Introduction

We dedicate this issue of *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* to the late John K. Whitmore (31 July 1940-14 November 2020), teacher, mentor, and important pioneer of modern Vietnamese studies. John was inspiring to the final minutes of his life. One of his last works, "Ngô (Chinese) Communities and Montane–Littoral Conflict in Đại Việt, ca. 1400–1600," is a powerful reinterpretation of pre-modern Vietnamese history. It relocates "Chinese" at the heart of Vietnamese history at the time, something that nationalist Vietnamese historians have until now tried hard to avoid.

Vietnam has long had a unique, if rather paradoxical, relationship with China and diasporic Chinese people: nowhere else in Southeast Asia are connections between Chinese and local people and governments as old, as complex, or as intimate as in Vietnam, yet many details of this relationship remain poorly understood. The shaping influence of twentieth-century nationalist political agendas, and of research priorities arising from them, have too often restricted our knowledge of Chinese people in Vietnam to generalities or stereotypes.

We are therefore proud to begin this issue by showcasing new, cutting-edge contributions from two established scholars on Vietnamese history—Nola Cooke and Charles Wheeler.

The name Wang Tai has been mentioned in virtually every work on the Chinese in Saigon, from later nineteenth-century French accounts to twenty-first-century publications online. Yet Wang Tai, the man, has remained quite a mysterious figure. Much information published on him is often vague, fragmented, or simply false. Nola Cooke's article, "A Chinese Businessman in 1860s French Cochinchina: The Making of Wang Tai (1828-1900)", helps to bring much of this uncertainty to an end. Drawn from the holdings of a recently accessible fund of many thousands of legal documents (the Depot of Colonial Public Papers in the French National Overseas Archives), Cooke has gathered decades of raw data that she has methodically analysed to provide very detailed information on the rise and near fall of this most significant Chinese figure in early French Cochinchina. This meticulous work, part of an ongoing research project, fills a huge gap in the jigsaw puzzle of our understanding of Chinese business and businessmen at that time.

Charles Wheeler's article operates on a grander scale. It is the most comprehensive work on the Minh Hương to date. Inspired by John Whitmore's "Ngô" thesis, Wheeler traces the Ngô in both directions, both before and after the 15th century. He extends his gaze from the Vietnamese coast to include southern Japan, Taiwan and the coastal regions of Fujian and Guangdong/Guangxi, and shows how all of them were crucial to the long- term formation of a fusion of coastal communities from which the Minh Hương ultimately arose. This research overturns the current narrative which depicts the Minh Hương as minor actors, a distinctive, fixed and recent group that accidentally arose following an exodus of Ming supporters from southern China after the final Qing victory but then faded into history within 300 years. Wheeler's approach blurs such categorical boundaries in a fruitful way, allowing the actual history to be reflected much more accurately. As Wheeler argues, this wider, maritime perspective "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".

We are grateful to Prof. Đinh Khắc Thuân for sharing his invaluable work on Chinese inscriptions in Hanoi. The motive force behind his work highlights again the central theme of this issue — a questioning of the narrow nationalist narrative of Vietnamese history. Although Chinese ("Ngô") were active for centuries in the heart of Đại Việt's capital, Thăng Long, except for a brief period in the seventeenth century, their inscriptions in temples or communal halls (*huiguan*) were excluded from the most recent collection of historical stele inscriptions commemorating the 1000th year of Thăng

Long/Hanoi's history. The inscriptions published by Đinh show a previously unknown aspect of the early nineteenth-century economy of Thăng Long. For instance, it is striking that in 1820 alone donations by the Cantonese merchants to the Hội quán Việt Đông *(Yuedong huiguan*) topped 10,000 taels of silver (24,235 *quan* of copper coins), while in 1830 Saigon the same dialect group gave their Hội Quán Tuệ Thành only half that amount. Fujian merchants, who were considered to be the richest dialect group in nineteenth-century Vietnam, donated but a third of what these Cantonese gave in Hanoi. This may hint that Thăng Long, where there were numerous Chinese shops and rich merchants, enjoyed a real degree of prosperity under the Bắc thành Tổng trấn of Gia Long and early Minh Mạng era. No such story can be found in the official Nguyễn history, so these Chinese inscriptions have recovered some thin layers of otherwise hidden Vietnamese history.

Chinese inscriptions thus form another focus of this issue. We publish 19 inscriptions collected from Hanoi, Phố Hiến, Hội An and Chợ Lớn to start a long term project of Chinese inscriptions in Vietnam. The importance of this project is highlighted in the research articles in this issue. While Ye Shaofei introduces the inscriptions in nineteenth-century Hanoi concerning the spread of Guandi worship, Zhang and Lê reveal a locally collected inscription on the family history of Trương Hồng Cơ, the most important Minh Hương figure in eighteenth-century Hội An. Both articles tackle the question of religion and shared culture. Further to that, Serizawa Satohiro's field work brings to light an important but little-known aspect of Chinese life in 1950s Saigon/Cholon, that of the religious life of Christian communities and a particular Buddhist group (*Mingyue Jushilin,* with Japan connections) among the Chinese population there.

In different ways, all of the works presented here could be considered as inspired by the pioneering efforts of John Whitmore who, in 2010, kindly contributed his own piece, "Brush and Ship: The Southern Chinese Diaspora and Literati in Đại Việt during the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries" to our issue devoted to Chinese in Vietnam (Volume 4). We present the new scholarship in this volume as a bouquet of flowers to John, in thanks for his groundbreaking career that flattened old boundaries and broadened the horizons of early Vietnamese history. We are privileged to have been his students and colleagues, and hope that John would have been interested in the new findings published in this issue.

Li Tana and Ye Shaofei