

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### REVIEW ESSAY

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#### **The Sino-Viet Borderlands in the Premodern Age**

John K. Whitmore, University of Michigan

Kathlene Baldanza. *Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 237 pp. \$100 (cloth); \$29 (paper); \$80 (e-book).

Bradley Camp Davis. *Imperial Bandits: Outlaws and Rebels in the China-Vietnam Borderlands*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017. 237 pp. \$90 (cloth); \$30 (paper).

As the world is currently concerned with the government of China and its growing power along its southern frontier, it is useful to consider past events that reflect the pattern of interactions between this northern power and the states lying along this frontier. East Asian historians Kathlene Baldanza and Bradley Camp Davis provide excellent, detailed studies of Vietnam and Beijing as they worked to resolve issues in the territory separating them. Although in the early modern age, the scholar-officials of both lands shared a Confucian ideology and practice, the asymmetric relationship between the two lands (Womack 2006) engendered very different perspectives on each side of the frontier. Baldanza and Davis offer valuable views on these relationships: the former focusing on the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in China; the latter on the late Qing (1850–1911). Each of the authors also gives us a view of the Vietnamese dynasties of those ages: the Tran (1225–1400), the Le (1428–1527, 1592–1788), the Mac (1528–1592) of Dai Viet, and the Nguyen (1802–1945) of Vietnam. The two authors bring us into their scenes through engagement with a variety of primary sources. Baldanza does a masterful job with contemporary Vietnamese and Chinese documents (both in Chinese characters), mining the interactions between the two. Davis, in a more recent setting, does a fine job bringing local oral traditions together with official imperial documents of both Hue and Beijing, as well as official and nonofficial French documentation. Both books offer a rich mixture of analysis of the

contemporary textual record, written and oral, as well as critiques of recent studies from Vietnam, China, and elsewhere.

Baldanza and Davis give us a strong sense of how the literate elites and courts of the two lands beheld and dealt with each other, including how factions in each argued policy. Whereas the scholar of Vietnam Liam C. Kelley (2005) examines (later) Vietnamese poetry written by envoys to Beijing, Baldanza takes up Chinese texts on Vietnam as well as Vietnamese texts composed in China, showing us the development of the Chinese view of their southern neighbor. Davis works with memorials to the throne on both sides as policy matters were hashed out. This aspect is particularly important as it helps us escape the assumption that Beijing controlled and dominated the relationship, with Thang Long (now Ha Noi) and then Hue always subservient. While at times this was the case, at other times it was not. Whereas China was often irritated by Vietnam's claim of imperial status (Baldanza, ch. 3), the Vietnamese court was aware of Beijing's situation and feelings and prepared to deal with the Chinese power in the best possible way for itself (attack, resist, negotiate, or ignore). The Vietnamese kept themselves separate politically, while sharing philosophically in the Sinic "domain of manifest civility" (Kelley 2005, 30–31), constantly striving to maintain as favorable a relationship with China as possible. Baldanza shows us a defeated Vietnam in the early fifteenth century, when the Ming crushed the short-lived Ho regime (1400–1407) and made Vietnam (once again) a province of the empire for two decades (1407–1427). Then, she presents a splendid description of a weakened Vietnam a hundred years later, torn apart politically, under Mac rule able to negotiate a *modus vivendi* with the Ming in the 1530s. In between, the Le had driven the Ming out and established a state so strong that the Ming were reluctant to move south in force at all (Whitmore 2015).

After the 1427 Ming defeat (following the 1280s Mongol defeat and later the 1780s Qing defeat), the lesson for the Chinese dynasties was that pure military force could be used as a threat against Vietnam, but that in practice this tactic was costly in men and materiel and did not work out so well (cf. the 1979 war; Davis, 163). Yet, at times of weakness in Vietnam, China still got involved in order to pursue its own goals. This Davis shows us with an example from the late nineteenth century in which Beijing sought to maintain order in the increasingly dangerous international scene of the day. Acting together with independent local forces, the imperial courts of the Qing and the Nguyen sought unsuccessfully to stem the European (French) intrusions, with China as the dominant partner.

One major aspect that draws these two works together is that both authors treat the region separating the territories of the two courts, their borderlands. This mountainous territory, actually the southeast corner of a much larger mountainous region dividing Chinese civilization from its neighbors to the south (now called Southeast Asia), has generally been foreign to lowlanders, the ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese. Originally these mountains did not form a borderland, but a frontier. States create borders, and with them borderlands, but before such creation takes place such territories are broad frontiers occupied by peoples of different cultural patterns than the lowland civilizations. Indeed, through the first millennium CE, these mountains did not form a border at all, since what is now northern Vietnam formed the southern edge of the great Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Tang (618–907) Empires of China.

As the Australian scholar Catherine Churchman (2015, 2016) has asked, where should we draw the line? This mountainous territory, lying between the Red and the Pearl Rivers, existed apart from the lowland Sinic societies north and south of it. Within this territory, up in the hills, were both upland valley peoples growing irrigated rice and above them, on the slopes of the mountains, a variety of other peoples growing dry rice, hunting, and gathering from the subtropical forests. It was in the upland valleys that peoples, here Tai speakers, formed the sorts of strong communities that Chinese and Vietnamese referred to as *dong* (apparently derived from an indigenous Tai term). While interacting with the lowland Sinic societies, the lords of these valleys generally remained independent and autonomous through the first millennium CE and into the second. At one time, in the mid-eleventh century, a Tai realm existed in the mountains between Vietnam and China, only to be crushed by both (Anderson 2007). While Chinese force and culture penetrated these mountains at times in those centuries, it was only the Mongols who pushed strongly into the northern half of this mountainous world in the thirteenth century, bringing Yunnan and surrounding areas firmly into the Chinese empire (Anderson 2015; Brose 2015; Sun 2015).

For almost five hundred years, from the thirteenth into the eighteenth centuries, the Chinese ruled this newly conquered territory through valley chiefs confirmed in their stations as “indigenous officials” (*tusi*). Linked to the Sinic administrative system, these chiefs remained relatively autonomous, while serving specific Chinese demands. Gradually, this frontier area became a borderland as the Chinese state began to draw a line between itself and its southern lowland states, particularly Dai Viet (Vietnam). Yet in the mountain depths during these

centuries, this was not a hard and fast line. There was much flexibility to it, depending on the relative strength of the lowland powers and that of the upland valleys. Baldanza (ch. 4) shows us a clear case of this. In the mountain valleys between the Pearl and the Red Rivers lay a number of autonomous communities (the *dong*). When the Le chased the Ming out of Vietnam in 1427, four of these *dong* chose to opt out of the Ming Empire and link themselves with the new dynasty in Thang Long. So they remained until the next Ming–Dai Viet crisis a century later. The new Mac dynasty and the Ming had great difficulty in making a connection, and only after much threat from Beijing and shrewdness from Thang Long was a settlement negotiated. In the process, the Vietnamese “gave back” (relinquished) their claim to the four upland valley communities. In this way, *dong* chiefs remained autonomous within their immediate mountain region, following their own interests unless directly focused on by Beijing and its power. The Singapore scholar Alexander Ong (2015) describes the relative political and ideological openness of these borderlands through the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth.

This situation began to change in the first half of the eighteenth century as the Qing dynasty in China and states in mainland Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Siam, and Myanmar) worked to establish their own officials in place of or over the upland valley chiefs. The Qing, applying *gaitu guiliu* (changing the local powers for regular officials), proceeded to replace many of the indigenous *tusi* with standard Han officials in Yunnan and other mountainous regions. This effort has continued in fits and starts all the way through the middle of the twentieth century (and on to today). As the early modern states of the region sought both to establish administrative control over all of their claimed territory and to draw well-defined lines (borders) around it (given the growing internationalization of the times), this effort created borderlands and reached into them. In the process, during the Qianlong era (1736–1796), the Qing emperor felt able to reach into Vietnamese territory on matters of strategic concern (Kim 2015).

Davis shows us the effort by the new Nguyen state in Vietnam starting in the 1820s to bureaucratize the administration, which he calls the “provincial project.” Under the Minh Mang emperor (1820–1840), the court in Hue acted to standardize its administrative structure from the lowlands into the highlands. Theoretically, this meant displacing valley chiefs with Kinh (Vietnamese) officials sent from the capital. However, this did not work in the northern mountains. The effort took place as the central power in Hue weakened through mid-century and as the Qing structure in the south fractured. One effort at local autonomy just north of the border,

Yanling, was crushed by the Qing, spinning off a series of outlaw gangs, known as the White, Yellow, and Black Flags, that swept across the northern mountains of Vietnam. The result was an anarchic zone, much beyond the earlier openness, full of violence and empty of Vietnamese imperial authority, with the *Tai dong* crushed or co-opted. (One wonders what the Tu Duc emperor in Hue had to say about all of this.) Davis provides a vivid description of three empires—the Vietnamese, the Chinese, and the French—as they attempted to move into this now-contested region: Hue to re-establish its imperial sovereignty (and its tax revenues) there; Beijing (as in the Qianlong era a century earlier) to stabilize this border area and to provide a buffer zone, here against the French; and the French to open and maintain the Red River channel into Yunnan for commerce and their own brand of civilization (Laffey 1972 is a good additional source for the French interests).

The Nguyen allied with the dominant Black Flags, the French banded with the overpowered Yellow Flags, and the Qing sent their troops in to join the Black Flags. The French won out and inherited the Nguyen imperial administrative structure. They promptly faced the same choice that Hue, Beijing, and other adjacent states did—bureaucratize the highlands or rely on local “powerbrokers,” to use Davis’s term, for control of the region. In the China-Viet borderlands, the latter meant either upland valley *Tai* chieftains (of the *dong*) or Chinese/Yunnanese chiefs who had gained control in a locality through armed or economic force. As Davis indicates so well, the French, like the Nguyen imperial regime before them, came to rely on these local powers to manage these borderlands well into the twentieth century. But the local chiefs and their communities had their own interests at heart, not those of either the earlier or the later empires, and they often acted as though the border did not exist. Pursuing political and/or economic goals, these local chiefs utilized what the empires had to offer them and acted to enhance their own wealth and power as well as those of their allies.

These two studies are excellent examples of examining the interactions of the Vietnamese and Chinese regimes, both at the court level and across the borderlands that have divided them. In the early modern age, the two regimes shared a broad philosophical approach, that of neo-Confucianism, but staunchly saw themselves as politically different. The Vietnamese have always worried about a long-term Chinese state presence within Vietnamese territory. We see this from the fifteenth century through the nineteenth and on into the twentieth (witness Ho Chi Minh’s famous declaration preferring the French presence over the Chinese). On the Chinese

side, Baldanza shows us the Ming policy switch from viewing Vietnam as a lost province needing to be rejoined to the empire before coming to view the Vietnamese as barbarians beyond the pale, undeserving of such a privilege. Davis brings us to the level of direct interaction between Qing and Nguyen officials, where the Chinese saw the Vietnamese as essentially hopeless in their governance and needing to be rescued from their predicament.

But what of the borderlands lying between these two empires? As noted, this was a territory foreign to the lowlanders on both sides. Both of these books are quite strong on the empires and their interactions with and across this world. We need to gain a better understanding of the mountainous world itself, as best we can from existing documents and oral traditions. This was not an anarchic world (except at times, as in the late nineteenth century), and it had its own political, cultural, and economic structure. In particular, in this part of the broad mountain world, it was the Tai chieftains of the many *dong* who supplied this structure, however shifting, among themselves and with the many upland peoples on the slopes above the valleys. Baldanza gives us a glimpse of the four *dong* lords who shifted sides between the Le/Mac and the Ming. Davis mentions Tai chiefs allying themselves with various of the forces that swept over them through the mountains. We get hints of Tai valley dominance of the peoples up the slopes. Overall, we need a better grasp of this borderland social-political structure as it dealt with the empires attempting to administer and control—politically, socially, culturally, and economically—these highland valleys and slopes.

This effort to extend the lowland states up into these mountainous borderlands has continued through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Davis shows us the French Empire, internationalizing the borderline and gaining traction in these hills until World War II, then losing it thereafter. It was in these borderlands that Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh developed their strength, allied with Tai chieftains, and, having made contact with Mao and the People's Republic of China (PRC), drove the French out of the mountains. Here, in one of the Tai valleys, called Dien Bien Phu by lowland Vietnamese, the Viet Minh inflicted the final great defeat on the French Empire in Indochine Française. Here, too, the PRC and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) collided in 1979. Now there is much greater state penetration than ever before into these borderlands. Baldanza and Davis well describe past Chinese-Vietnamese interactions from the early modern age into the modern. They point out continuities in these interactions that we need to keep in mind. There are strong memories here, on both sides of the

borderlands and within them, that are reflected in past and present Vietnamese and Chinese writings as well as in the long-lived oral traditions passed by one generation to the next, often kept present in shrines and museums (Anderson 2007). History here is deep and traditions long.

*John Whitmore is a research associate at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan.*

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