

WATER FRONTIER



COMMERCE
AND THE
CHINESE IN
THE LOWER
MEKONG
REGION,

Edited by Nola Cooke and Li Tana

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

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Water Frontier

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*This book is dedicated to Professor Chen Chingho,
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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 multiethnic 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 Kratoska, 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.

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The Water Frontier: An Introduction

Li Tana

Thus restored in its global nature, and in a deliberately non-classical perspective, the history of Southeast Asia can reasonably escape the “polarized” history to which it is too often confined . . . and profit from a new approach which takes into account synchronisms and networks.

—Denys Lombard¹

The land we call the Water Frontier remained largely underwater or in the swamp not three centuries ago. A glance at a map of Southeast Asia between the thirteenth and the early eighteenth centuries reveals no major political center along the hundreds of miles of coastline from Champa in the north past the Mekong Delta around to the Gulf of Thailand and south to Nakon Sithammarat on the Malay Peninsula.² The Khmer name of “Can”³ and Vietnamese of “Bien” or “Cuong” used in place-names in the lower Mekong Delta region all refer to frontier or border. In the late eighteenth century, however, on this once deserted coast, long regarded as a backwater, there emerged the two prominent political and economic centers of mainland Southeast Asia—Bangkok and Saigon—along with a string of bustling minor ports to flank them. South Chinese junk traders and a host of other itinerant merchants serviced all these ports. By the early twentieth century, rice, tin, rubber, and cash crop production had made this Water Frontier region Southeast Asia’s most vigorous center of growth, both in terms of population and productivity.⁴

The history of the emergence of this significant area became obscured when the region was sliced into pieces and fitted into respective national histories. This national view placed each country at the center of the story while the South

China Sea, the heart of the region, was largely ignored as the “empty center of Southeast Asia.”⁵ Yet, as the eminent French scholar, the late Denys Lombard, has persuasively argued, during the last two millennia at least, south China and the lands surrounding the South China Sea were so interwoven by overlapping trading networks and cultural interactions as to form an ensemble that can fruitfully be compared to the Mediterranean of Fernand Braudel.⁶ As Lombard concluded, “wanting to understand Southeast Asia without integrating a good part of southern China into one’s thinking is like wanting to give an account of the Mediterranean world by abstracting Turkey, the Levant, Palestine and Egypt.”⁷

Seeing the South China Sea as another Mediterranean means we must naturally take into account a number of surrounding shores at the same time, in this book we focus on the Water Frontier and southern China. This is not to impose a global vision onto complex historical reality but rather to seek to restore shared experiences and a shared history of the connected shores of the South China Sea, and to “rethink” the linked elements of this geographical ensemble simultaneously. Though sharing Lombard’s vision, the goal of this book is more limited: it is to begin to reconstruct the lost history of one part of this South China Sea ensemble, the Water Frontier area, by highlighting its commercial integrity and importance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

As the following chapters reveal, this fresh angle of observation has been illuminated by newly available primary materials, much of which have scarcely been touched before. This is particularly useful, given the well-known poverty of primary materials for precolonial history across this region. These treasures have been overlooked because they were treated as extraneous remnants when different national histories were tailored out of the original historical fabric of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These accounts formed a large and essential part of the history of these states and the region, but proved unusable when the neat modern dresses that would clothe the past of the new nation-states were fashioned.

The Water Frontier was a different world from that of these dynasties and successor nation-states. It was notable for the absence of the “relatively unconflicted acceptance of royal rule”⁸ so typical of contemporary Malay *negeri* or Thai *muongs*. As Sakurai shows here, the extraordinarily weak and divided Khmer kingdom in this region provided a political environment in which vital elements of the Water Frontier could develop, the most important one being the free movement of peoples and commodities. Indeed, one of the characteristics shared by the whole coastal region between the Mekong Delta estuaries and the Malay Peninsula in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was this frequent movement of people and exchanges of commodities and cultural practices among Viets, Siamese, Mon-Khmer, and Malays, with Chinese settlers, sojourners, and junk traders forming the common thread weaving them all together. The ebb and flow of peoples, goods, and ideas will be the main focus of this book, the *Water Frontier*.

Water Frontier—A Major Arena of the Time

The period between the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Reid shows here and elsewhere, was an era of dynamic commercial expansion between the earlier “age of commerce,” and the colonial high noon from 1870 to 1940.⁹ For mainland Southeast Asia in particular, it was also a time of vigorous state formation, characterized by strong commercial and demographic growth.¹⁰ The modern Siamese and Vietnamese states basically attained their current territorial limits through the dynamism of this time.

The major sources of this mainland dynamism no doubt derived in no small measure from their coastal regions.¹¹ The principal external impetus for this dynamism came from south China, whose junk traders, as Chin’s chapter shows, became the conduit through which China’s burgeoning population accessed consumer goods from the “South Seas” (*Nanyang*). Trade with Southeast Asia increased so rapidly that customs revenue between 1724 and 1750 rose threefold in Fujian and almost fivefold in Guangdong.¹² The impact of the China trade is underlined by the fact that the number of Chinese junks visiting Cochinchina increased fourfold between 1750 and 1820.¹³ This in turn boosted royal income remarkably. The total state revenue of the Nguyen ruler between 1746–1752 averaged 380,700 *quan*,¹⁴ but by 1800 revenue from overseas trade in Saigon alone was 489,790 *quan*.¹⁵ The same story unfolded in Siam. Between 1740 and 1820 the Siamese crown’s income from maritime trade rose from a fourth or a third to well over half.¹⁶ Changes taking place in southern China, how these distant people ate, dressed, and housed themselves, had so direct an impact on patterns of trade and production in Southeast Asia that the number of Chinese junks shuttling between China and Southeast Asia rightly marked this era as a “Chinese century” in Southeast Asia.¹⁷

Also in this period British country traders made their impact. Escaping the monopolistic Dutch grasp, they actively traded in the Malay Peninsula, making Terengganu and Riau, for instance, their dissemination point for opium and firearms in the 1760s.¹⁸ The establishment of Penang enhanced the scope of commerce in the region, and when Singapore was founded in 1819, it soon became the acme of free trade and the hallmark of prosperity of the day. This whole story is usually evaluated from within the frame of nineteenth-century colonialism and presented as the start of an ineluctable process of colonizing and capitalizing a region whose future was then determined in London, Paris, and Amsterdam. But the establishment of Penang, and Singapore can be viewed quite differently, as a continuation of the active regional trading system of the eighteenth century rather than as a sudden foreign intrusion in the nineteenth century. An examination of the trade volumes demonstrates that the major participants of the trade at the British settlements of Melaka, Penang, and Singapore in the early nineteenth century were from the ports of Southeast Asia’s last autonomous areas, while their trade to European-controlled Java and the Philippines was considerably minor.¹⁹ Instead, “by far the most considerable branch of [Singapore’s] traffic [was] with Siam, and next . . . with the port of Saigon,”²⁰ as

John Crawford observed in the early 1820s. The Saigon-Bangkok-Singapore triangle that Crawford described was the natural extension and product of a century-long movement of peoples and their economic exchanges.

Expanded cash revenues and more regular maritime contacts increased access to firearms, gunpowder, and strategic metals, and a large quantity of Western firearms flowed into the Water Frontier. This influx of wealth and weapons no doubt fueled the wave of piracy that characterized the coasts of Indochina from the Gulf of Tonkin to the mouth of the Chaophraya in the eighteenth century. Dian Murray has written extensively on the role of the south China pirates in the Vietnamese civil wars²¹ and Sakurai has documented the importance of Teochiu pirates in the conflicts between Taksin and Mac Tien Tu in the late eighteenth century. This was accentuated by the civil war that erupted in southern Vietnam after the Tay Son rebellion (1772–1802) overthrew the ruling Nguyen house, leaving one precarious descendant, Nguyen Anh, to try to restore his family's fortunes. In Siam, too, the 1767 Burmese destruction of Ayutthaya led to years of conflict as the part-Teochiu general Taksin seized the vacant throne, only to be deposed in 1782 by the part-Cantonese Chakkri family. Trading profits from the Mekong Delta alone allowed missionary Bishop Pigneaux in 1787 to buy "several cargoes of arms and ammunitions" from Pondichery and Mauritius for the embattled last prince of the Nguyen family, Nguyen Anh.²² The Nguyen leaders equally sent Chinese, French, and English officers to buy artillery from Goa, Melaka, Penang, Macao, and later, Singapore (see below). Backed with trading income Nguyen Anh was able to afford a huge munitions order in 1791 of 10,000 muskets, 2,000 cannons, and 2,000 shells.²³ This list was not unthinkable if we compare it to the one thousand muskets from India gifted to the king of Siam by Hunter, a British country trader, in the early 1820s.²⁴ Hunter was also the merchant who sold a steam warship to the Nguyen court for 50,000 Spanish dollars in 1844, plus 200 guns, mortars, and iron.²⁵

It was also in this period that French mercenary officers trained Vietnamese troops in rifle drill, rolling fire, bayonet charges, and even handling and making grenades.²⁶ The European impact was evident in field artillery, infantry drill, fortifications, and construction of European square-rigged vessels. Apart from the elephant corps, no major Viet military tradition was left untouched. In such a way almost all the major players in the field of the late-eighteenth-century Southeast Asia participated in the state formation of the Water Frontier.²⁷

Western weapons and technology flowing into the Water Frontier area went through a process of adaptation and assimilation that often changed their original form and infused them with local meanings. It is striking to note, for example, that the Saigon citadel as well as thirty-one other citadels constructed in early-nineteenth-century Vietnam were built "à la Vauban," rather than according to any Chinese or Vietnamese model. Moreover, after the building of the Saigon citadel, many citadels were designed according to the latest innovations in the art of fortifications developed in Europe.²⁸ Yet for all their fundamentally European design, these citadels met the standards of native