d. 280 CE), who converted to Buddhism while in Vietnam and translated numerous sutras from Sanskrit into Chinese (Trần 2004, 77). Kang also brought these teachings to China, contributing other new texts to the larger Buddhist canon in East Asia (Nattier 2008, 149).

The influences of Buddhism in Sino-Vietnamese relations continued during the cosmopolitan Tang dynasty (618-906). At the point when the early Tang court was devoutly Buddhist, its institutions for Buddhist patronage spread to northern Vietnam. Tang pilgrims heading south or on to India would often pass through Vietnam. Some would stay in the region for extended visits, contributing to spiritual activities of local Buddhist communities. In this way Buddhism weakened the divide between the regions of China and Vietnam within the Sangha of believers. However, a new political division emerged during the course of the Tang dynasty. Buddhism depended heavily on court patronage, and when that patronage declined in China during the Tang due to direct competition with the aristocratic class and Confucianized national elites, so did Buddhism's fortunes. In Vietnam, however, Buddhist leaders continued to receive court patronage. When the late Tang period persecutions of Buddhists spread, Vietnamese Buddhist leaders took control locally. In Vietnam Thiền 禪 (Chan or Zen) Buddhism arrived a couple of generations after it was introduced in China, but Thiền would become the most important sect of Buddhism for the political elite of the post-10th century Vietnamese court. The first Patriarch of the first Thiền sect was the South Asian monk Vinituraci and its second patriarch was one of Vinituraci's most important disciples, the Vietnamese monk *Pháp Hiển* 法顯 (d. 624), native of the region near modern-day Hanoi (Nguyen 1992, 82-83). There were 27 subsequent patriarchs of this sect, but there was no further record of the school after 1216. The patriarch of the second Thiền School, Wu Yantong, came to Vietnam from Guangzhou in 820 as the descendant of a wealthy settler family. This school had a strong influence on the history of Vietnamese Buddhism. A seventh-generation adherent of this school was the second emperor of the Lý dynasty (1010-1225), Lý Phật Ma 李佛瑪 or Lý Thái Tông 李太宗 (1028-1054), who was a patron of the Buddhist Sangha and temple construction (Nguyen 1992, 118). In the Lý court monks were even allowed a role in imperial administration, something that was never formally allowed at the Song court in this same period. Through continuous court patronage Buddhism became the state religion by the mid-12th century, with a special focus on the Thiền and "Pure Land." Such a close association between political and religious spheres of authority would no longer hold true in the central courts of north regime after the decline of the Tang. At this point Buddhism began to create another level of division on the Sino-Vietnamese boundary.

LATER DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CONFIGURATION OF THE SINO-VIETNAMESE FRONTIER

The Tang 唐 (618-907) dynasty marked a transitional period in the arrangement of the Sino-Vietnamese frontier, following changes in titles and accompanying responsibilities that the Tang court assigned to its representatives in the south. In the early Tang period, the Chinese court sought to exercise direct political control over the region of Vietnam. In 679, the name for Giao Chi had been changed to An Nam (“the Pacified South”), indicating the position, according to the Chinese leadership, that Vietnam occupied within the Tang Empire. The Tang administrative units in Vietnam were regularized after 706 as circuits (*dao* 道), districts (*xian* 縣), and protectorates (*du hu fu* 都護府). Nhật Nam had once again been made a part of Vietnamese territory, and the Tang court ordered the administrator of An Nam to appeal to surrounding local rulers to engage in proper tributary protocol and thereby to bring order to the region beyond the southern frontier. Throughout much of the Tang dynasty the An Nam Protectorate remained an integral part of the Chinese empire, and military appointees to this protectorate from the central court ruled the region with varying degrees of independence. The lowlands region remained under Tang control under this administrative system. The highlands remained under native leadership with the “bridled and haltered” (*jimi zhou*) system. The problem that emerged was that officials appointed to these permanent administrative positions (mostly military governors) established their own administrations. This pattern would later affect the administration of An Nam, particularly after the abolition of the An Nam Protectorate (*Annan duhufu* 安南都護府) as an administrative unit in late 866 (Fan 1977, 595). At that point, as had been the case in Sĩ Nhiếp’s day, local administrators sought to consolidate power and establish semi-autonomous rule.

In the period from the fall of the Tang through the founding of the Song Dynasty (968-1279) conditions became right for an independent polity to emerge under local leadership from the Red River region. The Song dynasty’s first rulers initially sought to project an image of sweeping territorial dominance before actually achieving it. This was attempted, for example, by including the Vietnamese kingdom rhetorically in the category designated for tributary kingdoms while granting official titles that suggested a greater amount of political independence. Meanwhile, Vietnamese rulers used the evolving relationship with China to set the foundation for their own indigenous base of power. Three successive Vietnamese ruling families, the Đinh 丁 (r. 968-980), the Lê 黎 (r. 980-1009), and the Lý 李 (1009-1225), accepted tributary ties with China while clan leaders competed locally with other powerful elite (Anderson 2013, 273). When Lý Công Uẩn 李公蘊 (r. 1009-1028) in the late summer of 1010 established his new capital at an ancient citadel now renamed Thăng Long 升龍 (modern-day Hà Nội), the Vietnamese ruler signaled a shift in the center of power away from the coast to the central delta region. At this point the Ly focused on political consolidation of the northern periphery of the kingdom, which entailed coming into closer contact with the people residing and ruling in the frontier areas. These encounters eventually brought Chinese and Vietnamese interests into conflict by the mid-11th century. Up until the successive rebellions of the Tai-speaking frontier chieftain Nùng Trí Cao 農智高 (ca. 1025-1054), the Song court regarded frontier disturbances as the responsibility of their vassal representative, the Lý court. This changed after Trí Cao and his followers spread

across much of South China in the early 1050s (Anderson 2007, 100-113). The Song finally sent a top general Di Qing 狄青 (1008-1057) and his trusted subordinates to the region, and a Chinese attack on the Nu ng rebels at Kunlun Pass sent Trí Cao and his forces into retreat. The end of Nùng Trí Cao's attempt to carve out a new political boundary of the frontier, however, resulted in an even larger conflict between the Chinese and Vietnamese courts.

Following Nùng Trí Cao's defeat, growing tensions at the frontier were largely the product of shifting demography and local disturbances. Song settlers moved south in large numbers, while the Lý rulers expanded the court's control over the uplands closest to the frontier region (Anderson 2007, 123-124). By 1069, Lý Nhật Tôn 李日尊 (r. 1054-1072) had secured control of his realm well enough to change the name of the kingdom to Đại Việt ("The Great Việt Kingdom"), and distance his court from the imperial regulations of his Chinese neighbors (Toghto et al. 1983, 488: 14069). In 1075, in order to thwart an attack from the north, the Lý court ordered General Lý Thường Kiệt (李常傑; 1019-1105) to attack the Song by sea and by land. The Song court managed to ally with Champa and the Angkor kingdoms to launch a counter-attack in late 1076. Lý Thường Kiệt successfully defended the Vietnamese capital at Thăng Long with the assistance of indigenous militia leaders from the Sino-Vietnamese frontier region. Hostilities eventually subsided and after a period of calm in 1084 a clear border was mapped out between the two states, the first such court-negotiated border in China's history (Anderson 2007, 144). With the exception of the Ming occupation of the Đại Việt kingdom in the early 15th century, this formal frontier between the two polities would remain in place through the early modern period.

During the Trần 陳 (1225-1400) dynasty, the territorial integrity of Vietnam was successfully defended against the expanding Yuan dynasty, stemming the tide of Mongol conquest in Southeast Asia. In 1288, following two previous unsuccessful invasion attempts, the Mongol ruler Khubilai Khan assembled an invasion force of 300,000 men and 500 war junks. He had new political designs on the Trần leadership, having chosen a royal family defector, Trần Ích Tắc 陳益稷 (1254-1329), to replace the reigning king Trần Nhân Tông 陳仁宗 (1258-1308). Khubilai desired with this victory to use the Trần kingdom as a stepping stone into the Southeast Asian region, but the Mongols were ultimately thwarted in this expansionist effort. The Yuan army captured Trần capital at Thăng Long, but Trần forces cut off the Mongols' supply lines. After a series of attacks and counter-attacks, the Mongols were confronted by Trần defenders at the Bạch Đằng River where the general Trần Hưng Đạo (ca. 1232-1300) famously used a defense of submerged iron-tipped stakes to disable the Mongol navy and throw the attackers into disarray (Lê 2000, 147). The Yuan forces were completely defeated. Soon thereafter Trần Nhân Tông sent a delegation to Beijing to present tribute and request vassal status after "begging forgiveness" for driving off the Mongol invaders. Hardly mollified by this behavior, the Mongols initially planned another attack, but with the death of Khubilai Khan in 1294 this plan was never realized. Thereafter Yuan-Đại Việt relations remained stable and the existing border between the states remained firm.

Following the fall of the Yuan in 1368, the victorious Ming dynasty's decision to dissolve the boundary between Vietnam and China under its second ruler the Yongle Emperor reflected the different personalities of the first two Ming rulers. The Hongwu Emperor, founder of the dynasty and father to the Yongle emperor, was cautious in frontier affairs and admonished his subjects

not to disturb China's neighbors. The "Ancestral Admonitions" (*Zu Xun* 祖訓) of the Ming court specifically counseled that they should not invade Vietnam, among other neighbors of China (Kang 2010, 98). Peaceful and impartial China was to remain a moral example for others to emulate, emphasizing the ceremonial aspects of tribute relations. In contrast the Yongle Emperor couldn't avoid bringing turmoil to the southern frontier as he pursued an increasingly expansionist policy. In the autumn of 1406 a force of 215,000 Ming troops attacked Vietnam, ostensibly with the goal of driving out a Vietnamese usurper and restoring the Trần family to the throne. However, once the troops entered into Vietnamese territory their goal changed to regional domination. By the end of 1407 Ming forces occupied most of the Đại Việt kingdom (Whitmore 1977, 53). At this point the southernmost periphery of the Ming empire reached as far south as modern-day Quảng Nam province. However, the border would revert to its former location before long.

The Ming attempt to absorb Vietnam completely through aggressive colonization, and thus erase the frontier delineation, did not fare well. The Chinese court made the mistake of sending unaccomplished officials down to fill posts in colonial administration, and many Ming administrators treated the occupation as an occasion for personal economic gain (Whitmore 1977, 64-65). Local resistance, led by the former official Lê Lợi 黎利 (1385-1433), began by attacking the colonial government's garrisons and supply lines, gradually wearing down occupying Ming army's resolve. In 1418 Lê Lợi's supporters launched a widespread revolt. When the Yongle emperor died, the next two Ming emperors followed the policy of occupation. However, in 1427 court advisors recommended abandoning the occupation attempt, quoting Hongwu's own opposition (Anderson 2013, 266). The occupation's opponents at court argued that whereas Vietnam may have once been part of China and so should be able to be civilized, local Vietnamese would not accept this civilizing mission (Taylor 1999, 150). Simply reviving tributary relations provided a more practical solution. Vietnamese historians long have had a different reading of events. It is generally accepted in Vietnamese scholarship that the founders of the Latter Lê (*Hậu Lê* 後黎) Dynasty (1428-1788), as reflected in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, saw essential differences between Vietnamese and Chinese cultures that were suddenly as plain as the mountains and rivers that divided the two regions. However, I would instead agree with the view espoused recently by Liam Kelly that the new Lê leadership regarded its mandate to rule as validated by a moral order shared by northern and southern regimes (Kelly 2005, 19-20). Proclamations of the early Lê may have presented Chinese and Vietnamese political pasts as clearly separated. However, common values such as those expressed through the performance of tributary protocol, for example, still held the two regions together in a special bond.

The frontier remained at peace for nearly a century after the Ming withdrawal. However, renewed efforts to form a separate state in the frontier region launched a particularly active phase in Sino-Vietnamese relations. In 1527 Mạc Đăng Dung 莫登庸 (1483-1541) established a separate regime, the Mạc 莫 dynasty (1527-1677), in the area of modern-day Cao Bằng. When the Ming court initially refused to recognize his rule, Mạc Đăng Dung pleaded for support. The Ming court finally recognized this frontier region as a colonial protectorate of the Ming empire but Mạc Đăng Dung had already cleverly abdicated to his son as the new "king" of the Đại Việt kingdom so that Mạc Đăng Dung could serve as a Ming frontier administrator in the same region (Zhang 1974, 321: 8330-8331)! Despite protests from the Lê court, the Ming court decided that

the Mạc and the Lê should continue to rule Vietnam as co-vassals of the Ming empire (Anderson 2013, 267). It took the Lê court 47 years before it was able to drive the Mạc out of the capital at Thang Long in 1592. Even then, the Mạc lingered in the northern frontier region until 1677, at which point the territorial struggle between the rival *Nguyễn* and *Trịnh* clans engulfed all of northern Vietnam.

China's interior experienced upheaval in the Ming-Qing transition period in the mid-17th century when the Ming forces engaged in pitched battles with the Qing forces in the South and Southwest. When the political situation was uncertain, the Lê court under *Trịnh* clan control and the Mạc court, then ruling over the frontier province of Cao Bằng, both sought to move the frontier northward (Sun 2001, 50). In the summer of 1647, shortly after Qing forces had driven off the Southern Ming Yongli 永曆 regime out of northwestern Guangdong province, the Lê/*Trịnh* court claimed loyalty to the fallen Ming and dispatched more than 300 warships to attack and annex the coastal prefecture of Lianzhou 廉州. After hearing the news of the naval invasion, the local administrator at Lianzhou sent word to the Qing court which dispatched its own troops to drive back the Lê/*Trịnh* invaders. In 1659 the Mạc kingdom's ruler, Mạc Kính Diệu 莫敬耀, invaded southern Guangxi with the same claims of Ming loyalty, this time conspiring with native *tusi* chieftains to augment his forces (Sun 2001, 50). The remnants of the Southern Ming Deyang 德陽 regime rallied behind the Mạc-led forces, but they too were eventually crushed by the Qing. The Mạc chose temporary political survival by recognizing the authority of the emerging Qing Dynasty, sending envoys to the Qing court with a formal apology and returning the conquered territory, thus bringing the frontier back to its original location.

MODERN BORDER NEGOTIATIONS

By the 19th century most frontier differences between Chinese and Vietnamese rulers were resolved, but problems with the Western powers from the other end of Eurasia were just beginning. In 1802 Nguyễn Ánh as the Gia Long 嘉隆 emperor (r. 1802-1820) took the throne as the ruler of the new *Nguyễn* dynasty (Woodside 1988, 17). Gia Long benefitted from Western assistance in reuniting the northern and southern territories of his kingdom, but this foreign assistance came at a price. By the mid-19th century the French were already more involved in Vietnam than was any other European power in the region. French victory in the 1884-1885 Sino-French War ensured that colonial authorities would continue their unchallenged expansion in the frontier region. The Treaty of Tianjin signed in the aftermath of the war established the Border Demarcation Commission to which both French and Chinese delegations were assigned. In July 1885 the new 12-year-old *Nguyễn* emperor, Hàm Nghi 咸宜 (1873-1943), fled into the Vietnamese uplands and called for popular opposition to the French. However, the resistance came much too late. Hàm Nghi was soon captured by the French and exiled to Algeria. In the late spring of 1885, Qing troops had already begun to withdraw from the frontier region following the conditions of the Treaty of Tianjin that created the French colonial Tonkin Protectorate (Luong 2010, 39). Two years later, on June 25, 1887, the Sino-French Treaty was signed to accept the newly-surveyed markers for a fixed land border between the Qing Empire and the French protectorate. The new colonial order was firmly in place; the ancient tributary Sino-Vietnamese relationship was shattered, yet the 11th-century boundary between these two states had hardly moved.

The Sino-French management of the Vietnamese border continued for half a century until the end of World War II in 1945. In the name of bandit suppression, the late Qing general Su Yuanchun 蘇元春 (1844-1908) established a system of border management that achieved a common purpose for both Qing and colonial French authorities, and the date of September 21, 1896 marked the official beginning of the Sino-French “mutually-patrolled national border (diuxun 對汛)” policy (Fu 2011, 146). Fu Shiming contends that the introduction of the telegraph pushed the management of the Sino-Vietnamese border into a new phase. After nearly 60 miles of telegraph lines were strung across the South China coast, the time it took to carry news from the Sino-Vietnamese border to the capital in Beijing was reduced from 20 days to four or five (Fu 2011, 145). This application of this new technology resulted in more rapid responses to local disturbances. The border was in this manner brought more fully into the affairs of both Chinese and French authorities, and this trend only accelerated after the founding of the Republic of China in 1911. Japanese conquest of northern Indochina in 1940 changed little in the borderlands, as Japanese authority eventually ruled through the Vichy French, but the post-war revolutions in both Vietnam and China led to a transformation of border management culminating in the establishment of checkpoints at designated locations.

With the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), socialist regimes on both sides of the border, the border was celebrated as a site of Communist solidarity and Sino-Vietnamese brotherhood. The former site of official premodern frontier encounters, Zhennan (“Subduing the South”) Pass, was renamed Munan (“Peaceful Ties with the South”) Pass in 1953 and again renamed Youyi (“Friendship”) Pass in 1965. China’s active support for the DRV’s struggles against French-led and later U.S.-led forces in part through cross-border supply lines turned the region into an active revolutionary site. However, the border soon lay at the center of renewed conflicts when Sino-Vietnamese relations soured at the end of the U.S. conflict. In the late summer of 1978 a violent clash erupted between Vietnamese and Chinese border officials and civilians. This skirmish was followed by the February 1979 border war launched by the PRC’s new leader, Deng Xiaoping, in response to the reunified Socialist Republic of Vietnam’s (SRV) invasion of Cambodia and the perceived mistreatment of ethnic Chinese (Hoa Kiều) communities in Vietnam after the reunification of the country in 1975. Officially, the post-1979 border remained an icy barrier between the two nations until the 1991 normalization of diplomatic ties. Chan Yuk Wah refers to the intentional silence on the 1979 border war in Vietnamese public announcements after 1991 as a strategy for reviving good relations with China without the need to fully address past areas of contention. In her analysis Chan moves beyond the purely political to the rhetorical realm when she argues that the modern-day Sino-Vietnamese border is “a metaphoric space for imagining the cultural and power politics involved in Vietnam-Chinese interactions which seek to bring about the maintenance of a harmonious relationship” (Chan 2009, 231). However, the border was not a flashpoint for everyone; cross-border relations differed between indigenous and non-indigenous inhabitants of the region. While military and civilian representatives of the Hanoi and Beijing governments embraced or confronted each other, depending on the winds of political change, local peoples interacted through trade and cultural activities in all but the tensest times (Womack 1994, 496). The frontier remained a zone of connectivity for those who lived closest to it.

Although contestations of the land border have largely been resolved since the normalizations of relations between the PRC and SRV in the early 1990s, the Sino-Vietnamese maritime border

has since become the focus of increasing regional tensions and put new strains on cross-border relations. The Chinese military analyst Liu Yazhou first laid out a clear overview of the crisis, which he summarized in the following manner:

The conflict in the South China Sea is, on the surface, a contention over a few rocky islands but in reality is a contention over resources. Seen in terms of historical standards China has gained the upper hand; seen in terms of geographical criteria the Philippines and other countries have gained the upper hand. In the new century, the highest objective of all countries is to control and exploit as much of the world's resources as possible to meet their own political and economic needs.

(Liu 2007, 36)

Beijing's strategic planners appear to have heeded Liu's advice, particularly in the manner with which Beijing argues for the historical validity of the claim to the "nine dash line," which is the U-shaped maritime zone that extends south from the shores of Guangxi and Guangdong in China into the South China Sea (*Nanhai* 南海) or *Biển Đông* ("Eastern Sea" in Vietnamese) to a point just north of the Indonesian Archipelago. Ken MacLean highlights the fact that "this line was the first major extension of China's southern frontier in over half a millennium, since the Mongols moved into Dali (now Yunnan) and the Ming briefly took *Đại Việt* (northern Vietnam)" (MacLean forthcoming). Beijing claims that imperial Chinese claims on the island of this region date from as early as the 8th century, but the "nine dash line" came into existence with a 1947 cartographic projection produced by the post-World War II Republic of China's government two years before their control of the mainland fell to Communist Chinese forces. Vietnamese authorities were at this time preoccupied with the developing conflict with returning French colonial forces, but in 1974 PLA naval forces seized several islands in this region from Republic of Vietnam (RVN) military defenders. Although at war with the RVN during this period, Hanoi has since taken this event as the flashpoint that began the current stand-off. In recent years there have been multiple encounters between Chinese and Vietnamese naval, coast guard, and even civilian vessels, such as marine surveying ships and fishing vessels. Many of the encounters resulted in the impounding of vessels on one side or the other, leading to diplomatic protests, angry editorials in the official presses, and even street demonstrations in Vietnam. Carl Thayer argues that the aggressive behavior of the Chinese participants is locally guided and not a direct result of Beijing's preferred policy (Thayer 2012). However, these actions along a contested maritime border spurred diplomatic responses and will continue to do so until the matter is satisfactorily resolved by all parties involved.

The natural resources below the surface of this maritime region are the much desired prizes of this contest for sovereignty, but they are not the only strategic considerations. As noted elsewhere, the South China Sea/*Biển Đông* was historically an important segment of transregional maritime trade network that linked trade originating as far north as Okinawa to the east and Indian Ocean trade from the south (Anderson 2011, 93). Today about half of the trade goods shipped by sea worldwide pass through the South China Sea/*Biển Đông* region (Nguyễn 2005, 26). For this reason Washington has shown a strong interest in keeping the shipping lanes out of the hands of a single nation, which is a position that Beijing finds difficult to accept. This conflict therefore holds ramifications for the future of Sino-Vietnamese relations and also plays a

role in shaping interaction between the once dominant power of the region, the U.S., and the increasingly influential traditional power, China.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Regional conflicts and local contestations for political power are often emphasized by modern historians describing the evolution of a firm border between Vietnam and China. However, the perspective one takes on border activity makes all the difference. As the editors of this volume write in the introduction of redefining borders, “the consequences of threats posed by border conflicts accentuates the importance of finding new ways to negotiate (borders’) presentation as positive potentialities based on their past histories as areas of exchange” (Walcott and Johnson, Introduction). The narrative of Sino-Vietnamese relations could be constructed in several alternate ways, focusing on the rise and fall of trade, for example, even at times when the frontier region was a source of anxiety for rulers of both northern and southern regimes. Officially sanctioned trade between the central governments respected the political division at the frontier, whereas unofficial trade among subaltern communities flowed easily through the region when restrictions were lifted. Lastly, cultural exchange and the flow of ideas passed easily across a frontier invisible to most frontier inhabitants. But these ideas, such as Buddhism, would in turn lead to social structures and political practices that reinforced the separation between northern (Chinese) and southern (Vietnamese) polities. The frontier between China and Vietnam has existed simultaneously as a line of division and a contact zone since the late 11th century.

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