

The Ngô Thesis and Minh Hương Evolution: The View from the Sea

©2021 Charles Wheeler

Abstract

John Whitmore's recent study of Ngô (Chinese) communities in fifteenth-century Dai Viet has broad implications for the study of premodern Vietnamese history. While he initially defines Ngô as Chinese, he in fact describes a community developed from a long-term "fusion" of coastal elements that included seafaring Min-speakers but were not limited to them. Whitmore's interest appears to be focused on this community's role in the basic montane–littoral tension he perceives in Đại Việt political history. However, he ends this seminal work by pointing to a "new Ngô community" in Đại Việt history, the Minh Hương, developed from the same "coastal fusion." This offers more than a comparison of two analogous historical communities; it opens the door to a new way of thinking about the function of "Chinese" in Vietnamese history. In this article, I take up Whitmore's challenge and use his model, based on a long-term process of coastal fusion, to develop a preliminary long-term history of the Minh Hương. Emphasizing early modern developments contextualized within the longer stream of Vietnamese history, it shows that the pattern of Minh Hương evolution not only resembles that of the earlier Ngô but also suggests Whitmore correctly perceived a "Ngô" pattern of coastal cultural fusion that suggest a radically different vision of premodern history.

Key words: Ngô, Chinese, Vietnam, Minh Hương, coastal fusion

1. Introduction

When I set out to write this article, I planned to reconsider the evolution of Việt Nam's Minh Hương community from a maritime perspective, aspects of which I have explored in past articles.¹ However, in the process of re-acquainting myself with my old project and profession, I encountered John Whitmore's thought-provoking 2012 article about Sino-Vietnamese "Ngô communities" in Đại Việt, their formation in coastal "fusion" zones, the "montane–littoral, highland–coastal" dynamic this created, and its effect on watershed

¹ These articles, on which this article partly depends, include "Buddhism in the Re-ordering of an Early Modern World: Chinese Missions to Cochinchina in the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of Global History* 3 (2007): 303–24; "Identity and Function in Sino-Vietnamese Piracy: Where Are the Minh Hương?" *Journal of Early Modern History* 16 (2012): 503–21; and "Interests, Institutions, and Identity: Strategic Adaptation and the Ethno-evolution of Minh Hương (Central Vietnam), 16th–19th Centuries," *Itinerario* 39 (2015): 141–66.

events in the kingdom's political history.² I had always accepted the conventional claim that the term “Ngô” 吳 (C: Wu) referred to China and expressed a Việt resolution of resistance against its aggression.³ How surprised I was, then, to find that the name “signified not only the Ming Empire but also the culture that had long populated the lower Red River Delta and maintained links between Đại Việt and its northern neighbour through the long stream of littoral Asia,”⁴ including, of course, the Wu or Ngô region of east-coastal China. Developing from sea-trading Chinese or Sino-indigène coastal communities in the Lower Red River Delta during the Lý 李 dynasty (1009–1225), members of Ngô society rose to political prominence, overthrew the Lý, and created the Trần 陳 (C. Chen) dynasty (1225–1400). This encouraged a highland–coastal dynamic that expressed itself repeatedly throughout the remaining history of Đại Việt, not only in the victory of Lê Lợi and his Lam Sơn army over the Ming invaders and their Lower Delta “Ngô” allies in 1427 but also in the sixteenth-century war between the highland Trịnh–Nguyễn alliance and the coastal Mạc 莫, often labelled “Ngô” in later Việt accounts. Intriguingly, this Ngô society did not vanish with the defeated Mạc, Whitmore argues, but instead assimilated with their Nguyễn 阮 rivals, who had turned on their Trịnh 鄭 overlord in a bid for autonomy during the seventeenth century. During this time, a “new Ngo community came into being (*eventually to be called Minh Hương* 明香, Ming Loyalists), now on the central coast of Việt Nam” under Nguyễn aegis [*italics added*].⁵ According to this formulation, new groups of Sino-indigène “fusion” differ in particulars only; in general, they retained a core Ngô character.

The implications of Whitmore's Ngô thesis are significant to the case of the Minh Hương, and by extension Vietnamese history in general. Conceptually, this proposition moves non-Kinh (that is, non-Vietnamese) communities like the Ngô or Minh Hương from the margins to the center of Vietnamese history. It complicates our whole notion of Việt Nam's relationship with China and the Chinese Overseas in fruitful ways, having reflected history more accurately by blurring the categorical boundaries between them. The significance of the Ngô thesis reveals itself fully when read against Whitmore's recent conceptualization, in collaboration with James Anderson, of a highland “Dong

² John K. Whitmore, “Ngo (Chinese) Communities and Montane–Littoral Conflict in Dai Viet, ca. 1400–1600,” *Asia Major* 27, part 2 (2012): 53–85.

³ This identification of Ngô with China dates to the kingdom of Wu or Ngô (220–280), however, most people associate it with the famous 1428 poem “Bình Ngô Đại Cáo” [平吳大誥] or “Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Ngô” by Nguyễn Trãi—famed scholar, poet, and Lê strategist—in celebration of Lê Lợi's defeat of the Ming dynasty and founding of the Lê dynasty. See Stephen O'Harrow, “Nguyen Trai's 'Bình Ngô Đại Cáo' 平吳大誥 of 1428: The Development of a Vietnamese National Identity,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 10, no. 1 (1979): 159–74.

⁴ Whitmore, “Ngo”: 54.

⁵ Whitmore, “Ngo”: 84.

world”⁶ This renders a very different kind of Vietnamese history in which Vietnamese ethnicity constitutes an ever-repeating synthesis of cultures formed through ever-changing social interactions.⁷ Conceptualizing multiple ethnicities, however construed, as equal agents effectively destabilizes one of the last walls in the fortress of Vietnamese nationalist history. The implications are therefore big. Radical theses this persuasive must be tested.

Here I make a crude start by reconsidering the earliest development of Việt Nam’s Minh Hương community from the perspective of the coastal zone so central to Whitmore’s Ngô thesis.⁸ Minh Hương ethnogenesis developed primarily from the interactions of two main streams of movement: First, the coastal stream of Việt and Ngô expanding south into the ethnically diverse lands of historical Champa to become Nguyễn Cochinchina; and second, the circulation of seafaring diasporic Chinese through the coastal waters, straits, and small seas of Asia’s eastern littoral. In this coastal “fusion” zone, groups combined, networks ramified, and identities changed. By the end of the seventeenth century, this confluence of social streams would produce a powerful merchant-bureaucratic elite comparable to other early modern groups worldwide. Like its Ngô forebears, in its mature form this elite would go on to aid Việt state formation in new territories and help to catalyse Việt political expansion along the coast to the Mekong Delta and Gulf of Siam. This Minh Hương community, decimated by the Tây Sơn cataclysm of the late 1700s, would quickly be resurrected with the rising tide of a new Nguyễn dynasty, with its identity preserved but its constituent functions fundamentally changed. By the 1800s it would be transformed into something more resembling a modern creole minority by the 1800s.⁹ Like the Ngô, it would eventually vanish in all but name.

⁶ See, for starters, James A. Anderson and John K. Whitmore, “The Dong World: A Proposal for Analyzing the Highlands between the Yangzi Valley and the Southeast Asian Lowlands,” *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 44 (2017): 8–71.

⁷ As articulated by Whitmore in his keynote address, John Whitmore Conference, Council on Southeast Asia Studies (CSEAS), Yale University, 16–17 October 2020. Historians have been moving away from this monocultural view of Vietnamese history in studies of other ethnicities for some time now, however, given the complex historical relationship between Việt Nam and China, Whitmore and Anderson’s thesis seems the most provocative. Prior revisionists important here include Keith W. Taylor, “On Being Muonged,” *Asian Ethnicity* 2, no. 1 (2001): 25–34; and Wheeler, “One Region, Two Histories: Cham Precedents in the History of the Hội An Region,” in *Việt Nam: Borderless Histories*, ed. N. Tran and A. Reid (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), pp. 163–93. See also important recent work by John Phan and Michael Churchman.

⁸ I follow Johnson and Earle’s definition of evolution as “processes whereby human societies grew”—as well as declined—“in scale and complexity under a broad range of environmental circumstances” to produce new syntheses. See Allen W. Johnson and Timothy Earle, *The Evolution of Human Societies: From Foraging Group to Agrarian State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 8. Also see Joseph A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (1988; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), esp. p. 9.

⁹ See, for instance, Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạnh (1820-1841): Central Policies and Local Response* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2004), Part One.

Rather than tackle the entire story of the Minh Hương, I focus here on testing the Ngô thesis by examining the original formation of the Minh Hương community up to the mid- seventeenth century. Because of that, the article concentrates on Central Việt Nam where they first developed, and its observations arise from a maritime perspective only. Future discussion of this thesis will hopefully provide much needed complimentary perspectives, in particular from the montane view.¹⁰ . It is my hope that this article will help advance the much needed process of reconsidering the role of so-called Chinese in Vietnamese history, as well as establish some important points of world-historical comparison.

2. The Ngô Precedent: Sino–Indigène Ethnogenesis before the Minh Hương

To understand the original development of the Minh Hương community, it is important to first understand the “theatre of action” in which it developed by reconstructing the major streams of transhumance that defined their social world. At the heart of this theatre lay the Central Coast, by which I mean the coast of Việt Nam’s modern-day Central region, and within which existed Cochinchina and before it Champa. In Cochinchina, the community developed largely from the interactions of a society of seafaring Min Chinese anchored in Fujian and dispersed throughout littoral East/Southeast Asia, and a littoral Việt colonial society bonded by a trans-ecological exchange that served commercial sea trade.¹¹ The two groups interacted along two interconnected streams: one, a stream of large ocean vessels sailing through a “complex of seas” between Nagasaki and Melaka via the Central Coast;¹² the other, an interweaving stream of coasters that connected the riparian, land, and oceanic traffic that constituted littoral East/Southeast Asia. This coastal traffic was important, because it delineated the littoral society inhabiting the off-shore islands, downriver estuaries, and convoluted shores that integrated inland and maritime societies, laying the basis for Whitmore’s “fusion” zone in which Ngô society historically formed.¹³ The Central Coast functioned more like a strait, thanks to the effects of the

¹⁰ The integrated montane–littoral view is important, for like the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Tongking “is not so much the sea between the lands” as it is “the sea among the mountains.” J.R. McNeill, *The Mountains of the Mediterranean World: an Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 12.

¹¹ On the latter characterization, see Wheeler, “Re-thinking the Sea in Vietnamese History: The Littoral Integration of Thuận-Quảng, Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 17 (2006): 123–53. I prefer a more complex composition of integrated ecozones based on Bennet Bronson, but Whitmore’s construction works in this case, so I maintain it in this article.

¹² Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. S. Reynolds (1966, repr. New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 23. A map by Takeshi Hamashita illustrates this effectively, despite overlooking the Gulf of Tongking; see *China, East Asia and the Global Economy: Regional and Historical Perspectives*, ed. L. Grove and M. Selden (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 86.

¹³ This premodern littoral society was an amphibious one, anchored to both shore and sea through waterways and their complimentary roadways. The coast connected them all. Skeptics of a unifying coast in Vietnamese history should consider the Mediterranean, Braudel’s model of unity, which possesses only one great river, the Nile. They were not needed, for the coastal route was “scarcely different than a river.” Braudel,

Paracels shoals, compounded by wind and current patterns, all of which forced ships to hug the coast.¹⁴ These features are not unique to Việt Nam. Indeed, the Cochinchinese coast “must also have looked quite familiar” to seafaring Min, where “the permeable sea mitigated isolation in [a] world of crested valleys” fed by rivers,¹⁵ as did the rest of the Tongking Gulf islands and coast where Min settled.

For our purpose, two stretches of these streams matter most: One flowing overseas between southern Japan and Central Việt Nam through the Taiwan Strait; the other along the coast between Longmen in China and Hà Tiên (once in Cambodia, now in Việt Nam)—the long “S” shaped coastal sea that connected the gulfs of Tongking and Siam via the Central Coast. Through this geographical frame of reference, the sources of Minh Hương genesis, power, decline, and metamorphosis can be understood.

The Minh Hương community evolved within “a complex pattern of interrelationships” that developed in the Tongking Gulf “going back more than two millennia.”¹⁶ Local and long-distance circulation by boat in order to trade or raid existed centuries before 111 BCE, when China’s Han dynasty imposed unified rule over the Gulf of Tongking, including the Red River Delta and downriver coastal estuaries to its south, at least as far as the Thu Bồn River and the island of Cù Lao Chàm.¹⁷ Archaeological evidence and historical documents such as the *Shuijing zhu* make clear that the coastal administrative centers of this new territory of Jiaozhi 交趾 (V: Giao Chỉ) functioned as a string of collection and exchange stations serving the provincial capital via waterways.¹⁸ Commerce was important to Jiaozhi; Han subjects reportedly travelled there “seeking riches from trade.”¹⁹ Those that did, whether they sojourned or stayed, became part of a

Mediterranean, p. 105. Many historical figures commented on this coastal centrality. For more, see Wheeler, “Re-thinking the Sea”: esp. pp. 142–51.

¹⁴ Ibid: pp. 139–40.

¹⁵ Ibid: pp. 142.

¹⁶ Nola Cooke, Li Tana, and James A. Anderson, eds., *The Tongking Gulf Through History* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 3.

¹⁷ Examples of early exchange are now quite numerous, beginning with articles in Cooke *et al.*, *Tongking Gulf*; and Nam C. Kim, *The Origins of Ancient Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Đào Duy Anh’s description of early Han administrative geography makes clear Jiaozhi’s trade basis in *Đất nước Việt Nam qua các đời* [The land of Vietnam through many ages] (Huế: Nxb. Thuận Hoá, 1994), pp. 61–62.

¹⁸ Third century traveler Kang Tai claimed that near the mouth of the Thu Bồn River, the citadel for Xianglin 象林 (V. Tượng Lâm), Jiaozhi’s southernmost district in Early Han times, “exchanged with locals the elephants [象] and woods [林] they trucked by custom.” Li Daoyuan, *Shuijing zhu* [Discourse on the Water Classic], 6th c., repr. *Qinding siku quanshu* (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, [1974]), *juan* 36: p. 31b. Rice was cultivated and “markets and dwellings surrounded” the citadel (*ibid.*, j. 36: pp. 21a). For convenience’s sake, I stick to the name Jiaozhi, though the territory had many names over the centuries of Chinese rule.

¹⁹ Those who returned “came back very wealthy.” Ban Gu. *Hanshu* [Book of Han] (Beijing, Zhongwen shuju, 1962), j. 26B: p. 1670. For more on this era in trade, see Li Tana, “Jiaozhi (Giao Chỉ) in the Han Period Tongking Gulf,” in Cooke *et al.*, *Tongking Gulf*, pp. 39–52.

new fusion of diverse peoples from which a kind of “Han–Việt” society formed.²⁰ Sea trade endured, whatever its vicissitudes.²¹ It attracted traders not only from the north but also from South and Southeast Asia, as evidenced in the circulation of Sogdian, Indo-Scythian, and Indian monks through Jiaozhi as early as the third century CE.²² Trade continued even after local elites, descendants of earlier generations of coastal fusions, ended Chinese rule and established an independent kingdom in the tenth century. However, it did not remain entirely the same.

By the eleventh century CE, political control in the Gulf of Tongking had fragmented into three parts—Song China to the north, Champa in the south, and Đại Việt between them. As the Lý dynasty (1009–1225) built its young kingdom of Đại Việt, Chinese sea-trading began to expand.²³ During China’s early Song era, Min sea traders from Fujian were soon active in Tongking Gulf trade in places that would later matter in Minh Hương history—moving counter-clockwise around the gulf, from Qiongzhou and Xuwen facing the Qiongzhou Strait from northern Hainan Island and the Leizhou Peninsula to Hepu in the east and Longmen Island and Qinzhou to the west near the border with Đại Việt; then, turning south, past the Red River Delta and eventually down the coast, to the coastal estuaries of Đại Việt and the Cochinchinese or Cham Coast where ships crossed the sea east/northeast to Hainan, completing a circle. Growing Song Chinese sea trade stimulated the formation of what Li Tana dubbed a “Jiaozhou Yang” exchange system in the Tongking Gulf, centred at the port of Vân Đồn.²⁴ This stimulated the churning of cultures as well as goods. By the twelfth century, according to Whitmore, a Sino-Vietnamese “Ngô community” emerged along the coast, born from the interaction between inland and maritime streams within coastally oriented “fusion zones.”²⁵ Ngô society grew powerful enough for one its own to seize the Đại Việt throne in 1225, declare the Trần dynasty, and

²⁰ I use “Han–Việt” for the sake of convenience.

²¹ As Wang Gungwu long ago demonstrated in “The Nanhai Trade, a Study of the Early History of Chinese Trade in the South China Sea,” *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31, no. 2 (1958): 1–135.

²² See, for example, Thích Thien-an, *Buddhism and Zen in Vietnam, in Relation to the Development of Buddhism in Asia* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1975), pp. 21–53.

²³ On early Đại Việt sea trade, start with Shiro Momoki, “Dai Viet and the South China Sea Trade,” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12 (1999): 1–34; Li Tana, “A View from the Sea: Perspectives on the Northern and Central Vietnamese Coast,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37 (2006): 83–102; and John K. Whitmore, “The Rise of the Coast: Trade, State and Culture in Early Dai Viet,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37 (2006): 103–22; articles by Anderson, Li Tana, and Whitmore in Cooke *et al.*, *Tongking Gulf*; and Anderson, “Commissioner Li and Prefect Huang: Sino-Vietnamese Frontier Trade Networks and Political Alliances in the Southern Song,” in *China’s Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier Over Two Millennia*, ed. J.A. Anderson and J.K. Whitmore (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 29–51.

²⁴ On the Jiaozhou Yang, see Li, “View from the Sea.” On its effects on coastal power, see Whitmore, “Rise of the Coast.”

²⁵ Whitmore, “Ngô”: 54, 85.

transform the lower delta to help facilitate the “rise of the coast” as a zone of political power. This explains why the de facto seat of power shifted from the Lý capital Thăng Long downriver to Tức Mặc 即墨.²⁶ By the thirteenth century a fundamental political tension had developed in the young Việt realm between montane and littoral elites drawn “Pushmi-Pullyu” style toward their respective inland and maritime sources of wealth.²⁷ This scenario is important because it appears to have established a general pattern or precedent for later Sino-Vietnamese communities that similarly formed in littoral zones of cross-cultural fusion, like the Minh Hương, as Whitmore hypothesizes.

A similar dynamic affected Đại Việt’s older political and commercial rival, Champa, which inhabited the Central Coast, where centuries later the Minh Hương first formed.²⁸ The proximity of trade generated a long tradition of “raid and trade” as a basic function of the coast’s historical political economy in ways that recall Robert Antony’s studies of the northern gulf.²⁹ Aspects of this economy would endure long after Vietnamese conquered, colonized, and culturally converted it. Historical and archaeological evidence underscore its ancient existence: Before Đại Việt and Champa, Jiaozhi and Linyi 林邑 (V. Lâm Ấp) competed to control the Central Coast.³⁰ Distant sea raiders, coastal competitors, and overland bands participated in this predatory economy, suggesting that Whitmore’s cultural fusion zone had very deep roots. This was especially true for Cù Lao Chàm, the island way-station that fisherfolk and sea traders of all sizes had frequented since before the Han conquest.³¹ In this regard, the Cham political economy reflected a generic trait of the Tongking Gulf society during the Jiaozhou Yang era.³² As in Đại Việt, engagement with

²⁶ Ibid: 56.

²⁷ Ibid: 59, 61. On the Pushmi-Pullyu, see *The Story of Dr Doolittle*.

²⁸ See Wheeler, “One Region”; and “Re-thinking the Sea”: 134–38.

²⁹ On “trade and raid” along the Cham Coast, see Kenneth R. Hall, “The Politics of Plunder in the Cham Realm of Early Vietnam,” in *Art and Politics in Southeast Asian History: Six Perspectives*, ed. Robert van Neil (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i, Center for Southeast Asian Studies), pp. 5–32. Among Robert Antony’s works, see esp. “Violence and Predation on the Sino-Vietnamese Frontier, 1450–1850,” *Asia Major* 27, no. 2 (2014): 87–114.

³⁰ On the importance of old Cham patterns to early modern Vietnamese rule. see Wheeler, “Re-thinking”: 135–36; and “Maritime Subversions and Socio-political Formations in Vietnamese History: A Look from the Marginal Center (*mien Trung*),” in *New Perspectives on the History and Historiography of Southeast Asia: Continuing Explorations*, ed. M. Aung-Thwin and K. Hall (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 142–52; and Wheeler, “One Region,” pp. 185–86.

³¹ Before 1000 CE, see Wheeler, “Cross-cultural Trade”, pp. 117–18, 121–24; after 1000, see Nguyễn Văn Kim and Trần Văn Mạnh, “Cù Lao Chàm trong không gian biển Chăm thế kỷ XI-XV,” [Culao Cham in Cham maritime space during the 11th–15th centuries] *Khoa học xã hội Việt Nam*, số 1 (2020): 59–74.

³² On signs of early predation along the northern Sino-Vietnamese gulf, see Li Qingxin, “16–17 shiji Yuexi ‘Zhu zei’, haidao yu ‘Xi zei’” [The “pearl thieves,” sea bandits, and “western thieves” of 16th–17th century western Guangdong], *Haiyangshi yanjiu* 2 (2011): 122–24. On Chinese pirates in 11th–12th century Champa, see Wang Huazhen, “Songdai Huaren haidao zai Yuenan: Lian hengxing haishang di Alaboren ye gan dalje” [Song-era

the larger streams of coastal and sea traffic also encouraged cultural fusions, not only with Min and other Chinese but also with Vietnamese, who settled in the very downriver estuary ports where descendant Minh Hương would be most active.³³ Indeed, archaeological evidence suggests that coastal fusions occurred, especially in the northern regions of historical Champa that had once been part of Jiaozhi, and were nothing new when Việt settled the downriver estuaries of the Central Coast in the early second millennium CE.³⁴ One wonders whether Min-Cham and/or Min-Việt fusions had already begun to form here as well, given the migration of Southern Song refugees to Champa and Đại Việt in the 1270s was a possible precedent of the Ming Loyalists of the 1600s.³⁵ The Min of Fujian had already been long active in the sea trade of Champa by this time. It seems likely that Ngô from Đại Việt were also active here, for the sixteenth-century historian Dương Văn An claimed that, during the reign of Trần Nhân Tông (1279–84), “anyone who traded anywhere had to follow the sea routes” which, for much of Đại Việt’s trade, meant travelling down the Central Coast.³⁶ About the same time, the first evidence of settlers from Đại Việt appeared in the historical record, not long after the Cham first ceded Thuận Hóa—Ô Châu in early Đại Việt or Indrapura in Champa—to the Trần dynasty in 1306.³⁷

This coastal traffic and immigration most likely animated movement along the parallel series of watersheds running along Đại Việt’s coast, where upriver highland ethnic communities interacted with downriver and coastal communities and every combination between them, while in southern Champa highland communities mixed similarly with Cham and other Asian merchants.³⁸ However this happened, interactions of littoral segments of three societies—Min Chinese, Việt, and Cham—intensified as the Jiaozhou Yang system flourished. Then, as the fifteenth century progressed, the Cham polity began

Chinese pirates in Việt Nam: Even the Sea Arabs dared to raid], Sina Finance online, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/2017-11-05/doc-ifynmvuq8672285.shtml> (accessed 5 March 2021).

³³ Wheeler, “One Region”: pp. 182, 185–86.

³⁴ This is evident, for example, in the mutations of Han-style ceramics unearthed in a prehistoric Sa Huỳnh zone of Central Vietnam (Wheeler, “Cross-cultural Trade,” pp. 109–10). For the rich history of sea trade and cultural fusion during the Sa Huỳnh and Sa Huỳnh–Cham period of the Central Coast’s history, see *ibid.*, pp. 94–109. For more on Sa Huỳnh and its relationship to trade, see esp. works by Lâm Thị Mỹ Dung and William Southworth.

³⁵ See, for example, Hok-lam Chan, “Chinese Refugees in Annam and Champa at the End of the Sung Dynasty,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 7 (1966): 10–19.

³⁶ In the 1962 edition of Dương Văn An, *Ô Châu cận lục* [A recent record of Ô Châu] (Huế: Nxb. Thuận Hóa, 2001), pp. 71.

³⁷ Huỳnh Công Bá, “Tìm hiểu công cuộc khai khẩn Bắc Quảng Nam dưới thời Trần (Qua tư liệu địa phương)” [Investigation into the great task of opening the region of northern Quang Nam in the time of Tran (through local sources)], *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử*, số 2 (1998): 46–49.

³⁸ For an example, see Kenneth R. Hall, “Revisionist Study of Cross-Cultural Commercial Competition on the Vietnam Coastline in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries and Its Wider Implications,” *Journal of World History* 24, no. 1 (2013): 71–105.

its inexorable decline, in part due to Đại Việt's appropriation of most of the country's trade and later its territory. Nonetheless, it had established an enduring precedent in the region thanks to its longtime position in Sino-Indian sea trade, and the deep structure of Central Coast society endured.

To the north, the power of the coastal Ngô survived the Trần dynasty, which fell to the Hồ, another powerful Ngô clan, in 1400. Soon after, however, the new Ming court intervened. It deposed the usurper but went on to recover, in its eyes, the renegade province of Jiaozhi to its proper place within the Chinese empire. In this endeavor, it was able to rely on Ngô support, concentrated in the Red River Delta region of Đông Kinh and along the coast.³⁹ Whitmore pointed out that resistance to the Ming coalesced around a mountain chief from Thanh Hóa named Lê Lợi, and aimed "to be anti-Ming, anti-Ngo, anti-Tran/Chen, and anti-coastal," opposing "the shared community and loyalties of this coastal zone."⁴⁰ It would appear that the triumph of these mountain elites was somewhat short-lived, however, for Whitmore also pointed out that, by the 1460s, Ngô elites were again in the ascendant in the Đại Việt court.⁴¹ The Lê campaigns of the 1470s, striking simultaneously at both the upriver mountains and coast, seem only to have ensured a century-long struggle between mountain and coastal elites, this time in a much-expanded domain.

Already, we see a constant re-infusion and recombination of Ngô and newly transplanted Chinese expatriates (either Min from Fujian or Min descendents inhabiting Guangdong and the northern Gulf) on the one hand and Việt, Cham, and other ethnic groups on the other. This process would continue up to the ethnogenesis of the Minh Huong and beyond.

3. Coastal Competition and Ngô Fusion

From the perspective of the coast, three events signalled the collapse of the status quo: first, in 1471, Đại Việt conquered nearly all of the Central Coast and destroyed its long-time rival Champa as a political and commercial competitor; second, around 1505, the Việt seaport of Vân Đồn disappeared and the Cham port of Vijaya declined, both due to the collapse of the Jiaozhou Yang system; and third, Đại Việt subsequently descended into internecine war between littoral- and montane-oriented warlord clans, which began with the Trần uprisings of the 1510s leading to the fall of the Lê house and rise of the coastally-oriented Mạc in 1527.⁴² After a long contest, montane forces led by the Trịnh clan and

³⁹ Historical regions important here like Đông Kinh, Thanh-Nghệ, and Thuận-Quảng are best explained in Keith W. Taylor, "Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region," *Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 4 (1998): 949–78.

⁴⁰ Whitmore, "Ngô": 66.

⁴¹ Whitmore, Keynote address, 2020.

⁴² Keith Taylor's regionalist perspective describes this struggle well in "Surface Orientations": 957–58.

their Nguyễn allies defeated the “Ngô pirates” led by the Mạc and in 1592 restored the old dynasty.⁴³

The sixteenth century has long been considered as a kind of dark age in Vietnamese history and consequently dismissed, particularly so in the case of the Central Coast, a situation that reinforces an uncritical interpretation of history through the eyes of Nguyễn-dynasty historiographers as the progenitors of Cochinchina’s power, wealth, and culture.⁴⁴ However, Brian Zottoli makes a persuasive case for some continuity in social, economic, and even political order in sixteenth-century Đại Việt’s southern territories of Thuận Hóa and Quảng Nam, where the territory of Cochinchina took form.⁴⁵ There, in 1555, two years before Lord Trịnh appointed Nguyễn Hoàng the governor of Thuận Hóa, the author and Mạc official Dương Văn An completed a survey of the territory’s 66 villages that found it a land “rich with rice paddy, carts used for transport, and boats travelling along the rivers.” Product lists provide evidence of aquaculture, riziculture, and foraging and collecting from the mountains to the sea, and local commodities such as woven silk, pottery, incense, tea, furniture, and notably, a strategic good like saltpetre.⁴⁶ Perhaps more significant are the lists that include raw materials for boat and ship building, such as hardwoods, resins, hemp rope, rattan mats, and ropes.⁴⁷ References to river and coastal travel are numerous.⁴⁸ In the coastal lowlands, Duong describes a culturally mixed population common to littoral societies, where women donned “Cham clothing” and men sported “the customary Tàu [艚] umbrellas,”⁴⁹ a reference to Sinitic culture.⁵⁰ Whether this refers to Ngô, Min, or Tang Chinese (see next section), these men belonged to the longer coastal stream of the western gulf who

⁴³ Lê-Trịnh and Nguyễn historians often referred to the Mạc as *giặc* 賊—variously translated “pirates,” “bandits,” “thieves,” “traitors,” etc.—a name they also applied to each other.

⁴⁴ One exception is Nola Cooke, “Regionalism and Nguyen Rule in Seventeenth-Century Dang Trong (Cochinchina),” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 29, no. 1 (1998): 132-44, which was written without access to Dương Văn An’s study. “The more we understand this [Central Coast] region, the more difficult it is to accept the notion that it lay completely dormant for centuries before Nguyễn Hoàng reintroduced it to the current of history” (“One Region,” pp. 179).

⁴⁵ Brian A. Zottoli, “Reconceptualizing Southern Vietnamese History from the 15th to 18th Centuries: Competition along the Coasts from Guangdong to Cambodia,” PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2011. This affirms my previous contention that “no port”—or state such as Nguyễn Cochinchina—“could have developed without prior population to build and support it” (Wheeler, “One Region”: p. 169).

⁴⁶ Dương Văn An, *Ô Châu cận lục*, pp. 72.

⁴⁷ For example, see *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 27, 30–33.

⁴⁸ For examples see *Ibid.*, pp. 11–19, 21–28, 44–48, 56, 58, 60–63, 68, 71, 73, 75, 76, 83, 85–86, 106, 111.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* For the original Chinese characters, see *Ô Châu cận lục* (Hà Nội, 1997), pp. 48–49 (romanized Vietnamese colloquial translation), p. 38a (original Sino-Vietnamese script). The custom of using Chinese umbrellas was prevalent in other parts of the South China Sea, like Java or Melaka.

⁵⁰ Bùi Lương translates the original Sino-Vietnamese phrase—*bắc nhân* 北人, or *bãi rén* in Mandarin pronunciation—as “Chinese [Tàu].” See *Ô Châu cận lục* (Saigon: Văn Hóa Châu Á, 1961), p. 42.

presumably participated in Whitmore's coastal fusion, whether as fisherfolk, petty traders, pirates, or longtime Việt-Cham inhabitants. Ngô had settled along the Central Coast, and many of them, including Mạc supporters, remained in Thuận-Quảng after the Nguyễn asserted control over the territories. Whitmore, following Zottoli, goes even further, suggesting "that there was a gradual merger of the Mac/Mo and Nguyen clans in this southern territory (information later obscured by the Nguyen dynasty) through the second half of the century."⁵¹ If so, the emerging Nguyễn elite probably assimilated elements of Mạc society, just as Ngô had previously absorbed Sino-Vietnamese elements. The identity or function of the region's inhabitants, the undercurrents of everyday economic life continued to flow throughout sixteenth century Cham country, despite the violence of warlord rivals. Thus, coastal fusions involving Ngô continued along the Central Coast throughout the sixteenth century.

The presence of littoral warfare in the conflicts of the sixteenth century indirectly supports Zottoli's claim of regional continuity as it suggests the return of competition for coastal control that had been endemic to the Central Coast during the heyday of Việt-Cham rivalry.⁵² We see here the evolution of this rivalry over two millennia, first between Jiaozhi and Linyi, then Đại Việt and Champa, then Trịnh-Nguyễn and Mạc, and finally between Trịnh and Nguyễn. The coast functioned as a core zone of violent, exchange, and other forms of interaction during the sixteenth century (not to mention the seventeenth): Nineteenth-century court historians of the Nguyễn dynasty reported that local inhabitants "crossed over to the Mạc clan" to "lead bandit raids" and "conduct Mac forces ... along the coastal way."⁵³ Boats played an important role in the outcome of the "montane restoration"—as Whitmore dubbed it—of the Lê by the Trịnh, just as they would in the Trịnh-Nguyễn wars a century later. Lord Kiểm had dispatched Nguyễn Hoàng and his forces to Thuận-Quảng to set up outposts in the coastal estuaries in order to drive out the Mạc, who were "following the coastal passage [north from Thuận Hóa] to raid Thanh-Nghệ", a Trịnh stronghold.⁵⁴ Sources like the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (Complete annals of Đại Việt), completed in 1697 under Trịnh auspices, describe numerous combined land and sea battles between Mạc and Trịnh -Nguyễn forces up to 1592, when

⁵¹ Zottoli, "Reconceptualizing Southern Vietnamese History," chaps. 3–5, cited in Whitmore, "Ngô": 84.

⁵² I explore the centrality of littoral warfare in the sixteenth and seventeenth century "Boats and the People They Made: Ships and the Social Flows that Shaped Nguyen Cochinchina (Central Vietnam), 16th-18th Centuries," unpublished paper, 2011. For a definition of littoral warfare, see an example in Milan Vego, "On Littoral Warfare," *Naval War College Review* 68, no. 2 (2015): 1–39.

⁵³ Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam thực lục tiến biên* (Hà Nội: Nxb. Giáo dục, 2002), quyển 1: pp. 27, 28, 31 [hereafter *ĐNTLTB*].

⁵⁴ *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (1697, quốc ngữ translation Hà Nội, Nxb. Khoa học xã hội, 1993), p. 131 [hereafter *ĐVSKTT*]; *ĐNTL*, p. 30.

Lord Hoàng's marine forces ejected the Mạc clan from Thang Long, Đại Việt's capital,⁵⁵ though Mạc remnants elsewhere continued to resist until 1600.⁵⁶ That same year, Nguyễn Hoang made his famous move, "successfully bringing all the large *thuyền ghê* [ships] and their officers under his command and took them down the coastal route straight to Thuận Hóa," where he set about laying the foundations of later Cochinchina.⁵⁷ It appears that both the outcome and aftermath of the Trịnh–Mạc war were settled in Đại Việt's coastal zone.

The continued dynamism of the Central Coast is evident in sources relating to exchange through piracy and smuggling as well. In 1555, the same year that Duong Văn An reportedly completed his survey, a band of Portuguese landed on Cùlao Chàm, the important island mentioned above. There, they stumbled upon "the bodies of sixty-two men and many others besides," over which a banner written in Chinese announced: "Let any ship or junk stopping here take on its water and depart immediately, weather permitting or not, on pain of suffering the penalty paid by these wretches."⁵⁸ Perhaps this mass execution was the work of the Mạc governor, eager to assert dominion over the strategic island and protect the streams of commerce that financed his lord's struggle to prevail over his foes. The point is, piracy hadn't disappeared from the western gulf, nor had offshore traffic, onshore trade, coastal society, or the presence of a political order, if not a state. The continuity of society from Lê to Mạc to Nguyễn along the Central Coast must be considered when hypothesizing Minh Hương origins.

4. Militarized Commerce, Tang Colonies, and Entrepreneurial *Chúa*

Curiously, situations in Đại Việt like the ones described above coincided with a series of events in littoral Asia that brought the conditions for Minh Hương ethnogenesis to fruition. Dramatic change in Chinese foreign trade policy that blurred the lines between raid, trade, and smuggling encouraged a new form of militarized commerce throughout East and Southeast Asia. This new form of trade was served, in part, by a transoceanic network of Sino-indigène merchant colonies named, like the Ngô, after an ancient dynasty, the Tang 唐. Once established in the coastal ports of littoral Asia, Tang colonies provided a source of offshore wealth that could be translated into political power for upstart warlords like the sixteenth-century Mạc and seventeenth-century Nguyễn, as well as Central Coast

⁵⁵ For references to littoral battles between the Trịnh–Nguyễn alliance and the Mạc before 1592, see *ĐVSKTT*, pp. 62, 96, 114, 130, 132, 136, 139, 141, 145–47, 151–52, 163, 175–77, 180, 307–308, 310. This littoral aspect is also well documented in other Vietnamese classics, which feature in Wheeler, "Boats."

⁵⁶ *ĐVSKTT*, pp. 184, 187, 190, 192, 199, 201, 208, 210–11.

⁵⁷ *ĐNTL*, pp. 34–5; *ĐVSKTT*, pp. 207–8, 307–8; Lê Quý Đôn, *Phủ biên tạp lục* [Desultory notes from the frontier] (1776; *quốc ngữ* translation with original Chinese characters, Saigon: Phủ Quốc vụ khanh đặc trách Văn hóa, 1972–73), vol. 1: p. 140.

⁵⁸ Fernão Mendes Pinto, *The Travels of Mendes Pinto*, trans. and ed. Rebecca D. Catz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 507.

elites including many Ngô. From Tang society, via its integration into Đại Việt coastal society, Minh Hương first took form.

By the turn of the sixteenth century, as conflict erupted in Đại Việt, subversive forms of trade and accumulation emerged throughout the East/Southeast Asian littoral in response to the Ming court's ongoing ban on maritime commerce. The lucrative profits from high-demand contraband inspired local fisherfolk, officials, merchants, and gentry to conspire with interregional networks of pirates, privateers, smugglers, and other military entrepreneurs. Together they formed a large shadow economy at sea in which no state, social group, or individual held a monopoly of power. In time, large trade syndicates fielded armed fleets manned by seafarers of diverse origins, like Min from Fujian, as well as the descendants of Min migrants in the Gulf of Tongking.⁵⁹ Indeed, raiding and smuggling grew so large that they continued to thrive after the Ming court rescinded its ban in 1567. This owed much to China's continued exclusion of Japan, which sustained the offshore Sino-Japanese raid and trade economy that in turn fostered Tang commerce and society.⁶⁰

I had always thought the name "Tang" first appeared sometime during the sixteenth century, when Min traders began to form permanent colonies in East and Southeast Asian seaports. In fact, the name is much older than that, at least in Vietnam. Nguyễn Thiên Túng, glossing fifteenth-century scholar Nguyễn Trãi's *Ức Trai tập*, writes: "Tangren are Liang Guang merchants that live in *phố* towns [of stone buildings]." ⁶¹ Whether these Tang merchants belonged to the dispersed community of sea trading Min inhabiting the northern gulf is not yet clear. In any case, the name does not appear to be all that common yet, although further research may prove otherwise. Sometime during the 1500s, however, the name came to refer to growing fleets of Min Chinese in cahoots with the Woko. A Ming admiral named Hou Jigao 侯繼高, in his late-sixteenth century reports on anti-piracy campaigns in the Lower Yangtze region, noted instances of Woko fleets followed by Tang ships—in one campaign near Korea, as many as 2000.⁶² Their range extended into the Tongking Gulf, as a 1577 report on a pirate attack on a merchant

⁵⁹ For examples, see Lin Renchuan, *Mingmo Qingchu siren haishang maoyi* (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1987), pp. 40–84; Ng Chin-keong, "Gentry-Merchants and Peasant-Peddlers: The Responses of the South Fukienese to the Offshore Trading Opportunities, 1522–1566," *Nanyang University Journal* 7 (1973): 161–75; and Zhang Guangnan, *Zhongguo haidao shi* (Shanghai: Huadong ligong daxue chubanshe, 1998), pp. 117–209. I borrow the term "armed trade syndicates" from Lin Renchuan. The term "military entrepreneur" comes from Thomas W. Gallant, "Brigandage, Piracy, Capitalism, and State-Formation: Transnational Crime from a Historical World-Systems Perspective," in *States and Illegal Practices*, ed. J. McC. Heyman (Oxford: Berg, 1999), esp. pp. 27–39.

⁶⁰ In addition to Lin Renchuan, see So, Kwan-sai, *Japanese Piracy in the Ming China During the 16th Century* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1975), esp. p. 29, and "The Rising Tempo of Smuggling," pp. 41–72.

⁶¹ Nguyễn Trãi, *Ức Trai tập*, in *Nguyễn Trãi toàn tập* (Hà Nội: Nxb. Văn Hoá Thông tin, 2001), pp. 744–45. Special thanks to Li Tana for sharing this with me.

⁶² Hou Jigao, *Quan-Zhe bingzhi* (Jinan: Qi Lu shushe, 1995), j. 31: pp. 172, 174, 177.

ship illustrates.⁶³ Whatever its history, the name Tang changed its meaning around this time to refer specifically to Min sea traders.

By the early sixteenth century, however, self-sustaining settlements of Min-speaking Chinese emerged, creating a stable network of colonies that people called Tang Streets or Tangren jie 唐人街. Japanese references to Tang settlements appeared in 1523 and grew more frequent; as the sixteenth century progressed, sea commerce surged, and merchant colonies proliferated.⁶⁴ They were aided by powerful coastal lords in places like Satsuma and Kyushu who discovered interest in promoting the Sino-Japanese smuggling economy at sea they shared with the Tang syndicates. They granted charters to Tang (most if not all of them Min Chinese, and increasingly Min-Japanese) to build settlements in the harbours where they were based. Once established, noted one observer, these Chinese tended to “marry Japanese women, and raise children there.” They formed their communities around “the great boulevard named Great Tang” (街名大唐) and the “Tang markets” (唐市) where “those who have capital band together with Japanese seafarers to conduct trade.”⁶⁵ The Tang colonies that these military entrepreneurs and their syndicates built developed in ways that resemble standard models of community and trade formation in merchant diasporas. Informal institutions particular to Chinese communal formation—like kin, native-place, or deity temple networks—aided the organization of long-distance carrier trade networks that in turn sustained the colonies themselves.⁶⁶ This affected not only the new transoceanic community but also the host societies that harbored them, for Tang society and trade had created “a large zone of net introversion.”⁶⁷

⁶³ Ibid, p. 177.

⁶⁴ Fu Yiling, *Ming–Qing shidai shangren ji shangye ziben* [Merchants and mercantilism in the Ming–Qing era] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1956), p. 125.

⁶⁵ Quoted from Iwao Seiichi, “Li Tan, Chief of the Chinese Residents at Hirado,” *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko* 17 (1958): 32–34. See also Fu Yiling, *Ming–Qing*, pp. 116, 121; Iwao Seiichi, “Japanese Foreign Trade in the 16th and 17th Century,” *Acta Asiatica* 30 (1976): 5; Lin Renchuan, “Fukien’s Private Sea Trade in the 16th and 17th Centuries,” in *Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, ed. E.B. Vermeer (Leiden: Brill, 1990), p. 182.

⁶⁶ For helpful examples, on Japan see the articles in Dai Yifeng et al., *Jindai lu Ri huaqiao yu Dongya yanhai diqu jiaoyituan: Changqi huashang “taiyihao” wenshu yanjiu* [Chinese sojourners in modern Japan and the trading syndicates that followed Southeast Asian sea routes: research on the Nagasaki merchants’s “Taiyi hao” documents] (Xiamen: Xiamen daxue chubanshe, 1994); for Cochinchina, Li Tana, Chapter Three of *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998); and Wheeler, “Missionary Buddhism in a Post-Ancient World: Monks, Merchants, and Colonial Expansion in Seventeenth Century Cochinchina (Vietnam),” in *Secondary Cities and Urban Networking in the Indian Ocean Realm, c. 1000–1800*, ed. K. R. Hall (Lexington Books, 2008), pp. 208–16.

⁶⁷ That is, “an area within which internal contacts are, overall ... more numerous, dense or durable than external ones.” Peregrine Horden, “Mediterranean Excuses: Historical Writing on the Mediterranean since Braudel,” *History and Anthropology* 16, no. 1 (2005): 30.

As for the host society, by 1600 Lord Nguyễn had grown able to mobilize his followers and fleet in a bid for autonomy along the Central Coast. His success, and the successes of his descendants, lay partly in a commercial strategy, based on precedent, that enabled the new state to tap into Asia's sea trade, both as a source of revenue and as a way to secure access to arms markets in places like Macau.⁶⁸ Perhaps, by committing to the Central Coast, Lord Hoàng realized that his strategic position was not all that different from the Japanese daimyō across the sea. Both used overseas commerce as an offshore source of commercial capital that they could convert into sufficient political capital to resist the subjugating efforts of larger domestic rivals and centralizing monarchs. In this, the Nguyễn would succeed where their sea-trading daimyo counterparts failed. Before breaking out on his own, however, Nguyễn Hoàng developed a relationship with Japan's government under Hideyoshi Toyotomi, who wished to quash his sea-trading daimyō rivals (people just like Nguyễn Hoàng) by centralizing maritime trade via the *Shuinsen* or "Red Seal" licensing system.⁶⁹ Under this system, the Japanese government annually awarded ship merchants permits to trade in places like Cochinchina.⁷⁰ Once ships arrived in the Vietnamese domain, entrepreneurs encountered, among others, Tang Chinese ready to trade. This policy not only secured Lord Nguyễn the wealth he needed to "resist the Trịnh" and "build an everlasting fortune," as his nineteenth-century descendants claimed;⁷¹ but also, by patronizing the Tang, the policy cultivated an environment not unlike that which had nurtured Ngô society in earlier times.

While explicit references to a Tang Street (C. Tangrenjie 唐人街) in Cochinchina appear in documents written as early as the early- to mid-seventeenth century, it seems more likely that they developed in tandem with the Tang colonies that grew all over East and Southeast Asia during the late 1500s.⁷² Sources confirm other Tang Streets existed in other Cochinchinese seaport towns. They acted as secondary, regional centres serving Hội An both as clearinghouses for imports and exports and as centres for Cochinchina's large

⁶⁸ Pierre-Yves Manguin, *Les Portugais sur les côtes du Viêt-nam et du Campa: Contribution à l'étude des routes maritimes et des relations commerciales d'après les sources portugaises* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1972), p. 45. Thanks to Zottoli, we must now question whether Nguyễn trade strategy derived from a Mạc model.

⁶⁹ Patrizia Carloti, "The Zheng's Maritime Power in the International Context of the Seventeenth Century Far Eastern Seas: The Rise of a 'Centralized Piratical Organization' and Its Gradual Development into an Informal State," *Ming Qing Yanjiu* (1996): 32.

⁷⁰ See chart in Ralph L. Innes, "Trade between Japan and Central Vietnam in the Seventeenth Century: The Domestic Impact," unpublished ms, 1988, pp. 12–13 (courtesy of the author).

⁷¹ From the alleged deathbed testament of Nguyễn Hoàng, in *ĐNTLTB*, p. 37.

⁷² Wheeler, "One Region," pp. 167–71; "Missionary Buddhism": 208–16.

coastal carrier trade. In addition to Hội An, early colonies during this phase include Thanh Hà, Nước Mặn, and Vũng Lắm.⁷³

As in Japan, Tang communities governed themselves informally. The Nguyễn court ruled foreign merchants indirectly through a headman or *kapitan* system that confined merchants to ethnic enclaves and assigned a reputable individual from among the quarter's merchants to govern them on Lord Nguyễn's behalf. In exchange for this autonomy, headmen accepted the responsibility of ensuring the steady flow of customs duties and other periodic tributes and taxes from their community to the Vietnamese court. Given their autonomy and control over tax collection and local governance, the sea trade that moved through Cochinchina's ports placed elders of Hội An's Tang quarter in a powerful position. Institutions helped them to secure these growing interests.⁷⁴ Common cultural institutions reinforced the merchant-monarch relationship in Cochinchina, as part of the Nguyễn strategy to maintain trade relations and control Cochinchina's foreign merchants through informal, parochial ties that encouraged kinship through intermarriage or adoption, with members of both the Japanese and Tang merchant communities.⁷⁵ This included religious means like Buddhist or deity temples.⁷⁶

By enhancing control over this plural society, the court did three things. It indirectly linked the coastal zone with those in other parts of the Asian maritime, most importantly for our purpose with Fujian and southern Japan, forming commercial relationships that in time became political. It secured greater control over its polyglot population of Kinh Việt, Cham, Tang, Min, various highland ethnicities, and any fusion in-between. And, unintentionally perhaps, it also encouraged the very "cultural fusion zone" that Whitmore describes for the Ngô. After all, Ngô were a part of it.

This process of cultural fusion through institutions is evident in a 1640 temple inscription located in a mountain grotto Buddhist temple called Tam Thái 三台 north of Hội An, which contains the name Phổ Đà Sơn 普陀山, "Mountain of the Merciful One," a reference to Quan Âm (C. Guanyin 觀音) or Avalokitesvara.⁷⁷ It also suggests the island of Putuoshan 普陀山 (V. Phổ Đà Sơn) off the central Chinese coast, one of China's four holy Buddhist mountains and a long-time hub for pirates, smugglers, and merchants, as well

⁷³ Đỗ Bang, *Phố cảng Thuận-Quảng thế kỷ 17 và 18* [The ports of Thuận-Quảng in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries] (Huế: Nxb. Thuận Hóa, 1996), pp. 8–56, 105–57, 152–58; and on Vũng Lắm, A. Laborde "La province de Phu Yen," *Bulletin des Amies du Vieux Huế* 16 (1929): 248.

⁷⁴ For a description, see Ch'en Ching-ho, *Historical Notes on Hoi-an (Faifo)* (Carbondale: Center for Vietnamese Studies, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1974), pp. 34–55; Li, *Nguyen Cochinchina*, Chapter 3; and Wheeler, "Buddhism": 307–18.

⁷⁵ Li, *Nguyen Cochinchina*, p. 65.

⁷⁶ Wheeler, "Buddhism," and "Missionary Buddhism."

⁷⁷ "Phổ Đà Sơn Linh Trung Phật," [Putuo Mountain channels the Buddha], "stele rubbing, Hán-Nôm Institute, Hanoi, no. 12623. See also Albert Sallet, "Les montagnes de marbre," *Bulletin des Amis a Vieux Hue* année 24, no. 1 (1924): 131–33.

as monks.⁷⁸ It also played a critical role in serving as an offshore base for Sino-Japanese trade, just as Hội An had done. The name is used elsewhere along the Chinese littoral, suggesting that the name “Phổ Đà Sơn” was chosen to associate the temple with a network of Quán Âm temples that paralleled interstate, cross-cultural networks of Tang traders. As evidenced in the inscription, which lists Japanese, Vietnamese, and two “Ming Dynasty” Chinese benefactors, temples like Tam Thái functioned as a trans-cultural medium that bonded a variety of people across social, cultural, and political boundaries. These alliances were reinforced through marriage, as we see in the names of the women who made up most of the inscription’s patron list. The majority appear to be Vietnamese, although the nature of Chinese characters makes it impossible to be certain. We can tell, however, that these women had married not only elite Vietnamese males but Japanese and Chinese merchants, too; trailing each woman’s name is that of her husband, like an ever-watchful patriarch.⁷⁹ Here we see temples beginning to provide the institutional nexus for creating a reinforcing web of relationships that wedded the interests of Tang community and Nguyễn society in Cochinchina. In this way, temple-based institutions created the social space in which expatriate Chinese and Japanese could interact with local Kinh and even Ngô elites in ways that suggest the fusion zones theorized by Whitmore.

In any case, the phenomenon of so-called Woko piracy and the underlying Chinese ban on trade with Japan established important precedents affecting Minh Hương evolution that are worth consideration. Like their European counterparts, the sixteenth-century sea predators of littoral East Asia matured to combine the functions of privateering, piracy, and trade. This combination structured an anarchic trans-state society of maritime Chinese powerful enough, in the seventeenth century, to challenge the agrarian behemoth onshore for autonomy as an independent regime, and nearly to succeed. Our fascination with their failed enterprise perhaps explains in part why we have been slow to analyse the success of these sea-trading Sino-indigène Tang in building a viable maritime state in partnership with the Nguyễn, a state that lasted for over a century, thanks to the opportunities that the coastal “fusion zone” provided the predecessors of the seafaring Ming Loyalists who would become the Minh Hương.

5. Tang Networks Assume Ming Loyalist Identity

⁷⁸ On the temples of Putuoshan, see Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 353–406. On the Four Sacred Mountains, see Yü, “P’u-t’o Shan: Pilgrimage and the Creation of the Chinese Potalaka,” in *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*, ed. S. Naquin and Chun-fang Yü (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 190. On trade and smuggling, see Lin Renchuan, *Mingmo Qinchu*, pp. 140–1; Yü, *Kuan-yin*, pp. 373.

⁷⁹ “Phổ Đà Sơn Linh Trung Phật.”

The most consequential of these Tang entrepreneurs in Cochinchina belonged to the clan syndicate that produced the famed merchant warlord Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga).⁸⁰ A product of the Tang community in Japan, he brought to fruition his family's trajectory from essentially a smuggling and piracy syndicate to a merchant empire, one that incorporated the elements of both entrepreneurial seafarer and coastal warlord.⁸¹ Historians typically trace the rise of the Zheng clan to the powerful Fujianese and Tang sea trader Li Dan. In 1610, the Tokugawa court "officially earmarked" Li, a Min operating between Nagasaki and Macau, to receive the coveted Red Seal licenses. He traded in Việt Nam as well. Indeed, both his sons Zheng Zhilong (Iquan) and Huayu (Niquan) were licensed to trade with Tonkin and Cochinchina between 1614 and 1621.⁸² Among the 354 Red Seal ships that sailed between 1604 and 1635, when the system ended, 87 (or about one-quarter) called at Cochinchinese ports.⁸³ Many ships were owned by the Zheng or their associates.

Tang trade and community mattered as much to the history of the Central Coast in the 1600s as it did in the 1500s, but the rise of the Zheng family in the early 1600s allowed Tang society to assume a political aspect under the banner of Ming loyalism that by mid-century contributed to the formation of identifiable Minh Hương communities. Still, this development was not inevitable. In addition to the Nguyễn court's long and costly battles with Trịnh Tongking, littoral East Asia presented Cochinchina with three major crises that threatened to destroy the commercial political economy sustaining it. The first erupted during the 1630s when the Tokugawa *bakufu* eliminated the Red Seal system, banned all large Japanese ocean carriers, forbade Japanese to travel abroad, and cast out the Portuguese who formed part of their trade through Macau.⁸⁴ The second erupted just a decade later, when the Ming dynasty fell to the Manchu, setting in motion a four-decade conflict over China's South and its maritime that shook the world between Melaka and Nagasaki. However, the anarchic system of Tang trade had reached its apogee, so that it sustained not only its trade and coastal warlords like the Nguyễn but also the Zheng empire. A third crisis confronted Cochinchina by 1683. The Qing state had won the

⁸⁰ This section benefits from too many sources to name, best summarized in English in Xing Hang, *Conflict and Commerce in Maritime East Asia: The Zheng Family and the Shaping of the Modern World, c. 1620–1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁸¹ The Zheng clan exemplifies the process by which piratical and smuggling forms of exchange evolve into merchant empires. Anne Pérotin-Dumon, "The Pirate and the Emperor: Power and the Law on the Seas, 1450–1850," in *Bandits at Sea*, ed. C.R. Pennell, pp. 25–54.

⁸² On Li Dan (or Iquan, "Captain Chyna") and his licenses, see Carioti, "Zheng's Maritime Power," p. 33; Weichung Cheng, *War, Trade and Piracy in the China Seas (1622–1683)* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), esp. pp. 29–30; Fu Yiling, *Ming–Qing*, pp. 127–29; Hang, *Conflict*, p. 35; Iwao, "Li Tan": 37–38.

⁸³ Innes, "Trade", p. 38, Table 1.

⁸⁴ For a summary of the policy, see Naoko Ilioka, "Literati Entrepreneur: Wei Zhiyan in the Tonkin-Nagasaki Silk Trade," PhD diss., National University of Singapore, 2009, pp. 190–96. On the Macau trade, with interesting insights into Cochinchina, see Boxer, "Macao as a Religious and Commercial Entrepot in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Acta Asiatica* 26 (1974): 64–90.

battle for the South China and quashed the Ming Loyalist Zheng regime on Taiwan and exerting state sovereignty over coastal and maritime China through a new policy regime governing overseas trade, travel, and migration. In each of these cases, despite upheaval overseas threatening the offshore Sino-Japanese trade that sustained the Nguyễn state, Cochinchina survived. Indeed, the fledgling regime prospered sufficiently to bankroll its half century feud with prosperous, powerful Tongking and repeated coastal skirmishing with the Dutch East India Company but it also expanded territorially south into Cham and Khmer lands, even as the Zheng merchant empire began to crumble.⁸⁵ Why didn't Cochinchina fail?

The Zheng clan were critical to these successes. By 1628, patriarch Zheng Zhilong controlled the Taiwan Straits through which shipping to Japan passed; a few years later, the Ming government placed Fujian's regional force under his control.⁸⁶ This effectively vested him with the complementary functions of entrepreneurial coastal lord and militarized sea merchant mentioned above. The clan's power grew in 1641 when the Tokugawa government resettled Japan's Tang traders in Nagasaki and gave authority over the Chinese community—and its trade—to his Sino-Japanese son, Zheng Chenggong.⁸⁷ The Tang essentially assumed the role that Japanese sea traders had once filled, so the old triangular trade continued, sustaining the commercial economy upon which the Nguyễn regime depended. They functioned well in this role because Tang were by definition ethnically hybrid.

Tang colonies and trade networks, now under the influence of the Zheng house and Cochinchinese elites, faced destruction in a second crisis, the fall of China's Ming dynasty to the invading Qing in 1644. Once Zheng Chenggong committed to the Ming cause, however, he deployed the Tang network to secure regional political and economic interests.

Initially this took the form of diplomatic missions to trading partners like Cochinchina. In 1646 a Zen master named Guangji 廣濟禪師 reportedly led a mission to Cochinchina and other Southeast Asian countries to recruit soldiers for a Ming loyalist army that could resist the advancing Qing.⁸⁸ Curiously, Guangji had only recently received

⁸⁵ The fighting with Tonking lasted between 1627 and 1672. On the VOC's fighting with Cochinchina, see esp. John Kleinen, "Towards a Maritime History of Vietnam: Seventeenth-century Vietnamese–Dutch Confrontations," in *Southeast Asian Historiography: Unraveling the Myths*, ed. V. Gabrowsky (Bangkok: River Books, 2011), pp. 276–94.

⁸⁶ Carioti, "Zheng's Maritime Power," p. 36; see also Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2003), pp. 28, 32; and Lin Renchuan, *Mingmo Qingchu*, pp. 238–51.

⁸⁷ Ronald Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 139.

⁸⁸ Jiang Wu, "Orthodoxy, Controversy and the Transformation of Chan Buddhism in Seventeenth Century China," Cambridge, MA, Harvard University diss., 2002, pp. 265–66. Later published as *Enlightenment in Dispute: the Reinvention of Chan Buddhism in Seventeenth-century China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

his dharma name from Chenggong's father, Zheng Zhilong; his secular name was Xue Tongzai.⁸⁹ Five years later, in 1651, Chenggong, now in control, "personally led a fleet of 24 ships to various places in Southeast Asia, sending seven ships to Batavia, two ships to Tonkin, ten ships to Siam, *four ships to Guangnan* [廣南國, the common Chinese name for Cochinchina], and one ship to Manila, to pursue trade relations [*emphasis added*]."⁹⁰ Ming loyalist scholar-officials travelled overseas as well: Zhu Shunshui went to Cochinchina in 1646 and Xu Fuyuan to Tongking in 1651. Xu travelled as a diplomat. Zhu displayed a singularly focused loyalism in the memoir of his four long sojourns in Cochinchina before settling in Nagasaki in 1658.⁹¹ The same may also be true for an actual Zen master named Yinyuan Longqi 隱元隆琦 (J: Ingen Ryūki), who sailed to Nagasaki in 1655 at the invitation of Tang elders who had invited him to help build a new temple there; interestingly, soon after his arrival he visited the Tokugawa shogun to request weapons on behalf of the Zheng.⁹² (He failed.) These and other missions were part of a larger Zheng campaign to mobilize support for the surviving Ming dynasty among Tang colonists and their host regimes in Japan, Tongking, Cochinchina, and other political centers in Southeast Asia. Whatever the case, these missions could not have been possible without the sophisticated network of the Tang colonies to provide them with the material resources, social connections, and local knowledge necessary to undertake them in the first place.

⁸⁹ "The Pingyi Duke Zheng Zhilong specially recommended Xue Tongzai, a stranger, and gave him the name 'Zen Master Guangji' and ordered him to conscript soldiers overseas" 平彝侯鄭芝龍特疏薦異人薛通載, 賜名為「廣濟禪師」, 令其徵兵海外. Chen Yanyi 陳燕翼, *Siwen daji* 思文大紀 [Great chronicle of Siwen (Longwu)]: j. 8, <https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hans/%E6%80%9D%E6%96%87%E5%A4%A7%E7%B4%80/%E5%8D%B78> (accessed 1 April 2021).

⁹⁰ Yang Yanzhe, "1650 zhi 1662 nian Zheng Chenggong haiwai maoyi di maoyi e he rune gaosuan" [Estimates of the volume and profit from Zheng Chenggong's overseas trade 1650–62], in *Zheng Chenggong yanjiu lunwen xuan* (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1984), p. 222.

⁹¹ This is summarized in Wu, "Orthodoxy": pp. 265–66; for a complete view, see also Claudine Salmon, *Ming Loyalists in Southeast Asia: As Perceived through Various Asian and European Records* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014). Despite claims that he was a Nguyễn captive, Zhu's memoir, *Annan gongyi jishi*, contains statements that sound more like a negotiation of equals. Take, for example, this 1657 letter to lord Nguyễn Phúc Tần: "The Duke of Liang 梁國[公] [i.e., Di Renjie of Wu-Zhou and the Tang dynasty] acted against the Zhou on behalf of the Tang 反周為唐 ... If [you] form an alliance with me, [we] should work hard together. ... Stirring the people and maneuvering troops ... to remove the one who snores on the bed [besides the Qing emperor, i.e. the Trịnh lord] and restore the golden vessel." One senses beneath the thick artifice of analogical Confucian rhetoric a sophisticated negotiation that perhaps may suggest the nature of the early Zheng–Nguyễn relationship. Ch'en Ching-ho, comp., "Zhu Shunshui *Annan gongyi jishi* jianzhu" [Annotation of Zhu Shunshui's *Record of service in Annam*], *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiusuo jikan* 1 (1968): 220–21.

⁹² Hu Chuanze, "Zheng Chenggong yu Yinyuan chanshi guanxi lielun" [A sketch of the connections between Zheng Chenggong and Chan master Yinyuan], *Fujian shifan daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 4 (1997): 96–101. For more on Yinyuan and his mission, see Helen J. Baroni, *Obaku Zen: The Emergence of the Third Sect of Zen in Tokugawa Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000) and Jiang Wu, *Enlightenment in Dispute*.

Ch'en Ching-ho's thesis that Ming Loyalist *cum* Minh Hương communities began to form in Cochinchina sometime between 1644 and 1653 has been proven by more recent studies.⁹³ Claudine Salmon, for example, has found reports in Batavia's *Dagh-Register* of émigré arrivals between 1644 and 1650.⁹⁴ Not long after, the earliest signs of Ming Loyalist identity also appeared in Cochinchina, starting with placards that commemorated the Lâm 林 clan temple and the newly constructed Quan Công (or Chùa Ông) temple, dated 1653.⁹⁵ At the same time, the first villages designated as Ming loyalist also appeared. A Japanese-style bell completed in 1677 and dated according to the Southern Ming calendar—as opposed to the Lê or Qing—implies that Ming Loyalist identity remained important to Tang colonists in Hội An even though the Ming had been destroyed and the Zheng regime would soon be too.⁹⁶

These signs suggest a new network being formed around Ming Loyalist identity, one that would not outlast the conflict but whose influence would reach far beyond the seventeenth century. Three extant letters well illustrate the importance of Tang networks to the survival of coastal domains like Cochinchina through inter-Asian sea commerce and Ming culture. The correspondence all involved Wei Zhiyan, a Fuzhou native, who by the late 1640s had emerged as a leading shipping merchant in Sino-Japanese trade via Vietnam.⁹⁷ For nearly three decades, Wei and his male kin lived scattered between the firm's principal ports of call: Nagasaki; Tongking's Pho Hien, their principal base in Vietnam; Fuqing, their ancestral home; and possibly Hội An, which Wei ships visited regularly.⁹⁸ Wei's two wives, one Chinese and one Vietnamese, resided in Fujian and Tongking respectively.⁹⁹ In 1672, he quit Tongking for Nagasaki where he became a

⁹³ Most if not all the literature that addresses the early history of Minh Hương villages in Cochinchina can be found in Salmon, *Ming Loyalists*; or Wheeler articles. See also works by Li Tana and Naoko Iioka.

⁹⁴ Salmon, *Ming Loyalists*, p. 15.

⁹⁵ Ch'en, *Historical Notes on Hoi-an*, pp. 40, 60, 61.

⁹⁶ The bell, dated Yongli 3 永治三年, was donated by a Jinjiang native and his wife. See the inscription reprinted in Claudine Salmon, "Transnational as Reflected in Epigraphy: The Case of Buddhist Bells in Southeast Asia," in *Chinese Overseas: Migration, Research and Documentation*, ed. C.-B. Tan, C. Storey, and J. Zimmerman (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2007), pp. 37–41. They were surnamed Guo 郭.

⁹⁷ The life of Wei (1618–89), also known in customs records as Wei Jiushi 魏九使 (Ch'en, *Notes*, p. 41) has been reconstructed by Naoko Iioka in "Literati Entrepreneur" and several articles. See also Ch'en, "Shiqi, shiba": 297–98; and *Notes on Hoi-an*, p. 50. Okada Ikki once speculated that he traded arms, which is plausible but not yet demonstrated. See "Annan-koku taishi kara Min-jin Gi Kiü Shi ni yoseta shokan ni tsuite" [A letter from a prince of Annam addressed to Wei Jiushi, a Chinese settler at Nagasaki], *Minami-Ajiya Kaku-hö*, no. 1 (1942): pp. 49–70. The Wei clan controlled the Tonkin office into the next century

⁹⁸ The gravestones of Wei Yuanyu 魏元餘 (V. Ngụy Nguyên Dư), and Wei Zhifeng 魏志鳳 (V. Ngụy Chí Phương) are both dated 1696, placing them in the same generation as Zhiyan, who died in 1689, and claim Fuqing origins (Ch'en, *Notes*, inscription nos. 23-7, 23-8). Elders' stories link the two as brothers (ibid., p. 50).

⁹⁹ Wei left his first wife in China with their son, who years later joined him in Nagasaki. He also left his Vietnamese wife, Vũ Thị Nghi, in Tonking when he went to Japan, where their eldest son also joined him.

Tokugawa subject and assumed leadership of the Tonkin Translator's Office that supervised Chinese ships trading in Vietnam. His sons inherited the position and adopted the Japanese surname Oga.

Wei Zhiyuan's close connection with mercantile, political, and cultural leaders in China, Japan, and Vietnam suggests the long reach of Tang influence in the coastal societies connected by their sea trade, as the three extant letters illustrate. One was from Yinyuan, abbot of a Huangbo Zen monastery in Fuqing, who sailed to Nagasaki in 1655 at the invitation of Wei and other Tang merchants. He and his disciples then remained in Japan, where they set about popularizing his school of Zen, known today as Obaku. One of his letters, along with family and temple documents, identified Wei as one of his principal patrons.¹⁰⁰ The two shared more than a religious passion; both shared a keen interest in preserving not only their native Min culture but also what they saw as a vanishing Ming culture as expressed in religion and the arts.¹⁰¹ Ming nostalgia certainly appealed to the next correspondent, Zhu Shunshui (J: Shu Shunsui), best known as the founder of the Japanese Mito School 水戸學派, which he set up when he settled in Japan following a long sojourn in Cochinchina working on behalf of the Ming resistance. While Wei and Zhu did not share the same close bonds as Wei enjoyed with Yinyuan, he nonetheless held the Neo-Confucian in high enough regard to loan him five *jin* of gold, which Zhu offered to return.¹⁰² Perhaps Wei or a brother had supported him as a Southern Ming agent or envoy during his stay in Cochinchina; perhaps they had secured him passage on a Wei or other Tang ship for his multiple voyages between Cochinchina, China, and Japan.¹⁰³ The third correspondent, a senior Nguyễn prince, sought a loan of 5000 taels (C. liang 兩) of silver to pay for "armour" and "weapons repair" in the wake of the southern victory over an invading Trịnh force in 1672 ("each day spending almost 1000 *jin*," the prince claims). "You have the *dao* for creating wealth and acumen for producing with *li*," he adds, and "therefore ... more wealth and more muscle" to "meet my pressing needs." This letter arrived in 1673, soon after Wei's resettlement in Nagasaki and a year after Cochinchina and Tongking struck a peace deal that would last a century.¹⁰⁴

Previous scholars had placed Vũ in Cochinchina (eg., works by Ch'en Ching-ho and me), but Ilioka has correctly identified her grave in Thanh Hóa. Ilioka, "Literati Entrepreneur", pp. 93, 140–42.

¹⁰⁰ See Yinyuan's letter to Wei in *Lu Ri gaoseng Yinyuan zhi Zhongtu laiwang shuxin ji* [Collected letters to and from China by the Japanese sojourning master Yinyuan], ed. Chen Qichao *et al.* (Beijing: Zhonghua quanguo tushuguan wenxian suowei fuzhi zhongxin, 1995), p. 284; also cited in Wheeler, "Missionaries": 315. Interactions noted in Ilioka, "Literati Entrepreneur", pp. 97–98, 101, 105, 113, 169.

¹⁰¹ This appealed to Wei, a musician of Mingaku or "Ming music," who most likely had appreciated the emphasis on both Min and Ming culture in Yinyuan's practice. This is explained well in Ilioka, "Literati", pp. 176–80. See Yinyuan's letter to Wei in *Lu Ri gaoseng Yinyuan*, p. 284, cited in Wheeler, "Missionaries": 315.

¹⁰² Zhu Shunshui (Zhu Zhiyu), "Da Wei Jiushi" [Reply to Wei Jiushi], in *Shunshui xiansheng wenji* [Collected works of Mr Shunshui] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995), pp. 48–49.

¹⁰³ As described in Ch'en, "Zhu Shunshui *Annan gongyi jishi jianzhu*."

¹⁰⁴ Okada, "Annan-koku taishi kara Min-jin Gi Kiū", p. 54. The letter's author was Nguyễn Phúc Diễn, son of Lord Nguyễn Phúc Tần (r. 1648–1687) and brother to Lord Nguyễn Phúc Trăn (r. 1687–1691). See also Ilioka,

Regardless of Wei's response, the prince obviously regarded him as a potential creditor, though perhaps he regarded all Tang merchants similarly. These three cases suggest the influence of merchants like Wei was potentially considerable, and the line between Việt, Japanese, and Ming Loyalist Tang highly permeable. At the least, it indicates a well-developed social network.

The stability of circulation inside the Tang trading zone depended a great deal on a stable currency system, of course. Evidence shows there was a Chinese currency zone that effectively balanced international payments and maintained steady supply chains, prices, and taxes. This apparently stabilized the trade and society of not only Tang colonies but also the countries who had adopted the bimetallic standard. Given the general illegality of sea trade in the eyes of Chinese governments, participants in the trading zone like Japan supported a Chinese-style bimetallic system and in the 1500s and early 1600s actively produced Japanese and Song-style coins to balance their regular trade deficits. Excellent research on the history of silver and copper currencies during the seventeenth century describes the Chinese currency zone that "offshore" mints sustained during the Qing–Zheng war.¹⁰⁵ Most important among them was the Nagasaki mint, established in 1661 to make the Ming dynasty copper coins upon which both the Tang trade and Nguyễn economy relied.¹⁰⁶ Little is yet understood about this currency zone, and more research is necessary if we are to measure the actual reach of Tang, Ming Loyalist, and Minh Huong power during these pivotal decades.

Ralph Innes and John Whitmore both hypothesized in the 1980s that the inflationary aspects of the bimetallic system created a strong incentive for the Nguyễn court to pursue territorial expansion and promote settlement to expand the commercial

"Wei Zhiyan and the Subversion of the *Sakoku*," in *Offshore Asia: Maritime Interactions in East Asia before Steamships*, ed. Fjita Koyoko et al. (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2013), 115–16. Diên was the crown prince when he wrote the letter, but he died in 1684 before he could ascend the throne (ĐNTL, p. 130). The prince delivered the letter via ship captain Wu Shunguan 吳順官 (Ngô Thuận Quan), son of Kadoya Shichirōbē (角屋七郎兵衛) and a Việt woman from Hội An surnamed Nguyễn. He is said to have sailed between Hội An and Nagasaki annually.

¹⁰⁵ *Optimal currency zone* denotes a place within which demand establishes a currency, in this case the Chinese bimetallic system, able to facilitate transactions, transport, and hoarding, "so that payments would have the smallest practical volume." In this case, it encompassed the sea-trading "entrepot zone" equivalent to Tang trade. See Arian van Aelst, "A South Chinese Currency Zone," in *Wages and Currency: Global Comparisons from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, ed. J. Lucassen (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 97. Excellent publications in Western languages by Arian Van Aelst, Santiago Blanco, Werner Burger, Ryutu Shimada, Richard Von Glahn, and Akinobu Kuroda open the door to understanding the fiscal and economic functions of the Tang currency zone, findings that can then be applied to a host of other political and cultural questions.

¹⁰⁶ Hayashi, *Kai hentai*, pp. 1721–22; Jiang Risheng, *Taiwan waiji* (Taipei: Heluo tushu chubanshe, 1980), j. 6, p. 25; Innes, "Trade", p. 19; John Hall, "Notes on the Early Ch'ing Copper Trade with Japan," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 12, nos. 3–4 (1949): 451–2. Ralph Innes made outstanding early insights into trade in silver and copper as both commodity and currency between Japan and Cochinchina, as did John Whitmore. See Innes, "Trade"; and Whitmore, "Vietnam and the Monetary Flow of Eastern Asia," in *Precious Metal Flows in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Worlds*, ed. J. Richard (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1983), pp. 382–83.

export economy.¹⁰⁷ Thus, Cochinchina's economic stability and commercial opportunities relative to South China may have stimulated Chinese immigration during the Zheng conflict. If so, this would have been an important development in Minh Hương history. It also would have begun long before the arrival of the "original" Ming Refugees in 1682. In a memorial to the Kangxi emperor in 1669, a provincial censor named Yu Jin reported: "Millions of Chinese commoners have dispersed and remain abroad in [Cochinchina] ... Among these refugees, there are some rascals who have submitted to the foreign state in order to survive." He was referring to Chao Wenbo 赵文伯 (V. Triệu Văn Bá), a Min Chinese official of the Nguyễn court official, who escorted a Guangdong *dusi* (district brigade commander) named Liu Shihu and his soldiers back to Guangdong after their patrol ship drifted into Cochinchina during a storm.¹⁰⁸ At least that is what they reported—another passage on the incident in the Chinese imperial court record reports that Liu and his crew arrived home on a sea trader loaded with commodities, "disregarding the current sea ban" on travel and trade that the Qing were trying to enforce.¹⁰⁹ It is not clear why these émigrés chose Cochinchina; perhaps more preferable countries like Japan discouraged immigration.¹¹⁰ In any case, the Chinese imperial record for that year reports that nineteen crew members had "not yet returned";¹¹¹ "We can only assume," Yu noted, that these seafarers joined the "innumerable" compatriots that lived in Cochinchina.¹¹² If validated, this hypothesis would demonstrate that Chinese migration was already well established when the legendary refugees of the fallen Zheng regime arrived on the Cochinchinese coast in 1682. Indeed, further research may reveal this to be yet another great crisis of the Nguyễn, created again thanks to Tang merchants under the banner of Ming Loyalist identity. Where exactly they settled is unclear, but some were beginning to settle in a place that hitherto had not been part of the Cochinchinese realm but, by the 1670s, some Chinese sources had begun to call "Cochinchinese Cambodia."

These events were part of an interfusion of networks that helped trade, diaspora, and local warlords like the Nguyễn survive the volatile environment of the late seventeenth century, and flourish. People created these networks. As Ming Loyalist literati-officials, Buddhist monks, and armed traders circulated throughout the Min

¹⁰⁷ Indeed, merchants introduced a rotating credit system that allowed for the development of production (Innes, "Trade," pp. 30–31; Whitmore, "Vietnam," p. 370.).

¹⁰⁸ Yu Jin, "Shuguo xiaoshun shu" [Memorial on a vassal state's effective obedience] (1669), in *Daguan tang wen ji* (1699, repr. Beijing: Beijing Ai ru sheng shuzi hua jishu yanjiu zhongxin, 2009), j. 2: p. 37. See also Lin, *Mingmo Qingchu*, p. 188.

¹⁰⁹ Yu Jin, "Shuguo xiaoshun shu."

¹¹⁰ In a letter to Wei Zhiyan, the Confucian scholar Zhu Shunshui reported: "letting one [Tang person] stay is ten times harder than passing the most advanced civil-service exam." Zhu, "Da Wei Jiushi," p. 49.

¹¹¹ *Kangxi shilu* [Veritable Records, Kangxi reign] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), j. 29: s.n.

¹¹² Yu Jin, "Shuguo."

Stream, they helped to integrate Min-Tang inhabitants of diasporic settlements into an integrated, elastic unit under the new Ming Loyalist banner of Zheng Chenggong. The merchant-warlord controlled all Tang Chinese shipping that sailed into Nagasaki between 1647 and 1662 and continued to dominate it in the 1670s, even as his military power declined;¹¹³ since Nagasaki customs reports usually identify Chinese merchants trading in Cochinchina with Zheng, we can speculate that the percentage was similar for the Vietnamese domain.

All this explains why Cochinchina's shipping remained steady in the face of war, trade bans, and the violent coastal evacuations that scourged seventeenth-century China.¹¹⁴ Zheng ships guaranteed Cochinchina continued access to Chinese and Japanese markets, thanks to its connections with the elaborate smuggling networks and undertow shipping trade that survived the Qing conquest. Zheng fleets engaged Chinese smugglers, often with the help of Qing officials, and despite Qing coastal prohibitions and terror, just as they had done in Ming times.¹¹⁵ The size of this shadow trading economy may seem small from the Chinese perspective, but it was enough to maintain Cochinchina's commercial base. From the court's perspective, the China pattern of carrier trade between Cochinchina, Japan, and China continued almost unchanged from the Red Seal era.

6. Yang Yandi and the Longmen Catalyst

The next stage of Minh Hương evolution, which dates between 1682 and 1775, has long remained obscured behind the story of the so-called Ming Refugees (Minh bo, an alternative name for Minh Hương). Conventional histories have relied on accounts of the event recorded in the nineteenth century by court officials of the Nguyen dynasty (1802–1945). One, the *Veritable Record of Dai Nam* (Đại Nam thực lục 大南實錄), tells how an “admiral of the old Ming house” named Yang Yandi (V. Dương Ngạn Địch) led his “Long Môn 龍門 fleet” of 50 ships carrying over 3000 soldiers “into the harbours of Tư Dung and Đà Nẵng,” where he appealed to Lord Hiền (Nguyễn Phúc Tần) for asylum. “We are exiled vassals of the fallen Ming house,” he declared; “righteously refusing to become vassals to the Qing, we have gone seeking vassalage.” The court deliberated. In the end, Lord Nguyễn admitted that he “did not have the heart to resist.” He then reasoned: “Now

¹¹³ See figures, for example, in Fu Yiling, *Ming–Qing*: pp. 127–30, 141, 148; Innes, “Trade,” pp. 28–30; Hayashi Razan (17th c.), *Kai hentai* [The transformation from civilized (Ming) to Barbarian (Qing)], ed. Ura Ren-ichi (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1958–59), pp. 357, 371, 375, 392; and *Zheng Chenggong yanjiu*, pp. 223–26.

¹¹⁴ On the coastal evacuation policy, see Dahpon Ho, “Sealords Live in Vain: Fujian and the Making of a Maritime Frontier in Seventeenth-Century China,” PhD dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2011.

¹¹⁵ An analysis of the Five Firms, not covered here, shows how. See Fig. 9, “The Interpenetrating Social Composition of the Zheng Organization,” in Xing Hang, “Between Trade and Legitimacy, Maritime and Continent: The Zheng Organization in Seventeenth-Century East Asia,” PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2010, pp. 72. For more detail, see pp. 71, 79, 81, 95, 97, 106, 218.

the land of Đồng Phố ... in the country of Cambodia has open fertile fields for thousands of miles, and the court has yet to find free time to manage it. Wouldn't it be better to use the strength of this band to go and open that territory?" Thus, he accepted Yang and his fleet as his vassals, and ordered them to Cambodia. The admiral and his fleet departed with thanks. Once in the lands of Đồng Phố, "the group cleared the uncultivated fields, and founded river ports and towns." Soon after, "the trading ships of the Thanh [Qing subjects] and countries of the West, Japan, and Java came bustling in great numbers, and because of that the land of Đồng Phố absorbed Hán"—that is, Sinitic—"customs."¹¹⁶ The creation of Viet Nam's South (*Nam bộ*) was underway.

The story has a mythic quality. Consider the depiction of the Longmen fleet and Nguyễn Lord as exiled vassals and a compassionate lord formed a compact whose outcome—the conquest and colonization of a foreign territory—the righteous abandonment of a corrupted home country, settlement legitimized by a territory's "uncultivated" condition and the subsequent development of agrarian economy, commerce, urban settlement, and the cultivation of Sinitic cultural norms. Such rhetoric resembles settler myths worldwide too much to accept at face value.¹¹⁷ Perhaps other interpretations of the event can help us to corroborate the story's claims.

Fortunately, several other sources do exist. To begin, the court historians who compiled the *Veritable Record* in the 1840s consulted an earlier source, *The Unified Gazetteer of Gia Định Citadel* (Gia Định thành thông chí 嘉定城通志), a small gazetteer of the Saigon region written around 1820 by Trịnh Hoài Đức, a Minh Hương and high officer of the Gia Định Citadel administration and the Nguyễn court under the Gia Long Emperor. Unsurprisingly, the two versions are quite similar. However, Trịnh drew from the oldest Vietnamese account of the event, *The Southern Court's Record of Glorious Deeds Performed* (Nam Triều công nghiệp diễn chí 南朝功業演志), Nguyễn Khoa Chiêm's dramatized history modelled on the classic *Historical Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguozhi yanyi*) and completed around 1719, 37 years after the event.¹¹⁸ The narrative is familiar, though it offers more detail that paints a bleak situation for the loyalists. Yang, "a vanquished pirate general from Longmen," escaped attacking Qing forces with 200 ships and 40,000 troops. Unable to sail north, the fleet headed south. Then, another

¹¹⁶ ĐNLTB 2002: vol. 1, p. 91.

¹¹⁷ This is particularly important rhetoric to Ming Loyalist mythology, given the perception they shared with many intellectuals and political leaders in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam that the Qing conquest represented the degradation of their world as reflected in the concept of "Hua-Yi biantai" (華夷變態). Dongyu Han, "The Rise and Fall of the Hua-Yi System in East Asia," *Journal of Chinese Humanities* 5 (2019): pp. 200–14. Some in "smaller" countries of the Sinitic cultural world, like Japan and the Vietnamese domains, believed it was up to them to preserve the political and cultural traditions of ancient China, just as the Ming had done (p. 205).

¹¹⁸ Đào Duy Anh, preface, in Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định*, p. 11. Nguyễn Khoa Chiêm (1659–1736) served lords Nguyễn Phúc Chu and Nguyễn Phúc Trú.

disaster struck. The ships became becalmed for a month before a vicious storm suddenly struck, scattering ships “to the four winds.” When it was over, Yang’s 200 ships numbered “a mere fifty,” and his 40,000 people “only 3,000.” The survivors “drank dew and raindrops” and “ate their shoe leather,” throwing overboard wives and children who “grew sick and died ... the situation was so dire.” Desperate, “the Long Môn fleet anchored off [Cochinchina’s] coast” near its capital. Yang sent an emissary to the Nguyễn court to formally submit to its authority, and the lord graciously accepted. To symbolize their relationship, the ruler offered humanitarian gifts of money, rice, cloth, wine, and meat, “to assuage their fear.”¹¹⁹ While Nguyễn Khoa Chiêm’s account contained far more details than the previously noted version of the Ming Refugee tale it differed substantially in one important factor. It says nothing about Cambodia, and nothing about any settlement or civilizing transformation there leading to the emergence of Southern Vietnam. The refugees leave the story as quickly as they enter it. From the perspective of this near contemporary tale, the Ming Refugees lacked any historical significance, for either Cochinchina or Vietnam.

Thankfully, Nola Cooke has identified two contemporaneous accounts written by members of the French Missions Étrangères de Paris [the Paris Foreign Missions Society] that provide useful cross-perspectives.¹²⁰ Bénigne Vachet, a well-connected and close observer of the Nguyễn court, described the 1682 arrival of “70 or 80 small boats” filled with “old men, soldiers, merchants, women, girls, rich and poor, abandoning their country [and ...] carrying nothing that was necessary for life.” Their circumstances recall the previous tale, with one important twist: The fleet had first landed in Tongking. However, “the first place where they landed ... was afflicted with a famine so cruel” that they had fled, selling children and “foraging”—probably a euphemism for raiding—down the coast until they reached Cochinchina. The lord, hearing of the ships anchored offshore, “believed it was nothing but a Tonkinese fleet” and hastened to investigate this possible invasion, “with his household,” “those of the princes and the greatest lords,” and the 12,000–15,000 soldiers who were “always about his person.” His council thought it “best ... to exterminate them.” However, Vachet continued, “the King worried that by carrying out such a cruel action the Chinese would not fail to be revenged one day, while on the other hand he feared that the Tonkinese might [gain] some intelligence [from them] ... [so] he resolved on a policy of winning them over.” He had an idea. In this indigent fleet

¹¹⁹ Nguyễn Khoa Chiêm 阮科占, *Việt Nam khai quốc chí truyện* 越南開國志傳 [The story of Vietnam’s foundation], also entitled *Nam Triều công nghiệp diễn chí*, repr. of original Hán text (1659–1736) (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1987), pp. 289, 301.

¹²⁰ They are Jean de Courtaulin, “Cochinchine. Relation depuis 1678 jusqu’en 1682,” MEP Vol. 728, pp. 21–22 and Bénigne Vachet, “Relation du voyage de Mgr l’Evesque de Metellopolis [Laneau] au Royaume de Cochinchine, l’année 1682,” undated, MEP Vol. 734, pp. 694–96. Thanks to Nola Cooke for providing and translating these accounts. She has also dealt with these events in “Later-seventeenth-century Cham-Viet Interactions: New Light from French Missionary Sources,” *Annalen derHamburger Vietnamistik* 4 (2010): 13–52. The article is available on Cooke’s web page at academia.edu.

he saw an opportunity to pursue “an expedition that he could not make without decreasing his forces and even without creating new enemies.” Namely, he “proposed the Chinese go straight to Cambodia to start Nac Non up again.”¹²¹ In other words, the court would use the Longmen fleet as a proxy to resurrect the political fortunes of the Nguyễn’s Cambodian protégé, Ang Non in his contest for the Khmer throne. The landing in Tongking aside—perhaps later pro-Nguyễn authors wished to omit, or were unaware of, this embarrassing detail—Vachet’s story vindicates the Vietnamese accounts.

The second account leaves me perplexed. Jean de Courtaulin, who was in the countryside at the time of the fleet arrival, reported that “300 boats or rather galleys of Chinese, all well-armed and all young, the oldest not appearing to be over 40 years old” fled China in 1682 “on account of their continual brigandage” and settled in Cochinchina. The rest of the account resembles the others. “The King of Cochinchina immediately did all [that was] needed to guard all the ports and coast,” but contrary to his expectation, the fleet “sent a herald to beg the King ... [for] a corner of his land in which they could live.” Lord Hiên denied the request, but “nevertheless he gave them a letter to go off to live in Cambodia,” supplying them with two months’ water and rice.¹²² This confirms the basic elements of the Ming Refugee tale but leaves unresolvable differences as well. The lord appears to have dispatched the fleet to Cambodia to get rid of them, rather than employ them in a grand plan. A logical motive, given the strong navy he apparently faced, whose difference from the other fleets described could not be starker. Most importantly, the Cambodian plan in this account originated with the Ming loyalists, not the Vietnamese lord.

Taken together, the three Vietnamese and two European interpretations of the Ming Refugee story provide the same general outline. A naval fleet of Ming loyalists landed on Cochinchina’s shores seeking asylum, and the Nguyễn lord sent them to Cambodia. Their differences are many. Their resolution depends on how we interpret the story of the Ming Refugees. Are we looking at different interpretations of a single event or a composite of several different events? After all, this is what myths do.¹²³ Both possibilities are plausible, but the latter is more convincing. It seems far more likely that several such fleets were launched by defeated Ming loyalists and refugees of all kinds in these years, especially during the chaotic final period of war between the Qing and its enemies in South China. Indeed, when has war *not* produce refugee migration? A look at the background of Yang Yandi and some of his confederates helps to explain why.

¹²¹ Vachet, “Relation”: pp. 694–97.

¹²² Jean de Courtaulin, “Cochinchine. Relation depuis 1678 jusqu’en 1682,” MEP vol. 728, pp. 21–22. Again, a debt of gratitude is owed to Nola Cooke for her generosity and translation.

¹²³ If there were several fleets rolled into one, it would explain the discrepancy in dates.

Yang's life as told by government bureaucrats and local observers puts the realities of the Chinese coastal society he lived in on display.¹²⁴ There, he and his brother Yang San began life among the region's "preponderance of poor seafarers engaging in crime ... as a means of survival."¹²⁵ From there, he quickly graduated to ever more sophisticated operations and impressive statuses. It is impossible to pinpoint a single identity that describes Yang; efforts to label him a pirate or Ming loyalist overlook the other functions of sailor, pirate, privateer, merchant, admiral, partisan, and ultimately, colonist that describe his career in various documents. This is particularly true for those identified as Ming Loyalists.

Yang and his confederates lived in a territory in crisis. Southwestern Guangdong (today coastal Guangxi) was the "main battlefield" in the Qing–Ming war.¹²⁶ The population of Guangdong province fell from nine to seven million between 1640 and 1661, as one-fourth of all arable land in Yang's region vanished.¹²⁷ It had yet remained to experience the Qing government's apocalyptic coastal removal campaigns, the brutal War of the Three Feudatories, and twenty-two years of war with the Ming loyalist Zheng. Hunger, dislocation, violence, and predation perennially had plagued the coast before the fall of the Ming, but the dynastic turmoil pushed them to an extreme. Strangely, opportunities grew as well, thanks to the grand smuggling network connecting the Chinese interior with those operating on the coast. Whatever the cause, by the 1660s Yandi had led a small fleet linked to a larger pirate confederation that battled Qing forces. The Qing had finally gained the upper hand in its battles with loyalists and pirates and in 1663 had ejected Yang from his Longmen base. He took temporary refuge in Tongking until the Qing government compelled the local government to arrest him, after which he fled to Taiwan and disappeared from public notice. Ten years later, in 1677, Yang returned to the gulf with 1000 men on 80 ships and retook Longmen Island. Perhaps he saw opportunities in the violence resurging across the gulf coast, including with the Zheng, as local troops revolted against a Qing emperor who struggled to quell his rebellious feudatories or viceroys.

¹²⁴ Unless otherwise noted, this paragraph relies on Li Qingxin, "16–17 shiji Yuexi 'Zhu zei', haidao yu 'Xi zei'"; Niu Junkai and Li, "'Chinese 'Political Pirates' in the Seventeenth-Century Tongking Gulf," in Cooke, Li, and Anderson, *Tongking Gulf*: pp. 133–42; and Robert J. Antony, "'Righteous Yang': Pirate, Rebel, and Hero on the Sino-Vietnamese Water Frontier, 1644–1684," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, no. 11 (2014), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/72n5w62r> (accessed February 26, 2021).

¹²⁵ Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: Institute for East Asian Studies, Center for Chinese Studies, 2003), p. 11. Many towns claim him as a native son. See Antony, "'Righteous Yang'", p. 6.

¹²⁶ Li Qingxin.

¹²⁷ Robert B. Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt: Environment and Economy in Late Imperial South China* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 158–59.

By 1679, the situation began to look difficult for people like Yang. The Qing were finally winning their war with the southern viceroys, had suppressed a massive mutiny in the naval units stationed in the gulf, were cracking down on the massive smuggling operations that had financed Guangdong's Shang viceroy, and had restricted trade to Macau.¹²⁸ Years of violence had reduced any organized opposition into groups of "soldiers, village paramilitary units (*xiangyong*), bandits, and pirates ... all fighting one another and indiscriminately pillaging villages and towns."¹²⁹ For the next four years, Yang launched raids and fought Qing naval units as far eastward from his Longmen base (near the Tongking border) as Qinzhou, Leizhou, and Hainan. Then the tide turned against him as the troop revolt "degenerated." By the end of the year, the Qing government had quashed the mutiny and, the next year ended, the War of the Three Feudatories, eradicating an important smuggling network that had been run by the Shang viceroy's clan. The next year, Qing warships began closing in on Longmen. This was an area already depopulated by hunger and violence, with so many of its people dislocated and desperate, while those like Yang, who had openly fought the Manchus, likely faced capture and execution by the victors. Could better conditions for a mass exodus of refugees be found?

But where should they go? It is important to remember that, looking south, lower Cambodia was no stranger to Yang. In normal weather, Longmen and the Mekong River were separated by only a few days' sail through Vietnamese coastal waters. During Yang's lifetime, this territory was also in transition; the Cambodian population was scattered and incoming Việt were only beginning to subjugate and settle it.¹³⁰ In a memorial to the Qing emperor in 1683, the admiral who defeated the Zheng clan and captured Taiwan, Shi Lang, reported that "the ships of Yang Yandi are now in *Cambodia in Cochinchina* [*Jianbuzhai zhi Guangnan* 柬埔寨之廣南]]."¹³¹ The choice of words—*Cochinchinese Cambodia*—belies the transitional condition of the Đông Phố region. Starting in 1623, growing military power in Cochinchina and the weak state power and internecine struggles in northern Cambodia had emboldened the Nguyễn lords to intervene in Lower Cambodian affairs, while Chinese and Vietnamese had also begun to settle there. Agents of the Zheng syndicate had operated in "Cochinchinese Cambodia" since at least 1647,

¹²⁸ To illustrate, when Qing officials confiscated the property of the merchant Shen Shangda, who controlled smuggling operations through the Guangdong's shipping, ferries, and coastal salt shipments, they discovered almost one million taels. Shen was jailed in 1679, as his benefactors, the Shang clan whose father had been viceroy, fell from grace. Wang Liqi, *Li Shizhen Li Xu fuzi nianpu: "Hong lou meng" yu Qing chu shiliao gouxuan* [Annual for Li Xu's father, Li Shizhen: A summary of Dream of the Red Chamber and early Qing historical sources] (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1983), p. 158. On the mutiny of Zu Zeqing and other m, see Antony, "'Righteous Yang'", p. 15.

¹²⁹ Antony, "'Righteous Yang,'" pp. 14–15.

¹³⁰ So it often has escaped the historian's notice.

¹³¹ Fu Lo-shu, *Documentary Chronicle of Sino-Western Relations, 1644–1820* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1966), vol. 1, p. 61.

the year that 51 “Fujian” merchants—Tang—trading on behalf of the Zheng drifted to Korea while on route to Japan from “Dongpucha 東浦察 [V: Đông Phố Trại]”, a clear corruption of the Chinese misspelling for Cambodia, Zhanpuzhai 柬埔寨 (V: Giản Phố Trại).¹³² Perhaps these indigents included Ming loyalists. Twenty years later, another group of Zheng merchants from Fujian—again, Tang—drifted to Jeju Island in the Korean Straits, where officials there noted they “did not shave their heads,” something the Qing court mandated on pain of death and thus a mark of Ming identity.¹³³ Indeed, it was not only Yang who had had eyes on Lower Cambodia as a refuge: Before the Zheng court settled on surrender, it had considered resettling the government in either Manila or Cambodia. Yang, who had returned to Longmen in 1677 with ships from Taiwan, claimed to command the Zheng southern fleet whose zone of operations included Cambodia. On Taiwan, he had persisted in advocating Cambodia as a relocation site, by which he no doubt meant “Cochinchinese Cambodia.”¹³⁴ Japanese customs records say he had been visiting there since the 1660s, however to prey on, not protect, its sea traders.¹³⁵

At this point, our analysis yields two important findings. First, it is clear that many Ming “refugees” knew the region in which they would settle because they had had decades-long experience in it. Perhaps it was even they who had suggested the idea to the Nguyễn ruler, regardless of what later sources said about it. It would not be surprising, as the above evidence suggests that Yang at least wanted to go there. Second, Yang and his confederates had controlled large fleets that had operated in the region for decades and knew there were enormous profits to be made there as they had been preying on traders for years. But now Yang was also an indigent, with his fleet nearly destroyed and the Qing in control of two of their key bases, effectively gutting their main sources of revenue.¹³⁶ Where else could Yang go, but to one of the places that he and his confederates knew could re-establish their fortunes, Cochinchinese Cambodia.

Even so, the process of transforming Ming loyalists into *Minh Hương* had only begun. Two facts suggest that Yang’s arrival marked the beginning of a period of competition and renegotiation of status that ended only in 1698 with the Nguyễn court’s formal recognition and incorporation of the *Minh Hương* as a minority elite. First, the Longmen Fleet’s formal incorporation into *Minh Hương* villages does not appear to have happened until 1698, almost sixteen years after their arrival.¹³⁷ Almost as soon as they settled in Đông Phố, Yang’s supposedly malnourished soldiers broke apart into rival factions with one of them quickly jumping into the internecine conflicts then raging all over Cambodia. During this interlude, these same Ming “refugees” came into regular

¹³² Lin Renchuan, *Mingmo Qingchu*, p.187.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ch’en Ching-ho, “Qingchu Zheng Chenggong canbu zhi yizhi [The migration of the Zheng partisans to southern borders (of Vietnam)],” *Xinya xuebao* (Singapore) 5, no. 1 (1960): 454.

¹³⁵ Hayashi, *Kai hentai*, 1: 327, 338, 351, 367, 398, 422, 439, 452–3.

¹³⁶ Lin, *Mingmo Qingchu*, pp. 200–4.

¹³⁷ *DNTLTB*, p. 152.

contact with the Nguyễn as both allies and foes.¹³⁸ Until 1698, then, the fealty of many of the Ming Loyalists living in southern Cambodia—perhaps all over Cochinchina—must have been in doubt. The Nguyễn court’s formal incorporation of both the Minh Hương villages and Saigon region into the Cochinchinese state by the creation of a Minh Hương village in 1698 thus formed a watershed in the evolution of Minh Hương community and identity.

The Longmen Fleet’s arrival in Cochinchina marks the beginning of a critical reorientation and incorporation, when the institutions of Vietnamese state, Tang merchant diaspora, and Minh Hương community began to respond to the Qing victory over the Zheng, when it was clear that Qing control of the coast was complete. Throughout maritime Asia, state responses to the new Qing order differed, forcing Tang communities and their Ming loyalists to adapt differently as well. In Japan, for example, the Tokugawa court overhauled Nagasaki’s Chinese quarter and the rules governing Chinese ethnicity in 1689, formally erasing Ming loyalist identity.¹³⁹ In Cochinchina, the opposite happened: the court recognized the Minh Hương community and raised it to elite status. Here, cultural institutions like temples continued to play an important role in managing adaptation. They deepened the commitment between Tang colonies and their local sovereigns and solidified the elevated status they had won. This section ends with a brief consideration of the role of temples in smoothing the transitional period.

This section ends with a brief consideration of the role of temples in smoothing the transitional period.¹⁴⁰ During the 1680s, Zen masters who embraced Ming Refugee identity landed in Cochinchina and by the 1690s began to assume positions of leadership and engage in temple construction in port cities with Minh Hương communities, places like Thanh Hà, Hội An, Quảng Nghĩa, Qui Nhơn, and Nha Trang in the old part of Cochinchina, and Đồng Nai and Hà Tiên in “Cochinchinese Cambodia.”¹⁴¹ These were done with large merchant support, just like Tang merchants and monks had done in Japan decades before. Following the general pattern in premodern history, religious temples helped to sanction the new commitments made within the nascent community and its cross-cultural relations. A new temple dedicated to the bodhisattva Amitabha, whom

¹³⁸ As told in a fascinating piece by Yumio Sakurai, “Eighteenth-century Chinese Pioneers on the Water Frontier of Indochina,” in *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750–1880*, ed. Nola Cooke and Li Tana (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), pp. 40–41.

¹³⁹ Dai, *Jindai lu Ri Huaqiao*, p. 77.

¹⁴⁰ This transitional process is described more extensively in dWheeler, “Buddhism”; “Missionary Buddhism”; and “Interests, Institutions, and Identity.”

¹⁴¹ Nguyễn, *Phật giáo Đàng Trong*, vol. 1, pp. 126–46, 167–70, 183, 200–6, 256–57, 181–89; vol. 2, pp. 64–386; *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* [Unified gazetteer of Great South], comp. Cao Xuân Dục (1909, Quốc ngữ trans., Huế: Nxb. Thuận Hóa, 1997), q. 1, pp. 81–84, 199–202; q. 7, pp. 385–87; q. 8, pp. 441–42; q. 9, pp. 49–51; q. 26, pp. 29–30; q. 27, pp. 79; q. 31, pp. 236–37; Ch’en, *Historical Notes on Hoi-an*, p. 39; Nguyễn Hiện Đức, *Phật giáo Đàng Trong* [Buddhism in Cochinchina] (Huế: Nxb. Thuận Hoá, 1996), vol. 2, pp. 8, 48.

Vietnamese call *Di Đà* 弥陀, credited its land and buildings to the widow of a wealthy Ming Loyalist merchant 1688.¹⁴²

Indeed, at the very moment the Longmen Fleet's arrived in Cochinchina, Lord Nguyễn expelled *quốc sĩ* or "Royal [Buddhist] Master" from his capital¹⁴³ and replaced him with Yuanshao 元韶—Nguyễn Thiều—a Chinese monk from Guangzhou who had migrated to Cochinchina in 1677 aboard a merchant ship and built a monastery there with merchant donations. Nguyễn Thiều practiced the same form of Zen as his counterpart in Japan, Obaku, aka Hoàng Bích (C: Huangbo), venerating Min and Ming cultures in his practice. Twelve years later, Nguyễn Thiều moved south to Đồng Nai in "Cochinchinese Cambodia." At the same time, monks assisted in promoting the elevation of the sea goddess Mazu, which the Qing court had recently elevated to imperial status and Tang merchants had embraced as the benefactor of the new institution of sea trade, the *huiguan* (*hội quán*) or merchant guild, beginning in Hội An sometime before 1695. He also called for the strengthening of orthodox Sinitic institutions, including "proper" cemeteries.¹⁴⁴

7. Destruction, Reconstruction, and Decline

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, Minh Hương enjoyed a ubiquitous presence in the institutions of political, commercial and religious power in Cochinchina. Internationally, Minh Hương played important roles as political, cultural and commercial brokers for the Nguyễn. They led diplomatic missions, offered intelligence, and acted as cultural emissaries to Buddhist temples and other cultural institutions in China. They continued to control the customs generated by foreign trade and held a near-monopoly on the country's overseas commerce. However, their earlier-seventeenth-century near-monopoly over Chinese shipping and ship building later gravitated toward the expatriate Qing subjects who in 1684 flooded the ports of maritime Asia, including Cochinchina, straight after the Zheng surrender. At the same time, the Minh Hương community appears to have grown more deeply invested in the domestic business of Đàng Trong, much of it export-oriented.¹⁴⁵ Their position at the apex of the sea trade gave them advantages in the growing export trade in forest and sea products, while their right to own land would have given them a central role in the development of commercial agriculture.

¹⁴² Ch'en, *Historical Notes on Hoi-an*, p. 55; Shilian Dashan, *Haiwai jishi* [Diary overseas] (Guangzhou, 1699; repr. Taipei, 1969), p. 108.

¹⁴³ Lê Quý Đôn, *Kiến Văn tiểu lục* [Jottings on what I've seen and heard] (c. 1777, quốc ngữ translation, Hanoi: Nxb. Khoa học Xã hội, 1977), pp. 404–5.

¹⁴⁴ Shilian Dashan, *Haiwai jishi*, pp. 109–10; excerpted in Wheeler, "Missionary Buddhism": 215–16.

¹⁴⁵ Li Tana, "Late-Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Century Mekong," in *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750–1880*, ed. Nola Cooke and Li Tana (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), pp. 71–84.

Temples stabilized, but continued to adapt when necessary. Sometime during the 1710s or 1720s, for example, a second guild hall was built for members of Hội An's Merchant Mariner Guild (C: *Yangshang huiguan*; V: *Thương Dương hội quán*). This temple's origins remain vague, but the timing of its foundation suggests that it owed its genesis in some way to the changes in trade policies in China (1717, 1727) and Japan (1715) that had the effect of encouraging greater interest in Southeast Asia. This makes sense because the Sino-Japanese entrepôt trade that had once been Đàng Trong's mainstay had faded away by then and the economy now depended upon export production, mainly to China.¹⁴⁶ Mazu was installed here, signalling the migration of the goddess temple from Buddhist monasteries to merchant guild halls, a clear indication of the changing relations between monks and merchants.¹⁴⁷

The second long century between 1651 and 1773 was marked by a high degree of institutional formation and strengthening. Building upon the Tang institutions of the previous period, Ming Loyalist Chinese, both in Cochinchina and throughout maritime Asia, participated in a common, exclusive set of institutions "through which they attempt[ed] to solve life's problems."¹⁴⁸ In the first stage, between 1651 and 1698, circumstances throughout maritime Asia encouraged a conflation between Tang and the new Minh Loyalist identity. However, the new maritime order imposed by the reformed Qing trading regime forced policy changes among maritime states that resulted in a differential evolution of Tang colonies all over the Asian maritime. In Cochinchina, it led to the development of a distinct Minh Hương identity recognized by the Nguyễn state. As a result, the Minh Hương became a genuine elite. The second period, from 1698 to 1773, was one of powerful interests, aided by strong institutions, and a growing sense of Minh Hương identity. We see a transition from a conscious political identity built around Ming Loyalism, claimed by Chinese who continued to identify as Chinese, to a cultural identity that, although still asserting a Chinese identity, was complicated by a growing acceptance of Vietnamese norms. The refugee story of origins and the myth of return remained the core tenets of Minh Hương identity, but the underlying commitment of this community to the Vietnamese state and Vietnamese society is clear. By 1773, the Minh Hương definitely fitted Stephen Cornell's definition of an ethnic group: they "shared a common and distinct culture, a set of elaborate symbolic structures—meanings, understandings, interpretation—that account[ed] for the way the world work[ed] and provide[d] usable guides to action".¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ "Dương thương Hội quán quy lệ" [The covenant and regulations of the Ocean Merchants Guild Hall (Hội An)], inscription rubbing, Han-Nom Institute, no. M.180. Partially reprinted in Ch'en, *Historical Notes*: 148–56.

¹⁴⁷ Wheeler, "Buddhism": p. 313.

¹⁴⁸ Stephen Cornell, "The Variable Ties that Bind: Content and Circumstance in Ethnic Process," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19 (1996): 265–89, esp. 270.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid: 270.

8. Collapse, Restoration, and the Minority Turn, 1773–1898

The third long century under study, from 1773 to 1898, reveals a wholly different set of circumstances and content that the formal resurrection of Minh Hương identity in Tây Sơn and Nguyễn Việt Nam belies. Here, we see that culture comes to play the predominant role in maintaining group persistence in the face of a cataclysm. . In the end, however, environmental change undermined their old interests, and encouraged a new Vietnamese dynasty to take steps to undermine their institutional power. At this moment in their history, the community turned to identity to try to forestall this erosion of status.

The Tây Sơn Uprising decimated Minh Hương communities in its early years although, curiously, Chinese played a key role in fomenting the rebellion in the first place. The early successes of the three Nguyễn brothers depended upon the support of Qui Nhơn's "Qing merchants 清商," sources say. Two of them stood above the others: Li Cai (李才 Lý Tài, Li Azhi 李阿智) and Ji Ting (Tập Đình 集亭, Li Aji 李阿集). They raised and led the Chinese land and naval force that was critical to initial Tây Sơn successes.¹⁵⁰ Li was from Fujian, Ji from Min-speaking Chaozhou Prefecture in Guangdong. Both had migrated as youths to Hội An to become merchants, and later settled in Qui Nhơn where they had become leaders in the community. While they were probably not Minh Hương, evidence does exist that Minh Hương participated in the civil war on both sides.¹⁵¹ The genealogy of an important mid-nineteenth-century high official named Trần Tiễn Thành 陳踐誠, a Minh Hương, lists family members on both sides of the conflict.¹⁵²

During this war, both sides used Minh Hương identity as a means for recruiting and rewarding military assistance from a new generation of Chinese "military entrepreneurs," or pirates. When Qing authorities interrogated Wang Guili, the Chinese leader of a fleet of "Vietnamese pirates," they remarked on the long hair he wore, different from the shaved head and queue mandated for all Qing subjects. Wang reported that after he had joined the naval forces of the Tây Sơn, and rose to the ranks of duke and brigadier general, he took a Vietnamese wife and adopted Vietnamese customs, including hairstyle.¹⁵³ Hà Hỷ Văn (He Xiwen 何喜文) started out in landlocked Sichuan as a member

¹⁵⁰ *Đại Nam thực lục tiền biên*, p. 78; George Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), pp. 200–1; *Gudai Zhong-Yue guanxi shi ziliao xuanbian* [Selected materials on the history of Sino-Vietnamese relations] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1982), p. 655; Zheng Ruiming, *Qingdai Yuenan di huaqiao* [Overseas Chinese in Qing-era Vietnam] (Taipei, 1976), pp. 4–5.

¹⁵¹ Choi, *Southern Vietnam*, pp. 36–37.

¹⁵² Ch'en Ching-ho, ed., *Zhengtian Mingxiangshe Chen shi zheng pu* ["A Brief Study of the Family Register of the Trans, A Ming Refugee Family in Minh-Hương ha, Thua-thien (Central Vietnam)"]. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1964), p. 67; *Đại Nam liệt truyện* [Biographies of the Eminent in Dai Nam, ancestral compilation] (quốc ngữ trans., Hanoi: Nxb. Khoa học xã hội, 1995): q. 4, pp. 162–73 [hereafter *ĐNLT*]

¹⁵³ Jiao Xun 焦循. "Shenfung dang kou ji" [A record of the destruction of pirates by divine wind], in *Diaogu ji wenlu*, juan 1672, repr. in *Guochao wenlu xubian*, ed. Li Zutao (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995), pp. 116–17.

of a White Lotus band, a Buddhist millenarian school whose uprising threatened the stability of the Qing, and somehow ended up in a pirate band that belonged to the Tiandihui secret society, where he “raided the coasts of Fujian and Guangdong.”¹⁵⁴ By 1786, he joined Nguyễn Ánh in his effort to return to power.¹⁵⁵ Nguyễn Ánh, like his adversary, used titles to encourage loyalty and military service. Apparently, it worked for He Xiwen. He distinguished himself in battle and secured critical naval victories that led to victory over the Tây Sơn in 1801.¹⁵⁶

After the apocalypse of the war’s early years the Tây Sơn began resurrecting devastated Minh Hương communities from the ashes. In Hội An, for example, a 1783 inscription memorializing the town’s restoration of its Quan Công hall reveals the first sign of Minh Hương resurrection.¹⁵⁷ Foreign accounts and a village register show that by the 1790s the city’s Minh Hương were “beginning to breathe” and their commerce to revive.¹⁵⁸ Curiously, this commercial revival appears to have coincided with the spike in Tây Sơn sponsored piracy. Given the Qing court’s designation of former Cochinchina as piracy’s “rat hole,” one can only wonder whether the community’s early and quick resurrection derived from commerce in pirated goods. In any case, the Tây Sơn resurrected the old Nguyễn system of Minh Hương xã and reconfirmed their rights.¹⁵⁹

Like his Tây Sơn rivals, and like past warlords, Nguyễn Ánh looked to combine commercial and military means to achieve his political goal of Tây Sơn destruction and Nguyễn restoration. Chinese and Minh Hương mariners and merchants quickly proved crucial to his efforts. For example, a number of rice merchants led missions to Siam to buy rice on behalf of Nguyễn Ánh in the 1780s and 1790s.¹⁶⁰ He did not restore the system of his ancestors, however. After conducting a census of the Mekong, in 1789 he divided Chinese and Minh Hương. First he separated them into *Đường* (C: *Tang*) and Minh Hương,

¹⁵⁴ On He see *Đại Nam liệt truyện*: pp. 500–2; Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định thành thống chí* (Unified gazetteer of Gia Định Citadel], Hán original w/ quốc ngữ trans. (Hanoi: Nxb. Giáo dục, 1998), p. 134; Zheng, *Qingdai Yuenan di huaqiao*, pp. 19–21.

¹⁵⁵ Diane H. Murray, *Pirates of the South China Coast, 1790–1810* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 187,n.6.

¹⁵⁶ Wheeler, “Charting the Social Fields of the Sea: Placing the ‘Chinese Pirates’ of the Gulf of Tongking at the End of in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Trading Empires of the South China Coast, South Asia, and the Gulf Region*, vol. 1: *Place*, ed. E. Tagliacozzo et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 51–53.

¹⁵⁷ Chùa Ông inscription, Hội An, 1783; Chen, *Historical Notes on Hoi-an*, pp. 60, 81–82; 130–31.

¹⁵⁸ Nguyễn Thiều Lầu, “La formation et évolution du village de Minh Hương (Faifóo).” *Bulletin des amis du Vieux Hué* 28 (1941): 365. See also an observer’s description of the Hội An area in the 1790s in George Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* (London, 1797), p. 166.

¹⁵⁹ Đào Duy Anh, “Pho-lo, première colonie chinois de Thua Thien” *BAVH* 3 (1943): 253; Ch’en Ching-ho (Trần Kinh Hòa), “Một điều nhận xét về Minh-hương-xã,” và các cổ tích tại Hội-an [‘Some observations about the village of Minh-huong and the monuments at Faifo, Central Vietnam’], *Khảo cổ tập san* 1 (1962–63): 14–16; Choi, *Southern Vietnam*, p. 37.

¹⁶⁰ *ĐNLTB*, p. 275; Choi, *Southern Vietnam*, p. 41.

before changing the terminology for mainland Chinese in 1790 to *Thanh nhân* (Qing compatriots).¹⁶¹ Minh Hương continued to govern themselves as before, while Thanh or Qing expatriates ruled themselves according to *bang*, or cliques based on dialect groups, with each clique governed by a *bang trưởng* or headman. This laid the foundation for the system of rule that governed expatriate Chinese and Minh Hương under the empire that followed, and it also appears to have set the stage for the Minh Hương's demise.

The empire that emerged in 1802 after Nguyễn Ánh defeated the Tây Sơn does not appear to have taken any immediate action to dilute Minh Hương power. In 1814, Nguyễn Ánh, now the Gia Long Emperor, mandated that the bang system he created in 1789 be instituted nationwide. Any group of thirty Chinese had to form a bang under one of seven identities, now including Minh Hương.¹⁶² Minh Hương protested loudly, however, arguing their Vietnamese matrilineage distinguished them from the expatriate Chinese, and the plan was halted. This marked the first time that Minh Hương leaders had used ethnic identity as a defensive strategy, but its success would prove limited.

Gia Long's successor, emperor Minh Mạng, reimposed his father's system several years later, but with one exception: Minh Hương did not have to join a bang, but they did have to reorganize into a Vietnamese style village, complete with a Vietnamese style *đình* village temple, administrative structure and the periodic compilation of a village census.¹⁶³ In 1827 the emperor further ordered that the Chinese characters used to symbolize *Minh Hương xã* be changed, switching the homophonic *hương* 香 for *hương* 鄉. This significantly changed the meaning of the community's name, from "Ming Incense [Loyalist] Community" (明香社) to "Ming Village Community" (明鄉社—*Minh Hương xã*), thus removing the political signifier at the core of their identity.¹⁶⁴ Two years later he went even farther and ordered a reclassification of Minh Hương along ethnic lines. Redefining Minh Hương inclusively as the descendants of a Chinese father and a Vietnamese mother, Minh Mạng forbade all expatriate Chinese from returning to China with their wives or children, and banned Qing dress. Furthermore, he reiterated: "each time anyone comes to trade, then wherever there are people who want to come, they must have the elder [bang trưởng] of the Minh Hương write a letter of guarantee."¹⁶⁵ But at the same time, statutes and edicts show that Minh Mạng also preserved their separate tax status and corvée exemptions, as well as reaffirming longstanding practices like the duty of Minh

¹⁶¹ Nguyen Hoi Chan, "Some Aspects of the Chinese Community in Vietnam, 1650–1850." *Papers on China* 24 (1971): 114; Riichiro Fujiwara, "Vietnamese Dynasties' Policies towards Chinese Immigrants," *Acta Asiatica* 16 (1969): 60–61.

¹⁶² Maw-kuey Tsai, *Les Chinois au Sud-Vietnam* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, 1968) ,p. 30; Nguyễn Hoi Chan, "Aspects": 115.

¹⁶³ Choi, *Southern Vietnam*,13.

¹⁶⁴ ĐNTLCB, p. 649.

¹⁶⁵ *Minh Mạng chính yếu* [Important rulings of Minh Mạng], bilingual Hán-Quốc ngữ ed., comp. Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn (Saigon: Bộ Văn hóa Giáo dục và Thanh niên, 1972–74), q. 6, p. 241.

Hương to act as interpreters, or to supervise markets by checking prices, coinage, etc.¹⁶⁶ His successor, Thiệu Trị, mandated that Minh Hương communities should be formed throughout the empire wherever there was sufficient offspring of Chinese fathers and Vietnamese mothers.¹⁶⁷ Whatever privileges still existed, by the 1840s it is clear that an important shift had occurred. No longer distinguished by their political loyalty to a long-lost dynasty, Minh Hương now formally constituted an ethnic minority rather than a minority elite set betwixt Vietnamese and expatriate Chinese.

We see the results of this policy change in the declining influence of the wider world on Minh Hương society. In the eighteenth century the Minh Hương had lost their prized role as intermediary in the undertow Sino-Vietnamese trade after Japan and China patched things up in the 1700s. Their power had continued, however, thanks to their traditional role in governing the sea trade, and also in cultivating domestic commerce and staffing much of the Nguyễn government. All this changed with the rise of the Empire of Đại Nam. The bureaucratic order that Nguyễn monarchs envisioned had no room for the informal tax-farming style of customs governance, another longstanding domain of the Minh Hương. The incorporation into the new empire of all Vietnamese-speaking peoples gave the Nguyễn emperors from Minh Mạng onward an opportunity to dilute the Minh Hương role in government. The imperial Nguyễn no longer needed Minh Hương to act as go-betweens in diplomatic, political or even commercial affairs. Furthermore, the scale of the Vietnamese economy had changed as well, as the empire became more land than maritime focused. This shifted the proportional balance in the tax base from sea commerce to rice agriculture, and the political balance followed, as was evident in the Nguyễn shift to a more agrarian emphasis in their policies. Perhaps fittingly, the Minh Hương decline seems to nearly parallel the early- to mid-nineteenth century decline of the junk trade which had first brought them to prominence.

In these changing circumstances, for the rest of the nineteenth century the Minh Hương resorted to a defensive strategy of ethnic preservation as its members fought against communal erosion by Vietnamese imperial, and then French colonial, governments. Increasingly the interest in preserving Minh Hương identity came solely from within the community and, as the last Minh Hương institutions faded, identity increasingly asserted itself purely on an ethnic basis.

Minh Hương influence eroded quickly after the French conquests. In 1871 the community's existence as a special category was eliminated in French colonial Cochinchina; they were given the choice of registering as Vietnamese or Chinese, and were accorded the rights of colonial subjects, even the right to apply for French

¹⁶⁶ *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* [Royally confirmed statute compendium of Đại Nam], Comp. Viện sử học, Huế, 19th century (quốc ngữ trans., Huế: Nxb. Thuận Hóa, 1992), q. 44, "Minh nhân," pp. 304.

¹⁶⁷ *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ*: q. 44, pp. 310–11; Fujiwara, "Vietnamese Dynasties' Policies," pp. 65–66; Choi, *Southern Vietnam*, pp. 146–48.

citizenship.¹⁶⁸ In 1898, the Thành Thái Emperor formally abolished the Minh Hương identity in the remnant protected empire, transferring these people to Vietnamese status.¹⁶⁹ Why it was done is not clear, and has never really been explored. Perhaps the French, deeply concerned about Vietnamese ties to China, saw the Minh Hương as a potential subversive threat. The French did wish to marginalize the Chinese community as much as possible, and eradicating a potential mediator between Chinese and Vietnamese would have been a logical decision. So, unlike other colonies who exploited hybrid or creole Chinese groups, the French eliminated theirs.



¹⁶⁸ Ramses Amer, *The Ethnic Chinese in Vietnam and Sino-Vietnamese Relations* (Kuala Lumpur: Forum, 1991), p. 9.

¹⁶⁹ Alain Marsot, *The Chinese Community in Vietnam under the French* (San Francisco: EM Text, 1993).