

Water Frontier

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Water Frontier

*Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower
Mekong Region, 1750–1880*

EDITED BY NOLA COOKE AND LI TANA



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*This book is dedicated to Professor Chen Chingho,
the pioneering scholar of this field*

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Preface

Precolonial Chinese migration to southern Vietnam has been misunderstood and even mythologized for much of the twentieth century by a historiography that consistently privileged a state-centered and national perspective of Vietnamese dynastic, colonial, and postcolonial history. Over the last decade or more, the flaws in such an approach to Chinese contacts with and migration into southern Vietnam and, indeed, Southeast Asia generally, have become increasingly clear in the work of scholars like Wang Gungwu, Denys Lombard, Claudine Salmon, Anthony Reid, Carl Trocki, and (in regard to southern Vietnam especially) in the pioneering studies of the late Professor Chen Chingho, to whom this book is dedicated. We seek to contribute to this scholarly current by advancing a new approach to considering the shared history of Chinese settlement and interaction in southern Indochina and its surrounding areas. In this book we propose a nationally neutral concept that sets aside modern state boundaries to reconsider the far more open and fluid situation of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from which those modern states emerged.

Our focus is principally on the lower Mekong region, an area stretching from modern south Vietnam into eastern Cambodia and southwest Thailand. For most of the eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries this area was a single trading zone woven together by the regular itineraries of thousands of large and small junk traders, mostly Chinese but also Malay, Cham, and Vietnamese. These overlapping itineraries in turn formed a regional component of wider trade networks that linked southern China to mainland and insular Southeast Asia. We call this area a "Water Frontier" because it was, at the time, a sparsely settled coastal and riverine frontier region of mixed ethnicities and often uncertain settlements in which waterborne trade and commerce, carried out in a long string of small ports, formed an essential component of local life. Indeed, it can be argued that the whole coastal region from the Mekong Delta in modern Vietnam to the

sultanates and later British colonies of the Malay Peninsula formed a single economic region, an extended Water Frontier knit together by the commercial activities of Chinese and other merchants and small traders. In time this larger Water Frontier, organized around the Saigon-Singapore-Bangkok triangle, would come to act as the anchor for one end of an emerging Pan-Pacific network of Chinese commercial interests.

Based on a selection of earlier conference contributions and subsequently written chapters, this book seeks to take the first soundings and to assemble the first evidence that will establish the existence of the Water Frontier historically, and by so doing begin to expand or reposition our still limited understanding of the interactions of traders from south China and local peoples in the region generally, and in particular in the area of modern south Vietnam. It focuses mainly on matters of commerce and political economy, among the least explored fields in Vietnamese historiography to date. This fresh angle of observation has immediately uncovered abundant primary materials, many of them as yet scarcely touched, as they were redundant to the process of constructing national histories for nation-building purposes. Yet the Water Frontier region was the economic foundation of the two new powerful mainland kingdoms that arose in the later eighteenth century, Chakkri Siam and Nguyen Vietnam. To choose only narrowly nationalistic interpretations of this era is to discard as superfluous many of the most important historical sources and, for instance, to fail to understand the dynamics that created these two dynasties and their economic capitals, Bangkok and Saigon.

The concept of a "Water Frontier" here, a fluid transnational and multi-ethnic economic zone, allows us to perceive and talk about the lower Mekong as a single region. It is thus crucial to a clearer and more historically nuanced understanding of the time and place and of the multiple roles played here by Chinese sojourners, settlers, and junk traders in interaction with a kaleidoscope of local peoples. As this book shows, a Water Frontier perspective reveals the regional significance of individual events within an appropriately wider context. It decenters modern dominant cultures and ethnicities from a past era when they were hardly hegemonic. It underlines the existence of a multiethnic, open frontier society within which newcomers or outsiders, important among them various Chinese groups and individuals, often made major contributions to local economic, political, and cultural life that would later be domesticated and exploited to their own benefit by the powerful new states that came to dominate the Water Frontier region during the nineteenth century.

We are very conscious of the debt of gratitude we owe to several scholars who have helped to formulate aspects of the Water Frontier concept. Our thanks go in particular to Anthony Reid, Carl Trocki, Yumio Sakurai, and Paul Krotoska, participants in a 1999 workshop organized by Li Tana and entitled "Commercial Vietnam: Trade and the Chinese in the Nineteenth Century." That workshop gave birth to the idea that a much larger region than simply modern south Vietnam was implicated in our subject matter and, after the workshop ended, we wrestled together with the fundamental problem of how to talk about

this wider area without inappropriately importing later national usages. The term "Water Frontier" arose from this fertile discussion. It took much longer, of course, to flesh out the concept and to carry out the additional research that breathed life into it, a process in which Carl Trocki played an indispensable role.

We would also like to acknowledge the long-suffering forbearance of our contributors, who patiently endured an extended and frustrating delay in the appearance of this book due to the persistent illness of one of the editors. We are greatly indebted, too, to Mark Selden for his assistance, encouragement, and critical commentaries during the process of preparing the manuscript for publication. Others who offered comments and suggestions on various drafts include David Marr, Victor Lieberman, and Christopher Goscha, whose contributions we deeply appreciate. Our thanks also go to Kay Dancey and Caroline O'Sullivan who assisted with maps and formatting.

We also wish to express our gratitude to the Australian Research Council, whose funding made possible the workshop in Ho Chi Minh City at which the Water Frontier concept was first mooted, and whose continued support has ensured its later development.

Finally, we would like to pay tribute to the goodwill and encouragement of our respective families, and especially to Bill and Lihong, without which this long drawn-out project might never have been completed.

The Late-Eighteenth- and Early-Nineteenth-Century Mekong Delta in the Regional Trade System

Li Tana

Indo-China presents a remarkable picture of immigration, centuries old and unchanging. The groups within the country are steadily nourished and supplemented from identical groups from without.

—V. Thompson¹

The colonial notion of rigid, impermeable, and unchanging boundaries and unchangeable peoples in premodern Southeast Asia, enunciated here by Virginia Thompson but accepted by so many others at the time, has been challenged by scholars in the last few decades. Newly uncovered data further expose the wide gap between colonial perceptions and Southeast Asian historical experiences. Here I discuss the issues with respect to precolonial Southeast Asian trade. Together with the works of earlier revisionist scholars, new data challenge the nationalist historiographies that read back in time from the clear-cut boundaries of contemporary Southeast Asia. Unavoidably, questions are raised, such as what was "internal" and "external," "within" and "without," "local" and especially "national" in eighteenth-century Southeast Asia. With an eye to such questions, this chapter looks at the internal mechanism that made the region effectively one economic unit and explores the connections between the broader Mekong Delta region and its neighbors.

A Text that Unfolds a Picture, Reveals a Perspective, and Recovers an Experience

To illustrate some of the characteristics of this unit let us look at a Vietnamese text of the early nineteenth century that describes six major routes leading to different parts of the region around the Gulf of Siam. The text in question is the *Xiêm la quốc lộ trình tap lục* [A Collection of Routes to the Kingdom of Siam].² Compiled by Tong Phuc Ngoan, a senior officer of the Nguyen government, it was presented to King Gia Long in 1810. The document details two land routes, three sea routes, and one mixed land and sea route between the various trading centers along coasts and rivers of the southern Water Frontier that connected Vietnam, Cambodia, Siam, and points further south. Information provided includes directions for the various routes, distinctive landmarks, and local products found on each route, the location of fresh water, and the distance between stopping places. The brief outline that follows gives a clearer understanding of the regional trade context.

The first route is called "the upper land route." Departing from Phnom Penh, it ran via Battambang to Bangkok up to Ayutthaya then down to the coast all the way to Chaiya. At some point it crossed the Malay Peninsula to Penang, from where it went up to Phuket and Chalaung. The second land route, called "the lower land route," is much shorter. It covers the area between Ko Chang, Chantaburi, Bang Pla Soi (Chonburi), and Petriu (Chachoengsao) to the east of Bangkok. It is worth noting that both land routes are described as departing from places other than the Mekong Delta, one from Phnom Penh and the other from Ko Chang. This was perhaps because the collection was submitted to Gia Long himself. As Prince Nguyen Anh, the king had been exiled in the region for many years and knew these places so well that it would have been stating the obvious to describe the routes from the Mekong Delta to Phnom Penh and Ko Chang.

The "coastal route" in the text departed from the Tranh De mouth of the lower Mekong branch, the modern Hau Giang and colonial Bassac River, and went via Rach Gia, Hatien, Ream, Ko Kong, and Chantaburi to Ko Kram Island in the Gulf of Siam. From there the route turned south to Pathiu, Chumphon, Chaiya, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Songkhla, Pattani, Sungei Kelantan, Terengganu, Singapore, and Penang before heading north to Chalaung. The "sea route" was a variation of the "coastal route." It left from Hon Khoai (Poulo Obi island) off Ca Mau point then sailed via Phu Quoc island to Ko Samet and Ko Si Chang islands in the Gulf of Siam before going down to Ban Pak Nam (or Packnam, about two miles from the mouth of the river Menam), Sam Roi Yat, Mae Nam Langsuan, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Pattani, and finally Chalaung, the present day Phuket.

The so-called cross ocean route³ was a collection of short travel routes between the islands in the Gulf of Siam, such as those from Ban Plasoi to Mae Klong and from Phu Quoc to Poulo Panjang.

Finally the last, and perhaps most interesting, route was called "a port-to-port route." It contains detailed information about the major rivers of the Mekong Delta area as well as tracing their upper reaches. With its seventy-plus place-names along the Mekong and its description of their landscape, this text has to be the earliest extant document we have about the Mekong Delta, predating Trinh Hoai Duc's better-known *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* by more than a decade. Further, and unlike the Gia Dinh gazetteer, Tong Phuc Ngoan's collection of trade routes contained information extending far beyond Vietnamese borders, including in its final description a route reaching as far north as Chiang Mai.

This document highlights the hybrid culture that characterized the Water Frontier. Both the compass used for directions and the way the compiler calculated distance (*geng*) were Chinese, but the text used distinctively Vietnamese measures for length, the *thuoc* (about 0.44 meters) and the *tam* (2.2 meters) rather than the Chinese maritime measure of *tua* (about 2.5 meters).⁴ Almost all the islands in the Gulf of Siam were given Vietnamese names, expressed in demotic Vietnamese (*nom*) characters and arranged according to Vietnamese grammar.⁵ Penang, for example, was called "Cu Lao Cau" in the text, totally different from the Chinese name Binlang Yu (Palm Island). While the word *Cau* is Vietnamese, the word *Cu Lao* for "island" came from Malay *Pulau*.⁶ The fascinating material compiled in this text surely indicates the extensive regional experience of southern Vietnamese before 1810. All this knowledge—the Vietnamese names for even quite small places, detailed directions, carefully noted water depths, features of the landscape, and products available for trade in each place—had to be accumulated from lengthy contacts between the peoples of the Water Frontier, which enabled these terms and knowledge to be so naturally absorbed into each other.

This observation led me to consider the principal contributors acknowledged in the compilation. They were named as Vietnamese with quite different occupations: a Buddhist monk, *Sai Thuy*; an army officer, *Thinh*; an interpreter, *Bien*; two Vietnamese merchants from Phu Quoc island, *An* and *Tam*; and some Vietnamese migrants in the area.⁷ Among them the most interesting for my purpose here are the two Vietnamese merchants. The text used a particular term for "merchant," the *nom* character *lai*. According to Thanh The Vy, the authority on Vietnam's commercial history, *lai* was only used to describe rich merchants handling trade in large quantities.⁸ It was also, linguistically speaking, a relatively late term in common parlance, with *lai* or *cac lai* not becoming widely used until the Tay Son period, that is, from approximately the 1770s onward.⁹

A Liberated Rice Market in the Regional Trade

Rice trade was the heart of the Mekong Delta regional economy. Although rice had always been produced virtually wherever Vietnamese settled, before the

Nguyen won increasing control of the far south it had never been produced as a large-scale export commodity. The development of the Mekong Delta region as an area of commercial rice production for the export market was undoubtedly one of the most momentous events in eighteenth-century Cochinchina. It was also a significant episode in Vietnamese history, since it represented a real departure from Vietnamese agricultural practices and the prevailing economic order.

For much of the eighteenth century, the Nguyen government in the Hue area of modern central Vietnam levied a substantial amount of this rice for sale cheaply to the capital area. After civil war broke out between the successful Tay Son rebels and Nguyen forces (1773–1802), the changed circumstances seem to have provided southern rice growers and boat owners with a singular chance for greater economic autonomy. Before the Tay Son period, the government in Hue reportedly levied 341 boats annually to transport rice from the south,¹⁰ removing an amount of between 5,000 and 6,000 tons from the export market.¹¹ However, all the old political and economic bonds between Hue and the far south were cut by the Tay Son rebellion by the mid-1770s. Although this produced the most devastating famine for a century in central Vietnam, in the south it freed the local rice market to an unprecedented extent and enabled it to offer its product on a far broader Chinese and Southeast Asian market. To this extent, the Tay Son rebellion created the environment that facilitated the rise of big Vietnamese merchants—the *lai*.

As *lai* was designated for rich merchants handling trade in large quantities and the word *lai* originally meant "sail," it is reasonable to assume that the merchants known by this term originally sailed large trading vessels and became rich on this basis. This group must have grown numerous enough to be socially visible, to be recognized as separate from petty traders. More important, the term distinguished sea from land traders. It is thus telling that the term *lai* became well known in the Tay Son period after the economic controls of the former Dang Trong (Cochinchina) Nguyen government had been destroyed by the rebellion.

Lai is also most likely a southern usage that originated from commercial rice transporting. This required a large quantity of junks that in turn required an abundance of accessible hardwood. The Mekong Delta region answered this demand beautifully.¹² It had been reputed as the best place for logging since early Vietnamese settlement in the later seventeenth century. Le Quy Don reported, on the basis of official documents from the later eighteenth century, that merchants in Nam Bo Chinh (in modern Quang Binh Province) would make trips to the Mekong Delta specifically for shipbuilding there. "They would build trips to the Mekong Delta specifically for shipbuilding there. 'They would build over a hundred big ships, and each would sell for thousands of *quan* [when they went back to Nam Bo Chinh].'"¹³ This would mean at a minimum well over 100,000 *quan* in sales from one district alone. To set this amount in context, it can be compared to the figure given for Nguyen state revenue in the same

source. According to the same author, in the mid-eighteenth century Nguyen government revenue ranged between 338,100 and 423,300 *quan*, although this does not include the Nguyen rulers' other more lucrative sources of revenue. Even so, it is striking to note that the money produced by shipbuilding and resale in one district totaled about one-fourth of the state revenue. It is also worth considering how many craftsmen must have been involved in this huge shipbuilding business. All these were crucial ingredients for the rise of big merchants, the *lai*. The development of these big merchants resulted directly from the freed rice market of the Mekong Delta.

An Extensive Arena—the Gulf of Siam

The zone of most active trade involving people from the Mekong Delta region, be they Vietnamese *lai* or local Chinese, stretched from Saigon to the Gulf of Siam and its south. Certainly the Gulf of Siam area was familiar to Nguyen Anh, who constantly "moved among the islands [in the Gulf]." In an urgent situation in 1783, for instance, as later Nguyen court records reported, an army officer of Nguyen Anh was "sent to Chan Bon (Chantaburi) to seek Ba Da Lac (Bishop Pigneaux)" to take charge of the prince's young son, Canh. But as chance had it, Nguyen Anh found the bishop himself later in 1784 as both parties were leaving the Gulf of Siam, the exiled prince en route to Batavia or Malacca to seek foreign assistance against the Tay Son and the missionary taking his pupils to Pondicherry to escape the chaos of civil war in southern Vietnam and Cambodia.¹⁴ This suggests that there was already a fairly good knowledge of the islands and coastal areas along the Gulf of Siam among certain southern Vietnamese of the late eighteenth century. In this regard it is particularly interesting to observe that the area of most detailed knowledge contained in the *Collection of Routes* lay from the Hau Giang (Bassac) river southwards, that is, the area facing the Gulf of Siam. A good number of Vietnamese probably lived on this line of contact. Apart from the well-known Vietnamese community in Chantaburi, archival materials held in the Missions Étrangères de Paris also routinely mention Cochinchinese settlements on a number of islands in this region in the late eighteenth century,¹⁵ not to mention the many thousands who lived in Hatien before its destruction in 1771. More specifically, a European traveler also noted in 1826 that Vietnamese merchants trading to Bangkok stopped over on the Siamese island of Koh Si Chang where they had built a temple.¹⁶ Koh (Ko) Si Chang appeared in our text as part of the sea route between Ca Mau and Phuket in modern southern Thailand.¹⁷

This active trading conducted by people from the Mekong Delta region contributed considerably to the flourishing commerce in the Gulf of Siam area, which in turn attracted the Chinese junk trade. Although Chinese junks were noted in this region by European travelers in earlier centuries, the fact that the

junk trade was reportedly at a peak in the Gulf of Siam in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was surely related to the prosperity generated at that time by the dense trading network that linked coast and hinterland from Saigon to the Malay States.¹⁸ A saying among the Chinese trading to Southeast Asia, most likely coined before the 1830s, compares the degrees of prosperity of the three major ports in Southeast Asia: "The first is Siam, and second Ba (Batavia). The third is Selat (Singapore)."¹⁹ The factors leading to the prosperity of the Siam trade were varied. Setting aside demand for rice for southern China, there was an expanding market for rice in the territory between the Gulf of Siam and the archipelagoes. This was the area in which, as Carl Trocki has shown, an offshore production system was created by expatriate Chinese labor organizations (*kongsi*) in the late eighteenth century. This system of "offshore" production was linked directly into the broader Chinese trading system. By the 1780s, Trocki noted, "a significant number of these 'coolie' settlements had been formed in . . . Phuket, Kedah, Terengganu, Kelantan, Sambas, Pontianak, Bangka, Brunei, or . . . Chantaburi and Trat."²⁰ Interestingly, this list of ports coincides closely with the ports mentioned in the *Collection of Routes*.

That the Vietnamese visited the ports cited above is also confirmed by an English observer in 1833 in regard to Terengganu: "In the afternoon a Cochinchinese vessel came into the river from Annam, laden with salt and rice. She was about 50 tons burthen, built after a European model."²¹ Terengganu was one of the rice deficit ports in the area that the Cochinchinese had good reason to visit.²² It had long been a meeting place for English, Portuguese, Chinese, and Bugis traders and a dissemination point for opium and firearms. From 1784 it became an important outlet for the tin and pepper previously taken to Riau.²³

This 1833 observation brings our attention to the southern Vietnamese maritime tradition. The French merchant and adventurer Pierre Poivre observed disdainfully in the mid-eighteenth century that Cochinchinese vessels were "always hugging the coast."²⁴ This was certainly confirmed by the sea routes mentioned in the early-nineteenth-century Vietnamese text *A Collection of Routes to the Kingdom of Siam*, all of which indeed hug the coast and its long string of minor ports. This typical Vietnamese maritime tradition, however, did not seem to hinder Viet trade from the Mekong Delta to the Gulf of Siam. As the regional trade system was fairly well developed in this period, it was in fact to the Viet advantage to hug the coast. Carried by strong coastal currents and prevailing winds, they could visit the smaller ports without paying port taxes and trade their rice for local products such as iron, tin, and pepper with little capital required.

This characteristic made Saigon's trade similar to that of Bangkok, although on a smaller scale. Crawford observed in the 1820s that "Bangkok carries on a coasting trade with the ports of Champon, Chaiya, Bandon, Ligor, Sungora, and Talung, on the western coast of the Gulf, and with Banpasoi, Banpakung, Bangprah, Banpomung, Rayong, Passeh, Chantabun, Tungyai, and Kokong on the

eastern coast. The great object of this trade is to collect produce for the Chinese markets."²⁵

From this point of view, Hatien was only one of the major ports flourishing in the regional trading system in the Gulf of Siam area in the eighteenth century. It was better known because for most of the eighteenth century there was no other major commercial center on the gulf. The founding of Saigon and Bangkok in the late eighteenth century, the liberation of the Mekong Delta rice trade, and the emergence of a significant number of Chinese laborer settlements in coastal Southeast Asia created a thriving trade system most noticeably in the Gulf of Siam area. Although ultimately linked to the Chinese trade system, it also had a life of its own.

Medium and Small Boats—the Backbone of the Regional Trade

The backbone of this system was medium- and small-sized junks rather than larger ones. This suggests a strong local or regional, rather than long-distance, trade. Medium to small boats formed perhaps the most numerous and active group in the Gulf of Siam area at the time. Crawford reports that in the 1820s there were about 280 junks based in Bangkok, 80 of them trading to China and 40 or 50 to Vietnam, "all small."²⁶ Those trading to China would also sometimes stop in Saigon to trade before heading to China.

It was these groups who supplied Vietnamese demand for iron and tin. Crawford said that Saigon's "exports from Siam consist of unwrought iron, iron pans, tobacco, opium, and some European Chinese goods. They take back mats for bags and sails, wrought and unwrought silks, &c."²⁷ Iron was always in great demand in Cochinchina of the predynastic Nguyen era, and this exchange must have been an ongoing practice present in the region for a long time as suggested by the name of Sa Dec as the "iron market." The need for iron became acute during the Tay Son period. To encourage merchants to bring the strategic items (pig iron, wrought iron, tin, and sulfur) he most needed, in 1789 Nguyen Anh allowed Chinese junks bringing these commodities to Saigon to take away large amounts of Mekong Delta rice tax free.²⁸ Although nineteenth-century Nguyen court records clearly used the term "Qing (i.e., Chinese) junks," the list of favored imports strongly suggests that the 1789 regulation was mainly targeting those Chinese based and trading in the Gulf of Siam area and its south where such commodities were easily available, rather than those who came directly from China.

The need for iron was expressed more explicitly in the tax regulation of 1809, which was concerned exclusively with vessels trading to Saigon from Hatien and Siam. According to this, anyone who brought more than 4,000 *can* (two tons) of wrought iron or 2,000 *can* (one ton) of pig iron from Siam to sell

in Saigon could buy unrestricted amounts of items like silk, silk fabric, cotton, silkworm cocoons, and sugar without paying port tax. Those who failed to bring any iron to Saigon, however, would not have access to the listed items.²⁹ By the 1830s this large Cochinchinese demand for iron seemed to have stimulated the iron industry in northern Siam in Tha Chanuang. There Siamese made a living by collecting large lumps of iron carbonate, which were scattered on the surface over a large area, and taking it by boat loads to sell to the Chinese foundries whose five to six hundred men worked day and night. With numerous Chinese in the area, a distillery was founded and the little China town established there became one of the two towns noted as having an exceptionally strong Chinese presence in northern Siam.³⁰

A Regional Trade System Including Chinese Small Traders

As the foregoing shows, the Chinese operating medium- or small-sized junks and based in the ports along the Gulf of Siam and its south, in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were an important element in the short to medium distance regional trade system. One illustrative example comes from a local history of the Qiong Shan District of Hainan Island. There it was reported that two junks were built in the early nineteenth century that headed for the port of Ban Pak Phanang, from where they started their business of *bo zai* (junk transportation) between Siam and Singapore. From Siamese ports they transported rice and teak to Singapore, bringing back European products to sell in Siam. As the distance between the two was short, they could make four to five journeys a year. When they had earned sufficient money, they brought rice, teak, and European products back to Hainan.³¹

Another example of the importance of Chinese small traders in the regional context of Southeast Asia comes from the report of an English observer in 1833 about some Chinese traders in a small vessel he met in Hoi An: "They told me that they had come from Foochowfoo [Fujian] four months ago, that they had been trading on the coast of Cochinchina ever since; that they were going up to Turon [Danang] in a week or so, to load with sugar for Singapore."³²

This observation from Vietnam was equally reflected in the experiences of some of the people from the same district of Hainan Island as discussed above. One happy story was about a certain Rao Xinxiao, who built eighteen junks in the Mekong Delta and twelve berths at the ports along the coast. His junks traveled between these ports carrying both people and cargoes and made a fortune.³³ None of these traders seemed to have paid port taxes to anyone, a major attraction of this region to the Chinese and other traders.

Rao's story might have been a common experience of many Chinese small traders operating in the regional trade system in the early nineteenth century. A similar story can even be found in the Nguyen chronicles of 1837. According to

this source, Emperor Minh Mang was furious to hear that a Chinese called Huang Ye had engaged in an extensive regional trade for more than ten years and had paid no tax to the Nguyen government by pretending that the government had levied his junk. What upset Minh Mang most was this pretense. A government levied boat (*nhieu thuyen*), which carried an official identification plate, looked completely different from a Chinese junk and thus he should have been easily recognized and taxed. Yet this corrupt Chinese had successfully made his fortune with the support of local officials who had known what he was doing and profited from it for an outrageously long ten years or more.³⁴

What Minh Mang saw in this case was the corruption of government officers. What he did not know was that he was looking at one unit in a massive trade system in which thousands of people in the Mekong Delta and the Gulf of Siam, be they Chinese, Vietnamese, Khmer, or Siamese, made their living. Looking at the political map of the region between the fifteenth and the late eighteenth centuries, one striking factor stands out: for almost three hundred years, not a single major political center existed along the thousands of miles of coast from Phan Rang in modern central Vietnam to Ligor (Nakhon Sithammarat) on the Malay Peninsula.³⁵ With waterways going everywhere and rice ready as cash, for those living in the Mekong Delta and beyond trade was a long-established custom and way of life, while notions of government control and tax obligations were recent and alien. This Mekong Delta experience and perspective formed an important basis for the Le Van Khoi rebellion of the 1830s. It is interesting to note, in this context, the stereotype of the inhabitants of southern Siam as being "pugnacious, impatient of authority, given to lawlessness."³⁶ Similar, almost word-for-word descriptions can be found on the people from the Mekong Delta.

Trade between the Mekong Delta and Phnom Penh

River-borne trade was just as integral a part of this regional trading system as maritime trade, especially trade between the Mekong Delta and Cambodia. As the Mekong Delta region was covered with rivers and canals, water routes were the easier option for trading in this area. As Crawford described Saigon, "the residence of the Chinese merchants . . . is intersected with many canals communicating with the main river, and boats come up and unloaded at the merchants' doors. From here there is a communication by water with the great river of Kamboja."³⁷

The backbone of this hinterland trade between the delta and Cambodia, however, was Vietnamese traders. Different types of boats and ships were made in the Mekong Delta for different purposes ranging from rice boats, fishing boats, firewood boats, to pleasure boats. One type of bigger boat, called *Ghe be*, had a large capacity and was made for trading to Cambodia.³⁸ This was most

likely what the Nguyen chronicles termed *thuyen hanh thuong Tran Tay* (boats trading to the "western protectorate," that is, to Cambodia). These craft were different from and more heavily taxed than *thuyen hanh thuong Luc Tinh* (boats trading within the six southern provinces), which were described as shorter, narrower, and shallower than those trading to Cambodia.³⁹ According to Son Nam, a Vietnamese expert on the Mekong Delta, the origin of the place-name Cai Be—"the place where *be* are gathered"⁴⁰—derives from the custom of *ghe be* anchoring at that part of the Tien Giang Mekong arm before and after trading to Cambodia. Cai Be in modern Tien Giang Province, the town that grew up on the trade between Saigon and Cambodia, is still called by the same name.

Besides its convenient location between Saigon and Cambodia, Cai Be possessed another advantage in its closeness to My Tho. My Tho was important to the Cambodian trade because it produced betel nuts, one of the major items that Vietnamese carried to Cambodia. Indeed, proximity to the Cambodia market might have directly stimulated commercial betel nut production here. Certainly Son Nam identified an area called "*muoi tam thon vuon trau*" (eighteen villages specializing in growing betel nuts) in the My Tho area.⁴¹

Another item that Vietnamese traded to Cambodia was salt. A special kind of red salt, said to be particularly tasty for processing salted fish, was produced in modern Kien Giang Province on the Viet-Khmer border. In the early nineteenth century local Chinese traded this salt to Cambodia. They would "pack the salt into bags, each bag containing 56 *can* [2.53 kilos] of salt, 40 bags would make one Khmer *xe* [a measure of about 100–120 kilos]. This trade [was] very profitable when the salt [was] sold in Cambodia."⁴² For their return trip, Vietnamese purchased canoes cheaply in Cambodia⁴³ where big tree trunks were readily available. The Nguyen chronicles of the early nineteenth century often mentioned logging in Cambodia and the Mekong Delta to make big ships for the court.⁴⁴ In the Gia Long era all the boats seem to have brought back quantities of deerskin since the chronicles say every Viet trading boat returning from Cambodia had to pay a special tax in deerskin of fifteen to forty-five pieces, depending on the size of the boat. Minh Mang abolished this tax in 1820.⁴⁵ In addition, traders with the specialized vessels required to transport them would bring back buffaloes, particularly from the Takeo area.

If we consider the trade items above, it strongly suggests that this trading system existed from very early in the Vietnamese history of the Mekong Delta. Certainly in regard to the buffalo traded from the Takeo area, it was critical for the opening of the Mekong Delta region as an area of commercial rice production. We know that early-nineteenth-century Saigon was the present-day Cholon, and Ben Nghe was modern Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City.⁴⁶ In its written form Ben Nghe was also called Ben Trau or Nguu Chu.⁴⁷ All these are Vietnamese versions of one Khmer name, Kompong Krabei,⁴⁸ which means "ferry for young buffaloes." Surely this name hints at an economic interchange between Vietnamese and Khmers in the eighteenth century.⁴⁹ The location of this "ferry

of young buffaloes" strikes me as significant because buffaloes were crucial for large-scale rice cultivation in the Gia Dinh and Bien Hoa area. As Trinh Hoai Duc noted in the early nineteenth century, "land in the Phien An and Bien Hoa areas needs buffaloes to cultivate it. Such land could yield one hundred *hoc* of rice for one *hoc* of seeds planted." Land in the Bassac area colonized much later by Vietnamese did not "require the use of buffalo."⁵⁰ In the old place-name for Saigon, it seems, lurks the memory of a trading practice critical to the opening of the Mekong Delta. The regular supply of draft animals sometimes came from even further away, from Siam. In 1778, for example, thirty Vietnamese traders were said to have come to purchase cattle at Khukhan in northeastern Siam and from there they returned to Phnom Penh.⁵¹ Only in the context of a regional trade in cattle can we understand how some rich Vietnamese families in the Mekong Delta area could possess 300 to 400 oxen and buffaloes each, as reported in the late eighteenth century.⁵² This astonishing number of draft animals owned by one family would have been almost literally unimaginable to anyone residing in the old territories of Vietnamese-speaking people, but not in the Mekong Delta.

Setting aside Saigon as an old port of the buffalo trade, we can find other such links elsewhere in the Mekong Delta region. The buffalo-oxen trading link between Vietnamese and Khmers definitely existed, and Cambodia remained the major source for oxen and buffaloes for southern Vietnamese provinces for centuries. So regular and profitable was this trade that it prompted some Vietnamese to specialize in it at the Takeo market in the bigger, heavier vessels that were previously mentioned.⁵³ As late as the 1950s, each year 40,000 of the 70,000 oxen (or nearly 60 percent) exported from Takeo and Pong Tom went to the Saigon-Cholon area and all of their 10,000 buffaloes.⁵⁴ This large and regular supply of farm animals, something only possible by trading with Khmer and uplanders in the region, was indispensable for the mass production and commercialization of rice. In other words, the opening of far southern Vietnam depended on a regional economic and commercial system in which Vietnamese interacted with various other peoples in the region and from which the vitality of the region arose.

Conclusion

Lying at the crossroads of several different trade currents, the Mekong Delta region formed a crucial link in an active trading system in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the early nineteenth century Vietnamese text *A Collection of Routes to the Kingdom of Siam* clearly demonstrates. What this shows us is a well-known and well-used series of trade routes by land and by sea, which connected mainland and insular Southeast Asia in various ways and had been in operation long before it came to Crawford's attention in the 1820s. Both

the future primate cities of Saigon and Bangkok were originally built on the basis of this tightly woven regional trade network and its wider connections. In this respect it is interesting to note that this region produced at the same time not one but three of the most important political figures of mainland Southeast Asia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: Nguyen Anh from the Mekong Delta, Taksin from Chantaburi, and Rama I from Ratburi. In light of the discussion above, I do not believe that their appearance at the same time and in the same region can be properly understood without relating these men and their accomplishments to the regional trade network that made possible so much of their success.

Notes

1. Virginia Thompson, *French IndoChina* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968), 168.
2. Tong Phuc Ngoan and Duong Van Chau, *Xian luo guo lu cheng ji lu* [A Collection of Routes to the Kingdom of Siam], introduced by Chen Chingho (Hong Kong: New Asia Institute, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1966) [hereafter *Xian luo guo*].
3. The translation of the names of this route and some others in this article are from Geoff Wade, "A Maritime Route in the Vietnamese Text: *Xiem-La-Quoc Lo-Trinh Tap-Luc*," in *Commerce et Navigation en Asie du Sud Est (XIVe-XIXe siècles)*, ed. Nguyen The Anh and Yoshiaki Ishizawa (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), 143-44. A new, abridged excerpt from the coastal route appears as an appendix to this volume.
4. See Chen's comment in *Xian luo guo*, 19.
5. *Xian luo guo*, 21.
6. Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1988), 245.
7. *Xian luo guo*, 1.
8. Thanh The Vy, *Ngoai thuong Viet Nam hoi the ky XVII, XVIII va dau XIX* [The Overseas Trade of Vietnam in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Early Nineteenth Centuries] (Hanoi: Su Hoc, 1961), 173.
9. Thanh The Vy, *Ngoai thuong Vietnam*, 173.
10. Le Qui Don, *Phu Bien Tap Luc* [Miscellaneous Border Records (seized in 1775-1776)] (Saigon: Phu quoc vu khanh dac trach van hoa, 1973), vol. 4, 41.
11. The average tonnage of Southeast Asian junks in the early nineteenth century was 20 to 28 tons. Anthony Reid, "A New Phase of Commercial Expansion," in *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies: Responses to Modernity in the Diverse States of Southeast and Korea, 1750-1900*, ed. Anthony Reid (London and New York: MacMillan and St Martin's Press, 1997), 68. A reasonable guess for the average Viet junks of this period would be 15 tons.
12. John White observed in 1820 that local "shiptimber, and planks, excelled anything I had ever seen." *A Voyage to Cochinchina*, reprint (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1972), 235.
13. Le Quy Don, *Phu bien tap luc*, in *Le Quy Don toan tap* [Complete Works of Le Quy Don] (Hanoi: Social Sciences Press, 1977), 104.

14. *Dai Nam chinh bien liet truyen, so tap* [First Collection of the Primary Compilation of Biographies of Imperial Vietnam] (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Linguistic Studies, 1962), vol. 28, 1322. Copy of letter from Pigneaux, 8 July 1785. Archives of the Missions-Étrangères de Paris, "Cochinchine", vol. 801, 71-73. Private communication from Nola Cooke, January 2002.
15. Private communication from Nola Cooke, January 2002.
16. Christopher Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asia Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885-1954* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), 15.
17. *Xian luo guo*, 17.
18. Tien Rukang, *Shiqi zhi shijiu shiji zhong ye zhongguo fanchuan zai dongnan yazhou* [Chinese Junks from the Mid-Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries in Southeast Asia] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1957), 33-34.
19. Yuan Zuzhi, "Ying hai cai wen ji shi" [A Traveler's Account of Overseas] quoted from *Wanqing haiwai bi ji xuan* [Selected Chinese Travelers' Accounts of the Late Qing Era] (Beijing: Maritime Press, 1983), 18.
20. Carl Trocki, "Chinese Pioneering in Eighteenth Century Southeast Asia," in *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies 195*.
21. Trocki, "Chinese Pioneering," 191. *East, Eastern Sea*
22. Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia before the Nation-State: An Economic History*, unpublished manuscript, chapter VII, 14.
23. Barbara Andaya, *To Live as Brothers: Southeast Sumatra in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 222.
24. "Description of Cochinchina, 1749-50," in *Southern Vietnam under the Nguyen: Documents on the Economic History of Cochinchina (Dang Trong)*, ed. Li Tana and Anthony Reid (Singapore: ECHOSEA, ANU/ISEAS, 1993), 73.
25. John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 413.
26. Crawford, *Journal*, 414.
27. Crawford, *Journal*, 414.
28. *Dai Nam Thuc Luc, De Nhat Ky* [Veritable Records of the Imperial South, First Reign] (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Linguistic Studies, 1962), vol. 4, 350 [hereafter *DNTL*].
29. *Kham Dinh Dai Nam Hoi Dien Su Le* [Official Compendium of Institutions and Usages of the Imperial South] (Hanoi: Social Science Press, 1993?), *tap* 4, vol. 48, 430.
30. B. J. Terwiel, *Through Travellers' Eyes* (Bangkok: D. K. Book House, 1989), 128, quoting the French missionary Bishop Pallegoix.
31. Pan Gan, "Qiong shan zui zao chu yang fang chuan dui sing shuai shi" [The Ups and Downs of the Earliest Junk Crews Going Overseas from the Qiong Shan District], *Qiong Qiao Chun Qiu* [Journal of the History of Overseas Chinese from Hainan Island] 1 (1990): 12.
32. Edward Brown, *Cochin-China and My Experience of It: A Seaman's Narrative of His Adventures and Sufferings during a Captivity among Chinese Pirates, on the Coast of Cochin-China, and Afterwards during a Journey on Foot across That Country, in the Years 1857-58* (London: Charles Westerton, 1861), 161.
33. Brown, *Cochin-China*, 13.
34. *DNTL, De Nhat Ky*, vol. 179, 4054-55. Also see Choi's chapter in this book.
35. *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power, and Belief*, ed. Anthony Reid (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 4.

36. Lorraine M. Gesick, *In the Land of Lady White Blood: Southern Thailand and the Meaning of History* (Ithaca: SEAP, 1995), 9.
37. Crawford, *Journal*, 587-88.
38. Son Nam, *Ben Nghe Xua* [Saigon's Yesteryears] (Ho Chi Minh City: Van Nghe, 1992), 40-41.
39. DNTL, vol. 179, 4050-4051.
40. Son Nam, *Ben Nghe Xua*, 40.
41. Son Nam, *Dong bang song Cuu Long* [The Mekong Delta] (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Ho Chi Minh City, 1993), 36. This place also seems to have been closely associated with Chinese residence and perhaps occupation. See Li Tana, "Cang hai sang tian: Chinese Communities in the 18th Century Mekong Delta" (paper presented at the International Conference on "China and Southeast Asia: Changing Links through History," Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 19-21 July 2001), 6.
42. Trinh Hoai Duc, *Gia Dinh Thanh Thong Chi* [Gia Dinh Gazette] (Saigon: Phu Quoc vu khanh dac trach van hoa, 1972), vol. 3, 7b.
43. Son Nam, *Ben Nghe xua*, 40.
44. Son Nam, *Dong bang song Cuu Long*, 38.
45. DNTL, *De Nhi Ky*, vol. 179, 4054-4055.
46. Crawford, *Journal*, 223.
47. "Gia Dinh that thu vinh" [Song about the Loss of Gia Dinh] in Truong Vinh Ky, *Gia Dinh phong canh vinh* [Odes to Gia Dinh], introduced by Nguyen Dinh Dau (Ho Chi Minh City: Tuoi Tre, 1997), 47, fn 1.
48. Truong Vinh Ky, *Petit cours de géographie de la Basse Cochinchine* (Saigon: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1875), quoted in Nguyen Dinh Dau, "Dia ly lich su thanh pho Ho Chi Minh" [Historical Geography of Ho Chi Minh City] in *Dia chi van hoa Thanh pho Hochiminh* [A Cultural Gazette of Ho Chi Minh City], ed. Tran Van Giau et al. (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Ho Chi Minh City, 1987), 223.
49. "Ben Nghe" [*Nguu Chu*] first appeared in the Nguyen chronicles in 1775. This is later than many place names in the Mekong Delta like Saigon or Dong Nai. *Dai Nam Thuc Luc. Tien Bien* [Veritable Records of the Imperial South, Early Period] (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Linguistic Studies, 1961), vol. 12, 165.
50. Trinh Hoai Duc, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, vol. 5, 3b.
51. Quoted from Puangthong Rungswadisab, "War and Trade: Siamese Interventions in Cambodia, 1767-1851", Ph.D. thesis, University of Wollongong, 1995, 77.
52. Le Quy Don, *Phu Bien Tap Luc*, 243a.
53. Son Nam, *Dong bang song Cuu Long*, 38.
54. *Nanyue Gaomian huaqiao shiye* [Overseas Chinese Enterprises in South Vietnam and Cambodia], ed. Chen Jixing (Saigon: n.p., 1955), 8. Buffalo and cattle for the Red River Delta came from the northern highland provinces of Lang Son, Thai Nguyen, and Yen Bai, from Nghe An and Thanh Hoa in the central region, and from Laos. Ta Thi Thuy, "Rice Cultivating and Cattle Raising in Tonkin in the First Half of 20th Century," in *Quantitative Economic History of Vietnam*, ed. Jean-Pascal Bassino, Jean-Dominique Giacometti, and Konosuke Odaka (Tokyo: Institute of Economic Research, Hitotsubashi University, 2000), 101.

6

The Nguyen Dynasty's Policy toward Chinese on the Water Frontier in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

Choi Byung Wook

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Chinese merchants from Fujian, Quangdong, and other southern Chinese ports had been welcome to trade with or sojourn in Nguyen Cochinchina (Dang Trong). After the fall of the Ming dynasty, this contact expanded as a wave of émigrés from southern China appeared seeking asylum from the Qing. Because these newcomers maintained an outward allegiance to the fallen dynasty in appearance and customs, Vietnamese called them Ming loyalists (*Minh Huong*.) The overwhelming majority of them were men who freely intermarried with local women, whether Viet or Khmer. Once established in the Nguyen realm, Minh Huong usually put down roots in local society and an unknown number probably merged into it over time, although others continued to maintain a sense of separate identity through their registration in special Minh Huong association. By the early nineteenth century, when Gia Long took the throne after three decades of civil war, many Minh Huong were already third-generation locals who had long supported the Nguyen cause.

As population pressure increased in China during the eighteenth century, a different exodus occurred from southern Chinese ports, especially after the Qing court relaxed its opposition to emigrant Chinese returning from abroad. Men seeking to make their fortunes in Southeast Asia, without necessarily intending to leave China permanently, began appearing in large numbers in the region. Unlike the earlier Minh Huong, these newcomers conformed to Qing norms of

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- Yang Yandi, 39, 40
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