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Contested Sovereignty: Local Politics and State Power in Territorial Conflicts on the Vietnam-China Border, 1650s–1880s

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Abstract

This article analyzes territorial disputes and political relationships at the border between China and Vietnam from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Predominant Western scholarship argues that, owing to the tributary relationship among states and polities, there was no territorial boundary in premodern Asia; furthermore, it suggests, the concept of the “geo-body” of a nation or sovereign state only arose with the transfer of new mapping technology from Europe. This article argues instead that the absence of lines of demarcation on Vietnamese and Chinese maps before the late nineteenth century does not connote a lack of consciousness of the existence of borders. The quest for autonomy throughout history by local communities living between China and Vietnam gave rise to border conflicts, which led to the intervention by and expansion of these two states, as well as negotiations and territorial division between them. The transformation of the China-Vietnam border from a premodern to a modern form thus did not depend solely on its cartographic representation; it also involved the power of the state to control space. Additionally, this article demonstrates that tensions over the border did not simply involve central governments but often resulted from a combination of local conflicts and the complicated relations between local actors and the state. The article suggests a new approach to exploring the history of state borders from the perspective of local people, in which the “in-between communities” are not seen as passive objects of border demarcation but are also a driving force in the establishment of a frontier. While the “in-between communities” discussed in this article were behind conflicts over land and its division into national territories, their manipulations of ethnic identity and transgressive mobility also helped blur the border between the two countries.

Keywords: China-Vietnam border, territorial disputes, geo-body, state-making, local power, cartography

Introduction

In the fifth month of 1806, two tribal chieftains (*thổ ty*), Đèo Chính Ngọc and Đèo Quốc Uy, sent a memorial to the Vietnamese throne. These leaders—the magistrates, respectively, of Lai Mountain County (Lai châu) and Văn Bàn Mountain County (Văn Bàn châu) in Hưng Hoá

Commandery (Hung Hoá trấn), which is now part of Lào Cai and Lai Châu Provinces—explained to the emperor that, long ago, mountain settlements (*động*) in their own counties—and in Tung Lãng, Hoàng Nham, Tuy Phụ, and Hợp Phì Mountain Counties—had broken up, and that many of the inhabitants of those settlements had fled into Qing territory. The two chieftains suggested to Emperor Gia Long (r. 1802–1820), who had founded the Nguyễn dynasty only four years earlier, that he should encourage these populations to return to the Vietnamese side; they could then resume paying taxes to the Nguyễn. After receiving an imperial edict to that effect, many tribal elders from the mountain settlements of Mượ̀ng Tề, Mượ̀ng Phù, Phương Mượ̀ng, Tôn Na Y (in Lai County), Mượ̀ng Ấm (in Hoàng Nham County), and the mountain settlement of Binh Lư (in Tuy Phụ County) did indeed move back into Nguyễn territory.



Map 1. Contested settlements, 1697–1806. 1. Ten Mountain Counties 十州; 2. Ngyu Dượng Mountain Settlement 牛洋洞. *Source:* Hồng Đức bản đồ [Hồng Đức map] (16??).

The return of these tribal elders provoked a strong reaction from the Chinese; the Jiaqing court (1796–1820) claimed that the area covered by these six settlements (*V. mường*, *Ch. muang*) belonged to the Jianshui District (*Jianshui xian*) in Yunnan and had been included in Chinese maps since the Kangxi era (1661–1722). Their inhabitants had lived peacefully there for over a hundred years, so it was surprising that Hung Hoá tribal elders were now trying to lure them back to the Vietnamese side.¹ From the Vietnamese perspective, the Jiaqing court was disingenuous in referencing the 1697 settlement as a point of departure, rather than as a milestone in a long history of conflicts between China and Vietnam over this particular stretch of border. That year, Vietnam sent a mission to China to pay tribute as usual; its main purpose, however, was to reclaim the three mountain settlements of Nguư Dương, Hồ Điệp, and Phở Viên in Tuyên Quang Commandery that had been seized by the Qing (see map 1).² Not surprisingly, given the unequal power of the Qing and Lê-Trịnh³ courts, the mission ended in failure, with repercussions reaching into the nineteenth century.

The government of French Indochina and the Qing court eventually established a formal demarcation of the territorial limits of Tonkin (northern Vietnam) and China, with the Treaty of 1887. As this article will show, however, a border already existed long before the advent of French colonialism. Furthermore, the Treaty of 1887 was not the final word on the matter. In 1999, a treaty on land borders was signed by China and Vietnam, followed ten years later by a “final demarcation of their land border at the Youyiguan border gate in Pingxiang City in south China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.”⁴ The frontier area thus continued to be an object of contestation between China and Vietnam into the twenty-first century.

Scholars in both China and Vietnam tend to interpret border disputes as illustrations of the drive by the two empires to expand their control over the area in premodern times—an indication of their early push for territorial sovereignty (see Vũ D. N. 2011 and Ge 2014) and a reflection of their consciousness of their separate national identities. This is essentially an analysis of state-making that radiates from the center to the periphery. While relations of power and state perceptions have played an undeniably important role in territorial conflicts between China and Vietnam, so too have the actions of border populations and local officials. Additionally, and problematically, the center-focused analysis of the process of border formation owes much to modern Western cartographic practices.

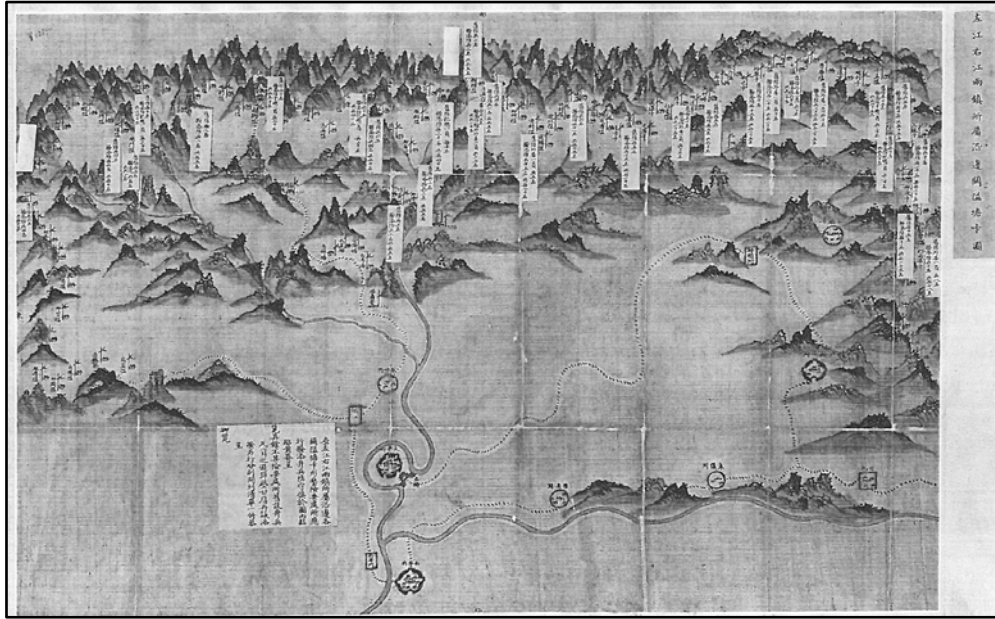


Map 2. Map of Yunnan Province in the Qianlong reign, 1736. 1. Mengzi District 蒙自縣; 2. Duzhou River 賭咒河; 3. Kaihua Prefecture 開化府; 4. Border with Jiaozi jie 交趾界 (Vietnam). Source: *Yunnan Tongzhi* (hereafter, YNTZ) ([1736] 1983, 13).

According to Western theorists, nationalism can only emerge when the inhabitants of a region share a perception of the space and territory they inhabit. This territory can be viewed like a living body, unified and indivisible, or as a “geo-body,” to use the term coined by historian Thongchai Winichakul. This perception is closely related to the current cartographic system that helps foster the concept of a national body with well-defined contours. The notion of a national geo-body, according to Thongchai, only emerged in Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Western-style cartography was introduced (see Thongchai 1994 and Anderson B. G. 2006).

Traditional Vietnamese and Chinese cartographies included the borderland in their maps (see maps 1–4 and 8). The borderline was represented by symbolic objects, such as walls and border gates, or by vague lines that mostly reflected certain aspects of the landscape, rather than the territorial limits of the two states (Whitmore 1994). In the early eighteenth century, the Qing court commissioned European Jesuit missionaries to assist in making a survey of the empire, the result of which was recorded in a variety of maps. These maps, which adopted a coordinate system based on measurements of latitude and longitude, used dotted lines to represent the limits of Qing administrative units but made no distinction between provincial and international boundaries. Furthermore, the description of the Qing Empire in many of these maps also included information about the terrain beyond the southernmost provinces, which seems to express the continuous and significant influence of the Chinese indigenous cartographic tradition that emphasized the ideology of “Mandate of Heaven” by Chinese emperors until early modern times (Hostetler 2013).

Maps, however, are a necessary but insufficient condition for the emergence of national sovereignty (Branch 2014, 5). The inclusion of national borders in European maps does not in itself necessarily denote a unified national body.⁵ Thus, while maps were a basic element in the emergence of sovereign nation-states, another important factor was the expansion and centralization of state power, which gave a different character to space (Branch 2014, 6). As a corollary, the absence of lines of demarcation on Vietnamese and Chinese maps before the late nineteenth century does not connote a lack of consciousness of the existence of borders. In this vein, the transformation of (neutral) space into (national) territory on the China-Vietnam border was not just a matter of cartographic representation; it also represented the state’s attempt to control space. Border conflicts between the two countries thus became means of acknowledging and enforcing the formation of their respective territorial boundaries before the advent of Western colonialism. In this process, both were aided at times and challenged at others by local people with their own interests and agendas. This article explores the process of border formation from the perspective of these local people, the “in-between communities” that lived in the China-Vietnam borderland.



Map 3. Left and Right River Commanderies and border passes in the Qianlong reign, 1736–1795. *Source:* National Palace Museum, Qing Palace and Grand Council Archives, Ref. 038894.

The populations involved in nineteenth-century territorial disputes in Hung Hóa Commandery belonged to a larger universe—the “Zomia,” a term coined by historian Willem van Schendel (2002) to refer collectively to the many communities living in the forest-covered massif that ranges from southern China to northern Southeast Asia. These communities were diverse ethnically (Zhuang/Tày, Nong/Nùng, Tai, Hmong, Yao) and linguistically (Mon-Khmer, Chinese-Tibetan), but they shared the characteristic of tribal organization and leadership. These groups were mobile across time and space, changing positions depending on the forging of alliances or the breakup, cooperation, or competition between non-state regimes (Scott 2009). Political scientist James C. Scott has argued that the Zomia was an alternative space that gradually split from the administrative system and culture of China. But, as this article will argue, the communities living in the Zomia along the China-Vietnam border had had close relations with their respective central governments over several centuries.

This article not only reconstructs diplomatic negotiations between Vietnam and China over disputed areas along their border, but also, more importantly, focuses on the complicated relations between their two courts and with the world of the tribal chieftains. It shows how “in-between communities,” far from being passive objects of negotiations that resulted border

divisions, were in fact the causal agents of mutual suspicion and conflict between the two countries. Local disputes were often the primary instigators of state involvement in the control of populations and frequently led to the demarcation of territorial borders. The reaction of the Vietnamese and Chinese courts to local disturbances had the potential to solidify new territorial arrangements that were shaped by the power imbalance between them, by difficult natural conditions, and by reactions from local communities. In particular, the shifting allegiances of the local populations, as well as their kinship relations and trade networks, resulted in the fuzziness of these same borders.

“In-Between Communities” and Border Administration

The dispute that pitted the Nguyễn and Qing courts against each other over border settlements in 1806 was neither the first nor the last such conflict in the history of Vietnam-China relations. Rather, it was part of an ongoing process of territorial delimitation stretching back to the tenth century, the end of the period of Chinese occupation of what is now northern Vietnam.

For most of the first millennium of the Common Era, the mountain region between China and Vietnam seems to have been perceived by Chinese rulers as a relatively isolated space at the margin of imperial administrations (see, for example, Schafer 1967). From the period of disunity until the Sui (from the third to the seventh centuries), a collectivity called the Li-Lao became a significant force thanks to economic and political exchanges with Han Chinese and their control of channels of communication and trade between the Pearl and Red River Deltas. When the Tang came to power in the seventh century, the newly powerful state sought to destroy autonomous forces. Most of the area was divided into *ji-mi* counties—units of the imperial administrative system in which tribal chieftains were incorporated in the local bureaucracy and granted official titles (Churchman 2011).

The transformation of this area into a borderland only began in the early 1000s, when it suddenly became a buffer between Song China and Đại Việt, the new center of power that emerged in the Red River Delta after the fall of the Tang. The Đại Việt rulers, who had lived under Chinese cultural influence for centuries, built their state along the centralized Chinese model, while constantly seeking to extend their reach into adjacent space through military

campaigns and reclamation work. Early historical records document the many campaigns by Lý rulers (1010–1225) to extend the area under their control in the northern highlands.⁶

The unification of China by the Song after six decades of warfare and division opened up possibilities for reestablishing Chinese dominance in the south. But efforts at expansion and influence by military means met significant challenges from new regimes, including Đại Việt. After the defeat by the Vietnamese of its expeditionary force in 981, the attention of the Song court returned to this region after the 1052–1054 uprising of Nong Zhigao (Nùng Trí Cao), a local chief who, in a very short time, raised a rebellion and seized several prefectures (*phủ*) and districts (*huyện*), shaking up the entire administrative machinery of modern Guangxi and Guangdong (Anderson 2007). To stabilize the southern region, the Song court aggressively increased security measures, built new administrative structures, and sent out appeals to local chieftains. These measures were, however, seen as threats by Đại Việt. The inevitable result was the outbreak of war in 1075–1077 (Hoàng 2004, 215–216).

Although the Song invasion of Đại Việt was a failure, the struggle between China and Đại Việt to gain dominance in the border area continued over the following years. However, these confrontations resulted in a stalemate, as neither side had the resources to control a peripheral area far from its center. The stalemate was resolved by the Treaty of 1084, the first official measure to divide up the space between the two empires.⁷ At the same time, a different political relationship was being maintained between the two—the tributary system—but this was mostly seen as a conduit for commercial exchange rather than diplomatic relations. It took many missions from Đại Việt over a whole century before the Southern Song recognized Lý Anh Tông as ruler of Annam (Annan guowang) in 1164.⁸

The establishment of a formal frontier had little impact on the ground because of the limited reach of the two states and especially because the whole border area was under the direct control of local chieftains. The Nong Zhigao uprising had shown the potential of local forces to threaten security along the border. Chinese and Vietnamese efforts to maintain order over the largest possible expanse of space and their competition for domination over the area became a race to win the hearts and minds of the tribal chieftains. Both sides made use of *ji-mi*, incorporating tribal chieftains into the local bureaucracy with official titles. The Lý and Trần dynasties (1010–1400) supplemented this policy by buying off chieftains and entering into

marriage alliances with them (Nguyễn and Nguyễn 2001, 235–255). Tribal chiefs were thus transformed into the front lines of defense along the border.

As James A. Anderson, a historian of the premodern Sino-Vietnamese borderland, has shown, Đại Việt’s close military and political connections with the mountain settlements spelled the difference in the outcomes of the confrontation between Đại Việt and the Mongols, on the one hand, and that between the kingdom of Dali (in modern Yunnan) and the Mongols, on the other, in the thirteenth century (Anderson 2014). The Mongols understood very well the importance of the communities located along the border; immediately upon coming to power, the Yuan dynasty officially recognized for the first time the status of tribal chieftains and brought a number of them into the administrative apparatus of the state. With the support of the chieftains, the Yuan were able to penetrate Yunnan and Guizhou, two areas that had previously not been part of the Chinese territory (Wen 2008, 37–41).

In the century after the late 1300s, both the rules governing diplomatic relations between China and Vietnam and the administration of the border area were elaborated and solidified. After coming to power in 1368, the Ming brought the tribal chieftains (Ch. *tusi*, V. *thổ ty*) into the formal bureaucratic apparatus to administer all the areas with non-Han populations. This policy was probably adopted in Jiaozhi (northern Vietnam) when it was under Ming occupation (1406–1426). In the early Lê era (1426–1527), the use of native (*thổ*) officials was widespread. According to the *Records of the Heavenly South Composed at Leisure* (*Thiên Nam dư hạ tập*), an administrative manual compiled in the fifteenth century, native officials were appointed in twenty-seven different locations with titles similar to the Ming *tusi* nomenclature.⁹ Relations between the Ming and the Vietnamese court were reestablished with more explicitly defined regulations and rituals, returning Vietnam to the Chinese tributary world order (Li Y. 2004). At the same time, Vietnamese elites, newly imbued with neo-Confucian ideas, began considering their country as a civilized nation on the same level as China (Kelley 2005, 28–36). Conversely, Chinese literati went from seeing Vietnam as a province within their empire to viewing it as a separate country of the “barbarian” (Ch. *manyi*, V. *man di*) universe, though still within the larger Chinese world order (Baldanza 2013).

The combination of the *tusi/thổ ty* system with that of tributary relations created a special context for maintaining order along the border and conducting diplomatic relations between the

two countries over a long period of time. Besides conferring legitimacy on the ruling dynasties of Vietnam, the tributary system also reduced tensions in the border area. From 1427, when independence was recovered from the Ming and the Lê dynasty was established, to 1788, when a Qing expeditionary force escorted Emperor Lê Chiêu Thống back to Vietnam after he was overthrown by the Tây Sơn (1789–1802), there were localized conflicts, but no actual war, between China and Vietnam.

Expanding the role and increasing the power of the tribal chieftains helped the two states solve the problem of their limited ability to ensure security and administer the border area and also brought each more revenue and manpower (Wade 2014, 76–77). Nevertheless, this system also had unintended consequences. The appointment of tribal chieftains as representatives of the state helped them become autonomous forces in a number of areas beyond the state's reach. For example, during the Ming, the Huang of Siming and the Cen of Tian in Guangxi became so powerful that they could not be ousted; instead, they were able to maintain their positions despite the fact that, on several occasions, they refused to obey orders and even defied the court (Shin 2006, 78–81; Du 2011). On the Vietnamese side, tribal chieftains enjoyed even greater power and could even intervene in struggles at court; thus, the Mạc, expelled from the capital by the Restored Lê dynasty in 1592, were able to retain control of the border area for nearly a century thanks to the support of local tribal chieftains (Niu 2012). Additionally, although the tribute system was supposed to regulate diplomatic relations between China and Vietnam via regular missions, in many instances, especially daily cross-border exchanges, tribal chieftains used their status as representatives to intervene directly in relations between the two countries.

Until the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, tribal chieftains ruled over their own power bases in the border area despite occasional efforts by both the Chinese and Vietnamese courts to curb their secessionist tendencies through military campaigns. The principal means of dealing with their power, however, still consisted of courting them, as both sides needed the chieftains to manage the border. Beginning in the late sixteenth century, the Ming began to eliminate self-rule in a number of localities and to replace locally chosen leaders with appointed officials. However, the new policy eventually had to be abandoned; it proved difficult to implement due to strong opposition from the tribal leaders (Lan 2011, 299–358). On the Vietnamese side, the continued presence of Mạc forces until the late seventeenth century

prevented the Lê-Trịnh regime from seeking to expand its control toward the border area. This changed after the Qing withdrew support from the Mạc, who were then forced to abandon their stronghold in Cao Bằng and flee to China. With the Mạc out of the picture, the Lê-Trịnh regime became determined to eliminate the power and influence of local forces in the border region. As with the Ming and Qing courts, it encountered mixed success, owing to the ability of local people to escape the jurisdiction (and taxing and mobilizing powers) of both the Chinese and the Vietnamese courts by manipulating their ethnic identities, crossing the border, and switching allegiance at will.

Dealing with an Expansionist State: Split Identity as Survival Strategy

The paucity of locally produced documents makes it impossible to construct a sustained or detailed history of a single border community; however, official histories and gazetteers, though composed from a state perspective, intermittently let us into the lives of these peripheral populations and afford us a glimpse into some of the strategies employed by tribal chieftains to increase their power and foster their secessionist aspirations. These strategies could also be viewed as measures aimed at avoiding the expansionist and oppressive policies of the state. In reality, as can be gleaned from various episodes recounted in official histories, tribal chieftains pursued extremely flexible courses of action based on their specific and immediate interests. This often entailed playing one country against the other, fleeing from one side of the border to the other in order to evade control or capture, switching allegiance, or even maintaining allegiance to both countries at the same time. Thus, the Zomia was not just a refuge from state power; its inhabitants frequently brought the state into the region. Three episodes involving the Vũ clan of Tuyên Quang and the Hoàng and Đèo clans in Hưng Hóa illustrate how local leaders played one state against the other by deploying flexible identities. Their maneuvers, however, not only brought the state(s) to the border area but also caused friction between the two courts.

The conflict that arose over three mountain settlements of the Tuyên Quang Commandary had its origins in the activities of the Vũ clan in the late seventeenth century. In the summer of 1689, two decades after the defeat of the Mạc, a rebel force arose in Tuyên Quang; the Lê court dispatched an army that captured its leader, Vũ Công Tuấn. This was a significant moment in the

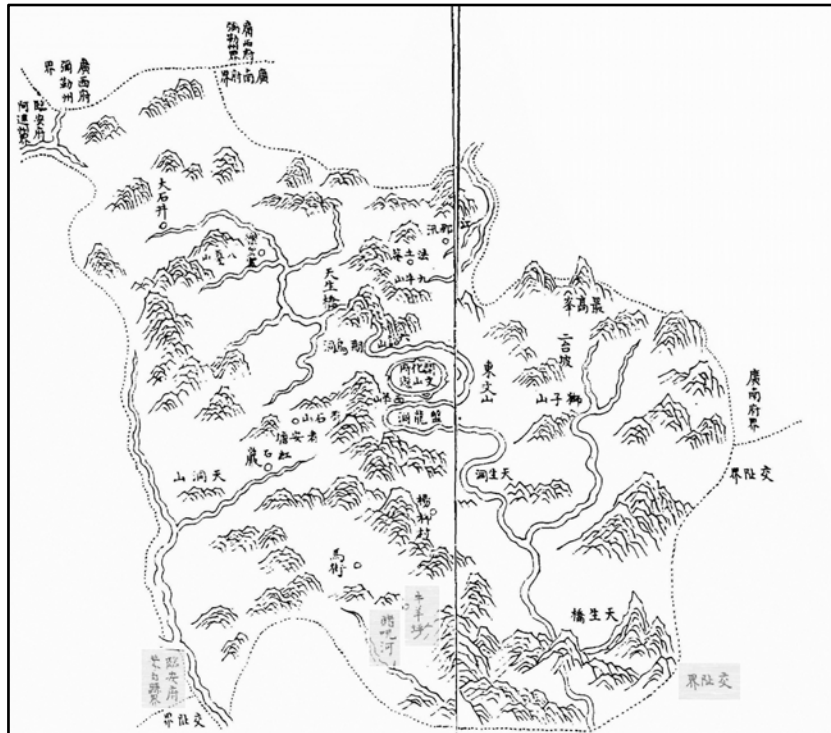
eventful history of the China-Vietnam border region because Vũ Công Tuấn headed a clan that had exercised great influence in Tuyên Quang for over a century.

The area in which the three disputed settlements were located had been under the control of the Vũ clan since the arrival in the mid-1500s of Vũ Văn Uyên, an official of the Lê (then in exile, while the Mạc were ensconced in the capital Thăng Long). Uyên had raised an army to fight the Mạc; at the same time, in order to consolidate his prestige, he also submitted to the Ming and accepted a position in the Chinese administration.¹⁰ Upon being restored to the throne in 1592, the Lê rewarded the Vũ clan for its services against the Mạc with the right to hold control of Tuyên Quang in perpetuity. But, beginning with Vũ Đức Cung a few years later, while clan leaders accepted titles in the Lê administration, they simultaneously began to exhibit anti-Lê and even secessionist tendencies. In 1659, Vũ Đức Cung's son, Vũ Công Đức, even sent a letter to the Qing offering his allegiance.¹¹ But only ten years later, after being courted by the Lê, Vũ Công Đức expressed his intention to travel to Thăng Long to submit. Vũ Công Tuấn was the last leader of the Vũ clan in Tuyên Quang to hold an appointment in the Vietnamese bureaucracy. In spite of his position, he crossed into Yunnan in 1685 and, with the support of Nùng (Zhuang) officials, raised troops of Nùng and Thổ (*Tu*) to conduct pillaging raids in Tuyên Quang and Hung Hoá. Vũ Công Tuấn was finally captured four years later when he tried to return to Tuyên Quang.¹²

Residents of Nguru Dương Settlement reacted to Vũ Công Tuấn's defeat with an offer to submit. Nùng Đắc Tước, the head of the Hồ Điệp Settlement, also sent an envoy petitioning to return to the Vietnamese fold. The court ordered Tuyên Quang Commandery officials to write a conciliatory letter to him and to withdraw troops from Tam Kỳ (now part of Tuyên Quang City) to the capital.¹³ But this event led to conflicts between the Qing and Vietnamese regimes. The surrender of the heads of Nguru Dương and Hồ Điệp Settlements led the Lê court to consider that "the three settlements of Nguru Dương, Hồ Điệp, [and] Phở Viên in Tuyên Quang had been forcibly annexed by native officials of the Qing bureaucracy of Yunnan."¹⁴ In 1691 and 1697, the Vietnamese court sent two missions to the Qing capital in Yanjing to demand the return of these lands. This demand met with fierce opposition from Chinese officials. Shi Wensheng, the governor of Yunnan, explained that

the three settlements of Nguu Dương, Hồ Điệp, and Phổ Viên have been part of the Chinese empire since the Ming. When the Qing opened up Yunnan, the settlements sent taxes to Mengzi District. In the fifth year of the Kangxi era, this was changed to Kaihua Prefecture. It has been so for more than thirty years. [The settlements] definitely do not belong to Vietnam and should not be returned.¹⁵

The Lê court was forced to accept that, under the new name of Dongan County (Dongan li), the disputed settlements were incorporated into the Qing administrative system (Tang and Zhou [1758] 2004, 59–60) (see map 4).



Map 4. Kaihua Prefecture in Yunnan Tongzhi, 1736. 1. The border of Mengzi District, Linan Prefecture 蒙自縣臨安府界; 2. Border of Jiaozhi 交趾界 (Vietnam); 3. Duzhou River 賭咒河; 4. Nguu Dương Settlement 牛洋坪 (Vietnam). *Source*: YNTZ ([1736] 1983, 24).

During the chaotic Ming-Qing transition, many tribal chieftains under Chinese jurisdiction asked to become subjects of Đại Việt. In 1683, Cen Yinzun, the head of the mountain county of Guishun, and Zhao Guoqiao, the head of the mountain county of Sicheng in Guangxi, sent envoys bearing tribute of local commodities together with a laudatory message: “Wherever the royal army arrives, all come out to pay homage; the Mạc rebels have been

eliminated, the kingdom has returned to a single court.” The [Trinh] lord ordered that a reply be drafted and accompanied it with silver and silk and gave lavish presents to the envoy before sending him back.¹⁶ In 1697, when the heads of the mountain county of Guishun sent horses, the [Trinh] lord gave a lavish farewell banquet in honor of their envoy.¹⁷

Whereas the conflicts that arose over the three mountain settlements in Tuyên Quang emphasized the political maneuvers of the tribal chieftains to maintain their position vis-à-vis the state, the conflicts over the six *mường* (Ch. *muang*) in Hưng Hóa with which this article opened show that geography and a long history of interactions in a border area far from centers of power produced a complex political situation that fueled disputes between the two countries. Well before the issue of sovereignty over the six *mường* was raised by the Nguyễn, that area had already become a theater of contestation. In fact, the six *mường* constituted only a small part of a larger area that covered ten mountain counties in the An Tây Prefecture of Hưng Hóa Commandery (corresponding to the present triangle bordered by China, Vietnam, and Laos).

To explain why an area that belonged to Vietnam was transferred to Qing jurisdiction, nineteenth-century Vietnamese scholars claimed that in the early eighteenth century, seven of the ten mountain counties of the old An Tây Prefecture—Tung Lăng, Lễ Tuyên, Hoàng Nham, Tuy Phụ, Hợp Phi, Khiêm and Lai—had belonged in Hưng Hóa Commandery (see map 1). Because of governmental neglect, however, the people of these seven counties had fallen under the control of the northern (Qing) court, and Chinese border officials forced them to change their clothing and hairstyle and to register to pay taxes.¹⁸ In the mid-eighteenth century, Hoàng Công Chất, who had led a rebellion in the Red River Delta before fleeing to the jungle of Hưng Hóa, took over the area and remained in control for the next three decades. Hoàng Công Chất later submitted to the Lê-Trịnh and accepted an official title from the regime.¹⁹ Still later, taking advantage of the inaccessible location of the Mãnh Thiên Settlement, he forged an alliance with the heads of ten mountain counties; this turned him into one of the most powerful leaders in the border region in the decade of 1750–1760.²⁰ In the first month of 1769, taking advantage of the death of Hoàng Công Chất, Lê-Trịnh forces defeated his son Hoàng Công Toàn and took control over the territory that the Hoàng clan had previously ruled. Hoàng Công Toàn and four hundred of his men fled to Yunnan and submitted to the Qing. In 1771, bowing to Vietnamese pressure, the Qianlong Emperor sent Hoàng Công Toàn and his followers into exile in Xinjiang.²¹

Hoàng Công Toàn's submission to the Qing was probably a factor in the incorporation of the six settlements (*mường*) into the Chinese territory. In 1792, after establishing relations with the Qing, the Tây Sơn regime (1789–1802) proposed to reclaim the lost lands, reasoning that “these settlements that adjoin Kaihua in Yunnan were previously ruled by Hoàng Công Toàn and his clan. After he surrendered [to the Qing], local people requested to be considered as living within the Chinese space (*nội phủ*); accordingly, local officials levied taxes from them.”²² Historians of the Nguyễn dynasty that succeeded the Tây Sơn had a different explanation: “When Hoàng Công Chất secretly occupied the area, tribal leaders, afraid of his malignant power, asked to be incorporated into the northern [Qing] space. Moreover, Qing subjects also often forced their way into these settlements, as a result of which Quảng Lăng and Khiêm Counties were annexed by Jianshui District in Kaihua Prefecture.”²³ But in 1769, Đoàn Nguyễn Thục, a high official of the Lê-Trịnh, reported to the court after putting down the Hoàng Công Chất rebellion:

In the ten mountain counties of Hung Hoá, the population has declined in the aftermath of rebellion; most Nùng and Man people have left. Tribal heads neglected their administrative responsibilities; some went to Laos, others to China. [We need to] urgently discuss how to address this problem and restore laws so the people of these ten settlements will be returned in perpetuity to our tax rolls.²⁴

In order to enforce the role of the state in this region, the Lê-Trịnh regime promulgated a law of fourteen articles. Besides granting certain privileges to local communities and creating a system for collecting taxes and assuring security, this body of laws prohibited Tai people from assuming Qing clothing and paying taxes to the Chinese state.²⁵

Written from different perspectives and at different times, these documents reflect the same reality: the unequal balance of power between the two centers had a direct impact on the political stances of the tribal chieftains at the periphery. Tax collection by Qing officials and northern cultural influences on the populations of the ten counties may have occurred over a long period of time. Despite a lack of concrete evidence, there is also a strong possibility that Hoàng Công Chất and his son, Hoàng Công Toàn, had cultivated relations with the Qing before the Lê-Trịnh pacification campaign. Moreover, the Hoàng of Mường Thanh and other local tribal chieftains may have accepted falling under both Chinese and Vietnamese jurisdictions as a

means of assuring recognition and protection by (and from) both sides. The political changeability of the region's tribal chieftains persisted until the beginning of the nineteenth century. But, together with the arrival of the state, this situation did not just lead to simple conflicts; it also created a whole series of misunderstandings between the two states.

Conflicts involving the Đèo clan in the Hưng Hóa Commandery and others that unfolded in Phong Thu, a garrison lying next to the Qing District of Jianshui, illustrate yet another aspect of the multiple orientations of the tribal chieftains in the conflicts and violent interactions on the border. They show that, at the local level, power was wielded by an unstable coalition of local chieftains with their own interests and political allegiances, a coalition that acted singly or as a group to maintain or break up existing power structures and intervened directly in negotiations involving central-local relations, as well as those between China and Vietnam in the borderland.

According to both Vietnamese and Chinese sources, the Đèo clan was one of the oldest and most influential clans of tribal chieftains in the northwest of Vietnam and in a number of counties and districts in southern Yunnan. In the fifteenth century, the power of the clan even posed a threat to the newly established Lê dynasty so that the dynastic founder had to personally lead an army to pacify the northwest.²⁶ When the Nguyễn began to restore the system of tribal chieftains in the early nineteenth century, an influential member of the clan, Đèo Quốc Thuyên, was one of the few local leaders to receive an official bureaucratic title, beginning with that of provisional captain (*tuyên úy*) for Chiêu Tấn County to special defense commander (*phòng ngự sứ*) of Hưng Hóa Commandery, all high positions in the Vietnamese tribal administration in the early nineteenth century.²⁷ At the same time, Đèo Quốc Thuyên agreed to act as head of the military camp and collect taxes in the two settlements of Phong Thu và Bình Lư in Chiêu Tấn County, which lay next to Mãnh Thích estate (*trại*). This area was originally part of Lai County in Hưng Hóa but was lost to the Qing a long time ago, as Qing subjects had surreptitiously occupied it and renamed it Mengsuo estate.²⁸ Đèo tribal leaders continued to accept bureaucratic appointments from both states. During the infancy of Thuyên's grandson, Đèo Doãn An, the Nguyễn court allowed Đèo Vĩnh Điền to temporarily administer the area around Chiêu Tấn County. This may be why, in 1831, Đèo Doãn An requested from the Qing to be appointed estate head and explained that Đèo Vĩnh Điền had usurped power. Then, together with Đèo Doãn Kiên, Đèo Doãn Võ, and three hundred Qing soldiers, he captured Điền and brought him to Jianshui.²⁹

What had been a conflict that was strictly internal to the Đèo clan provoked tensions between the Qing and the Nguyễn. Immediately after Đèo Doãn An asked to submit to the Qing, the prefect of Linan (Linyuan Commandery), in which Jianshui was located, sent six hundred men to take Phong Thu, on the ground that “Phong Thu has long been an old part of Mingsuo and [the Vietnamese] have no right to occupy it.”³⁰ The Nguyễn court reacted forcefully: “Hung Hoá Commandery is clearly contiguous with Qing land; how must we deal with such a provocation by Qing officials so as to preserve national prestige?” An army of one thousand men, along with ten elephants, was swiftly dispatched to defend Hung Hoá. Upon their arrival, three hundred men with five elephants were ordered to occupy Chiêu Tấn, and a letter was sent to the Qing court. The letter stated: “Phong Thu is an old part of our territory. Since ancient times, it has been occupied according to a well-defined border. As for the place called Mingsuo, it may exist, but we have never heard of its location; therefore, please do not listen to Doãn An and cause conflicts.”³¹

The letter seems to have had little immediate impact; only a few days later, Qing armies were still advancing on Phong Thu. Unable to resist, the commander of the post, Chủ Đình Thông, withdrew to Bình Lư settlement. Emperor Minh Mệnh reacted by sending another two hundred soldiers and two elephants to Chiêu Tấn. Meanwhile, Qing soldiers were falling prey to disease and dying in large numbers; the rest scattered. By the time the Nguyễn army reached Phong Thu, the Qing army had already withdrawn. Direct confrontation was thus avoided. The Qing court finally acknowledged receipt of Emperor Minh Mệnh’s missive and responded by suggesting that the Nguyễn wait ten days so that the two sides could resolve the issue peacefully.³² The contest over Phong Thu reached closure when Đèo Doãn An was captured by Nguyễn soldiers as he sought to return to Hung Hoá. He was taken to the capital, where he was executed. The court selected a younger son of Đèo Quốc Thuyên, named Đèo Quốc Long, as administrator of the two settlements of Phong Thu and Bình Lư and of the post of Phong Thu.³³

Local Conflicts, or Confrontations between States?

The history of communities in southern China and northern Vietnam is a history not only of interaction between the state and local communities but also of alliances, divisions, and competition among local actors. Even after China and Vietnam established tributary relations

and began to define the border, territorial contests and violent episodes did not decline, as documented in Chinese and Vietnamese sources.

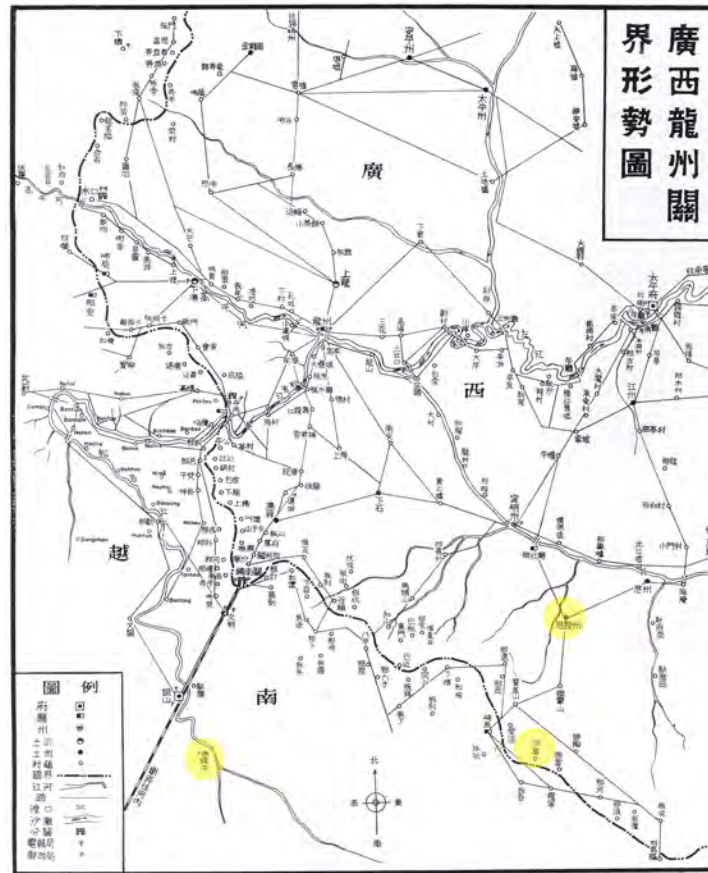
From the perspective of the state, conflicts between tribal chieftains were characteristic of mountain settlement society. In the fifteenth century, the Lê minister Đinh Liệt averred: “Fighting among themselves is one of the characteristics of the barbarians (*man yi*) living in remote places; we need only to protect our territory and avoid conflicts over the border.”³⁴ This suggests that in Vietnam, but also in China, it was accepted that violent power struggles among tribal chieftains lay outside the state’s power to control and did not affect its interests. However, as the next section of this article suggests, power struggles and political maneuverings on the part of the tribal chieftains transformed many contradictions and conflicts between local actors into state-level conflicts that tributary relations helped prevent from escalating into war. In fact, the intervention of the two regimes in the resolution of these local conflicts caused the local chieftains to recognize the real power of the state’s administrative structure and led to treaties delimiting the border.

The three case studies presented below show the diversity of conflicts, as well as forms of state engagement in the borderland in different places and contexts. While competition over economic interests and contests over space—such as forestland, agricultural land, and mining areas, became more intense in the borderland—competition for leadership and chieftainship was undeniably the fundamental cause of local conflicts. The degree of state concern and the methods for resolving conflicts varied. Each state actively sought to resolve conflicts through negotiation, but treaties between the two states could not bring peace to the border area. Conflicts persisted and came to an end only when a compromise was reached among local chieftains from both sides of the border.

Dispute over Na Oa (Nawo) Village

The first of the three case studies involves the status of Na Oa (Nawo) Village (map 5), an important political and economic site along the border between Vietnam and China. Na Oa—now in Ningming County (Guangxi) but then part of Lộc Bình, a mountain county in Lạng Sơn—commanded the fertile land next to the Chinese settlement of Siling County.³⁵ The story starts with the memorial sent in 1689 by Đoàn Tuấn Khoa, a high official of the Lê, to the Qing

court regarding the boundary of Lộc Bình County in Trường Khánh Prefecture, Lạng Sơn Commandery.



Map 5. Border dispute over Na Oa (Nawo) Hamlet. 1. Siling County 思陵州; 2. Lộc Bình County 祿平州; 3. Na Oa (Nawo) Hamlet 那窩村. *Source*: Huang Jiamo (1986, 104).

According to Vietnamese sources, Na Oa was administered by Vi Đức Thắng, a tribal chieftain from a clan that had long ruled the area. When trouble erupted in the border area, Vi Đức Thắng seized the opportunity to annex seven settlements in Siling County and gathered local people to establish new areas of habitation. The tribal chieftain of Siling, Wei Rongyao, protested to Wu Xingzuo, the governor of Guangxi. Because Wei coveted the fertile land around Na Oa, he added it to the area that he was claiming back from Vi Đức Thắng. Negotiations over this issue dragged on for several decades until the Lê court appointed Đoàn Tuấn Khoa to seek a resolution. The *Complete History of Đại Việt* goes on to explain that Đoàn Tuấn Khoa took back not only Na Oa but also the seven other villages that Vi Đức Thắng had seized.

In spite of this, the agreement reached by the two courts did not resolve internal conflicts. In 1701, Wei Rongyao, dissatisfied with the resolution of the dispute that had been reached, invaded fields belonging to the Lộc Bình County, forcing the Lê court to appoint the tribal chieftain Vi Phúc Vĩnh to take defensive measures. In 1724, the governor of Guangxi, Li Fu, sent a memorial to the Yongzheng Emperor reporting that “Vietnamese officials from Na Dương County are bringing local troops from Lộc Bình by the hundreds to the border with the intention of competing with Siling over Na Oa village; I have ordered local officials to surround them and to discreetly increase defensive measures.”³⁶ In the end, Na Oa was absorbed into the Chinese territory.

Dispute in Duzhou River Area

One of the most important instances of local politics leading to conflict between the states involved the Tụ Long (Dulong) copper mine. The story begins in 1725 with a report to the Yongzheng Emperor from Feng Yunzhong, the head of Kaihua Commandery, that a large army consisting of a thousand men led by the Vietnamese general Trịnh Kính had stationed itself right by the border of Yunnan.³⁷ This created great concern in the whole border area. However, the presence of the Lê army did not reflect expansionist ambitions on the part of Đại Việt; rather, it was intended to protect its territory. A report by the governor-general of Yunnan-Guizhou, Gao Qizhuo, to Beijing in February 1726 elaborated on the nature of the trouble and the area involved: “The Kaihua border area includes land that used to be part of the [Chinese] empire but was lost to Jiaozhi (Giao Chỉ). Since then, copper had been mined there. The provincial administration commissioner Li Wei has previously reported on this matter. I believe that the issue of mining is of minor significance; but frontiers are important, so I conducted an investigation.”³⁸

According to Gao, an area that included six estates in Fengchun contributing twelve *shi*³⁹ of grain annually to the Chinese side had come under Vietnamese control in 1686. After weighing a number of alternative interpretations of their actual location and of a border with Vietnam, he concluded that “the area covering eighty miles from Yanchang mountain to the south may have been lost to Vietnam some time during the Ming; if so, then we must reclaim it.”

⁴⁰ Yongzheng responded to the memorial by stressing the importance of harmonious relations

with foreign states. Furthermore, Annam was a compliant tributary state; the heavenly court should not fight with smaller states over matters of minor interest.⁴¹ So he proposed that the border be set at the Small Duzhou River (see map 6). The Lê court accepted this proposal, although it held on to the belief that “this area was forcibly seized by tribal officials of Kaihua; we have protested to the Qing court many times but Chinese officials took the side of the local tribal officials and argued that we were the ones who had invaded it.”⁴² Between 1726 and 1728 the two courts sent officials to resolve disputes at the border without effect.



Map 6. Border dispute in the Duzhou River area. 1. Mabo Border Pass 馬伯汛; 2. Dongan County 東安里; 3. Small Duzhou River 小賭咒河; 4. Big Duzhou River 大賭咒河. *Source:* Tan Qixiang (1982, 48–49).

The area in dispute—between the Small and Big Duzhou Rivers in the region of today’s Dulong and Jinkuang Counties in Maguan District, Yunnan Province—had been part of Vietnamese territory since the Ming and was heavily populated. So, when E Ertai, who replaced Gao Qizhuo as governor of Yunnan-Guizhou and represented the Qing court on border issues,

sent several missions to state the position of the Qing court on the matter, his envoys met with opposition from Hoàng Văn Phác, a local tribal chieftain.⁴³ The strong reaction of the chieftains not only delayed the settling of the border but also increased tensions between the two courts. According to Vietnamese historians, “E Ertai suspected our side of having some nefarious plan so he asked the Qing court to mobilize troops in various provinces and privately requested that Guangdong and Guangxi prepare troops and banners to relieve the disputed border.”⁴⁴ Eventually, in 1729, the issue was resolved, with the border set south of the Small Duzhou River. Two Lê officials, Nguyễn Huy Nhuận and Nguyễn Công Thái, went to Tuyên Quang to draw the borderline and plant boundary markers together with Qing officials. According to Lê historians, “the Kaihua tribal chieftains wanted to hinder the transfer of rolls in Baoshan, so they lied about the exact location of Duzhou River. Nguyễn Công Thái, knowing they lied, traveled to remote and dangerous places, passing through silver and copper mines, and determined the real location of Duzhou River. He then erected a stele at the border.”⁴⁵

As the story of the border at the Duzhou River area shows, local tribal chieftains were sometimes the driving force behind orders from the central government. In fact, all of the two courts’ opinions related to territorial sovereignty in this area closely aligned with those of local tribal chieftains. On the Vietnamese side, it was Hoàng Văn Phác’s opinion; on the Qing side, Gao Qizhuo reflected the opinions of the native officials of Kaihua. This is easily explained by the fact that the Tụ Long (Dulong) mine not only was coveted by tribal chieftains but also was an arena for competition between various political forces.

Dispute over the Bamboo Fence in Pingxiang and Siling Mountain Counties

Competition did not only involve sites of economic significance. It had also become a way of life, as illustrated by the following disputes over a bamboo fence that shine light on everyday life on the border and the role of the state in local affairs (see map 7). In 1750, officials in Guangxi sent a memorial to the effect that many different types of bamboo grew in the area; the plants had strong trunks, but local people could not make use of them because they were covered with thorns. For this reason, the officials suggested that they should be planted in the border area, since, after a few years, the resulting forest could serve as an important component of border defense by deterring trespassers. The following spring, the Qianlong Emperor agreed

to the proposal and put the new province chief of Guangxi, Ding Chang, in charge of implementing it. Ding Chang immediately ordered the opening of a bamboo plantation along the boundaries of the area under his direct jurisdiction, but six months later, the governor-general of Liangguang reported to the Qing court that “[Vietnamese] people are pulling up the bamboo fence along the border and invading Chinese land.”⁴⁶ The court debated this serious issue. Qianlong argued that, as a general principle, the Middle Kingdom should not betray weakness toward foreign barbarian states, but, for that very reason, it should not oppress them either; the goal was to maintain trouble-free (*xiangan wushi*) conditions along the border. The court ordered an increase in defensive forces and sent an investigating team to Pingxiang. The team reported back the reality on the ground that

Pingxiang County is adjacent to Vietnam with mountains serving as borders; the terrain is uneven and the population is mixed. When they planted bamboo, Pingxiang residents trespassed into Vietnamese land, except where the difficult terrain prevented them from planting. Elsewhere, bamboo trees were planted every forty meters. Any tree that grew on Vietnamese land was cut down; all those planted correctly along the border were left alone.⁴⁷



Map 7. Border at Pingxiang, Guangxi Province, in the Qing dynasty. 1. Na He Pass 那河隘; 2. Bằg Tường Mountain County 憑祥州; 3. Tư Lăng Mountain County 思陵州. *Source:* Tan (1982, 46–47).

The Qing court concluded that the incident arose from the fact that the populations were intermixed, so, “if local people are severely punished for breaking laws, then foreign ones cannot escape similar punishment.”⁴⁸ It urged tribal officials to continue planting bamboo, with the stipulation that any mistakes must be made good. They were not to trespass onto Vietnamese territory, but they must not yield ground and withdraw. People who lived in mixed communities must be punished and their tribal officials reprimanded. The populations must be re-separated. The court also asked Vietnam to send back those guilty of trespassing so that they could be dealt with.⁴⁹

Barely a month later, before tensions in Pingxiang had abated, the head of Siling County, Wei Riyi, and tribal elder Li Yanggao allegedly received a report from Luo Fuli of the Nahe Settlement to the effect that, in the seventh month, more than twenty people from Bản Bồng Settlement in Lộc Bình County had crossed into Chinese territory and moved the earthen wall east of Mi-ke mountain as well as the bamboo border. They had penetrated two hundred meters into China and taken sixty-two ricefields. The governor-general of Liangguang, Suchang, saw that the incident in Siling bore resemblance to that of Pingxiang and ordered an on-site investigation; he also sent troops close to Nahe and forbade border crossing. The investigating team discovered that the wall seemed newly built, as the earth was still red. Upon being interrogated, Wei Riyi and Luo Fuli admitted that they had conceived the scheme of seizing land after receiving the order to plant bamboo. They had conspired with Huang Qingfang, promising him that each year he would receive four baskets of grain. The two then urged their people to build a wall and plant bamboo; this had brought fifty-eight Vietnamese ricefields into Chinese territory. Contradicting earlier reports that Vietnamese had trespassed into China, the investigation led to a whole raft of local officials being punished. Luo Fuli, Huang Qingfang, and their men were sent into the army at Pingle Prefecture; Wei Riyi and Li Yanggao were cashiered; Zhang Shangzhong, a Pingxiang elder in charge of tree planting, was also cashiered for his responsibility for the border violation.⁵⁰

Although the border conflicts of 1750–1751 ended with the dishonorable dismissal of many officials, this did not spell the end of such conflicts. In the early eighteenth century, a Qing official observed that

the three prefectures of Nanning, Taiping, and Siming border Jiaozhi [Vietnam] over thousands of miles without a dividing wall or even mountains to define territorial limits; ricefields lie next to each other, and the inhabitants of villages [on either side of the border] can see one another. But the local barbarians have many customs among which are raiding and pillaging one another. Sometimes, our people cross over to pillage; sometimes, it's the [foreign] barbarians who invade.⁵¹

His observation could be applied to the whole eighteenth century.

State Intervention and Its Limits

Constant references to local disturbances and frequent assertions of sovereignty in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries suggest the two states' increased attention to the border. But state intervention did not result in a definitive resolution of conflicts. Over several centuries, the *tusi/thổ ty* system had been deployed by both regimes to bring order to the border area. In reality, it brought about the opposite result: divisions and contradictions within local communities.

By implementing the system of circulating officials (*gaitu guiliu*), the Qing court may have hoped to bring the administration of the border area under greater control from the center and decrease the incidence of border conflicts. It began to implement the policy of appointing circulating officials in the south, in particular in Guangxi and Yunnan, under Kangxi (1654–1722) and especially Yongzheng (1722–1735). In Vietnam, the same policy began to be implemented in 1831–1832 during the reign of Minh Mệnh (1820–1840) (Nguyễn 1996; Vũ 2014). To this was added a campaign of Confucian education, with the state sending education officials to “civilize” border peoples and transform them into proper imperial subjects. Finally, self-governing communities such as mountain settlements or estates became official administrative units such as hamlets and villages. At the same time, individuals and families were registered on population censuses and tax rolls and their lands on property rolls (Herman 1997). The efforts of both courts to expand their presence in the border area brought significant results. First, the administrative apparatus of each state was more extensive and powerful than before. After the administrative reforms in China, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, court-appointed officials were in charge of most of the administrative units in Guangxi (Huang Jiaxin 2007, 163–164). In Vietnam (racked by civil war for the last three decades of the

eighteenth century and only under a unified regime since 1802), the number of communities labeled as “mountain settlements” declined considerably in comparison with the early eighteenth century; they had become communes (*xã*), basic units under the direct control of the state. The system of administrative documents such as land and population registers helped in population management and the collection of taxes (Ngô and Papin, 2003; Dương and Phạm, 2012). The two states gained increased knowledge of the geography, customs, and populations of the area. The production of gazetteers in both China and Vietnam testified to the appointment of officials to the region as well as the expansion of education among local communities

These developments did not, however, completely destroy the power of local actors. In Guangxi, some tribal chieftains retained their power until the twentieth century. In 1907, the *tusi* of Pingxiang, Liu Zhupei, tried to foment a rebellion and fled to Vietnam. He was cashiered and the post of *tusi* was finally abolished.⁵² The previous year, Li Depu in Anping was punished for an infraction, leading to the end of the *tusi* system that had endured over five hundred years in that area through twenty-five generations of tribal chieftains (Took 2005, 88). In Vietnam, the introduction of the system of circulating officials met with fierce resistance on the part of tribal chieftains, reaching a high point in the Nông Văn Vân rebellion of 1833–1835. Although the rebellion was put down, the Nguyễn court was forced to abandon the new policy and return to the old *thổ ty* system (Vũ 2014, 372–373).

Efforts to extend education into mountain areas similarly met with little success. The Vietnamese court complained on numerous occasions about the poor quality of the teachers and network of schools in the border area. Several centuries of civil war and disorder could not produce a strong administrative infrastructure or the necessary foundation for “civilizing” local inhabitants. In addition, the educational efforts of the Nguyễn took place in a very short time, in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Since the 1830s, the mountain area of the China-Vietnam borderland was continuously overwhelmed by military forces and bandits associated with the Nông Văn Vân uprising. Of the seven hundred men who received the *cử nhân* degree in regional exams from 1813 to 1879, only one came from Hưng Hóa; none came from Tuyên Quang, Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, or Quảng Yên (Đỗ 2013).

Besides the enduring power of the tribal chieftains, the ability of the Chinese and Vietnamese courts to intervene in border conflicts was further limited by the difficult terrain,

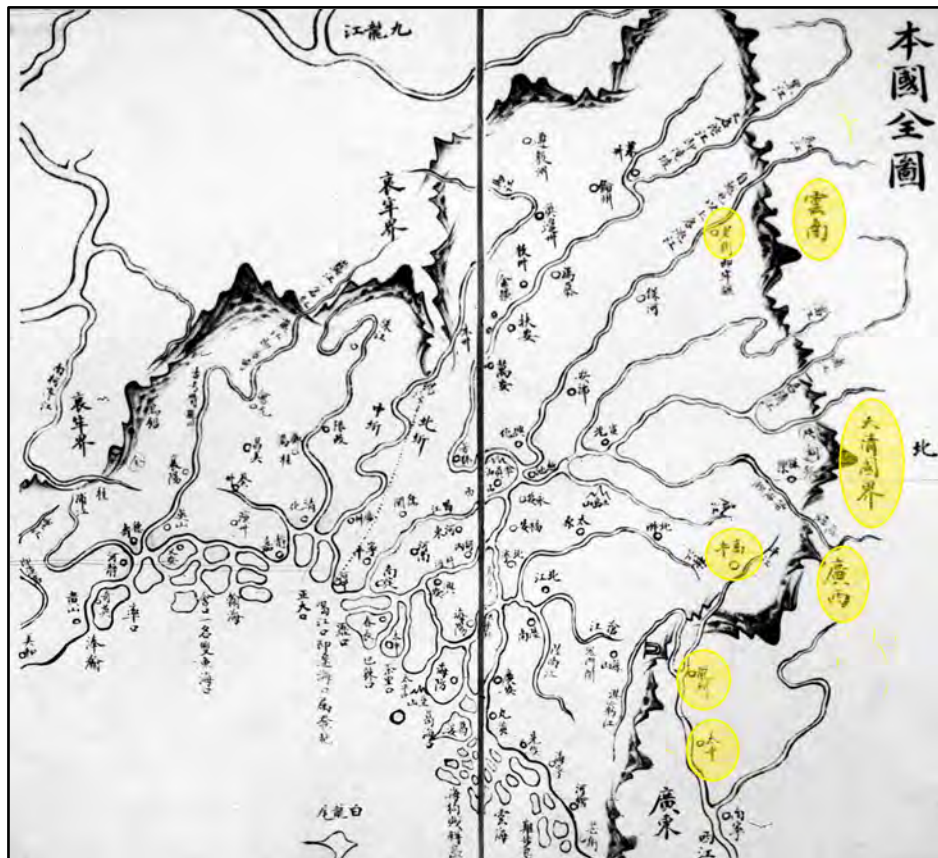
power imbalance between the two countries, and lack of clarity in the management of border populations. Imperfect identification of the border populations complicated state administrative efforts. Chinese applied the terms *yi* (barbarian) and *tu* (native) to inhabitants of the border to distinguish them from Han; Vietnamese used the term *Thổ* (*tu*) in the same way; but Vietnamese elites of the Nguyễn era, besides calling themselves *Kinh*, also identified themselves as Han—that is, as representatives of Han civilization in contradistinction to non-Sinicized/non-Viet communities. The lack of clear identification of such communities caused migratory networks and kinship and exchange relations to blur the borderline and helped their members move outside the reach of the state. Cross-border movement by tribal chieftains was extremely widespread before the twentieth century. In confrontations with the center, many tribal chieftains fled across the border, as had Hoàng Văn Đông in the eighteenth century and Nông Văn Vân in the nineteenth.

Beginning in 1860, the border area became a theater of warfare between different political and military actors, from remnants of the Taiping to the Black Flags, Yellow Flags, and local bandits (Davis 2008). This significantly curbed the ability of the state to administer the region and turned it into an arena of violent competition for power for two decades before colonialism restored order.

Making and Unmaking the China-Vietnam Border in the Early Modern Era

In his seminal work on the role of maps in constructing the geo-body of Siam, Thongchai Winichakul suggested that national borders did not emerge there in the early modern era because there was no network of borders in the political regimes in the region; people then conceived of the world as made up of large and powerful polities and smaller, weaker centers (Thongchai 1994, 81–88). Although the world order that Thongchai depicts bears some resemblance to the tributary relationship between China and Vietnam over a millennium, this article has sought to demonstrate that the potential for dividing up space had its origins in the combination of competition for power among local actors and the expansionist policies of the two states. A question arises out of this new understanding: did this partitioning of space have the same meaning for the state and for local people as our present definition of national borders?

Presumably, the conception of power and the management of space by the two countries differed significantly from our present understandings. Terms that were frequently used in premodern Vietnam and China included “belonging to” and “maps,” and maps included both terrain and populations, with the second being of greater importance (Wen 2008, 310); the two states were more concerned with people and their locations than with empty geographical space. Part of the reason may have been the tributary relationship in force until 1885. From the Chinese perspective, according to which Vietnam was conceived of as belonging to the Chinese world order, the governing distinction was between “Han” and “barbarian” (*yi*) rather than between two separate countries. Although the Nguyễn dynasty often boasted of its cultural orthodoxy in contrast to the foreign origins of the Qing, its elite never rejected the tributary relationship.



Map 8. Vietnam in the late nineteenth century. 1. Yunnan Province 雲南; 2. Lào Cai Town 老街; 3. The border of the Great Qing 大清國界; 3. Cao Bằng Province 高平; 4. Guangxi Province 廣西; 5. Long County 龍州; 6. Taiping Prefecture 太平. *Source:* Anonymous (18??).

While all conflicts had local origins, local people did not always accept the resolution of their disputes by the two centers, which resulted in the latter's efforts to highlight differences and divide territorial space. Local people found greater commonality of language and patterns of exchange with similar communities across the border than with populations under the same political regime, which undermined the efficacy of the border at ensuring territorial sovereignty. Nonetheless, the two centers' efforts at defining the boundaries of their respective territory did have some impact.

In 1870, after learning of a French invasion of Vietnam, the Qing court sent Xu Yanxu, an official with long experience in Guangxi, to Vietnam. After eight months there, Xu wrote a book in which he gave a brief survey of the history, culture, and customs of Vietnam, systematically describing the border area with a list of hundreds of passes and military posts stretching from the coast of Guangdong to mountainous prefectures of Yunnan (Xu 1877, 169–210). Although the survey's primary goal was military, it can be seen as the first step on the part of Chinese officials toward seeing Vietnam not as a part of the Sinosphere but as a territorially sovereign state (see map 8).



Map 9. The Sino-Vietnamese borderland, 1889–1890. *Source:* Commission Française d'Abornement (1889–1890).

Not long afterward, Xu's geography was used to define the border between China and Vietnam. The treaty between China and France in 1887 thus capped a centuries-long process of boundary formation (see map 9). It was the result not only of French colonial might and the introduction of Western cartographic techniques but of centuries of interaction between China and Vietnam and the peoples living in the border area. Did the drawing of a borderline create a

well-defined geo-body on either side of it? The borderline cut through communities that shared the same ethnicity and continued to maintain relations of kinship and economic exchange across it. During periods of conflict between the two countries, these communities were forced to take sides, and yet they continued to be viewed with suspicion by their respective governments. The drawing and redrawing of the China-Vietnam border between 1887 and 2009 did not alter this situation. Neither cartography nor nationalist histories can capture the complexity of life for in-between communities or their relationships to states that are at once far away and yet all too dominant. To view these communities as mere victims of rapacious state expansionism is to deny them historical agency and, in particular, to ignore their role in bringing the state to the margins of its territory through the attempts of their leaders to compete for power and preserve their freedom of action.

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Notes

- 1 *Đại Nam thực lục* (hereafter, ĐNTL) (2004, 2:666–668).
- 2 *Đại Việt sử ký tục biên* (hereafter, TB) (1991, 48).
- 3 After the Lê dynasty was restored to the throne in 1592, real power was held by the Trịnh until 1786 (hence the often hyphenated name of the regime). The regime controlled only the northern half of today's Vietnam.
- 4 See “China, Vietnam Settle Land Border Issue,” *Xinhua*, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-02/23/content_10878785.htm, accessed May 6, 2016.
- 5 For example, the development of new cartographic techniques in Europe in the late sixteenth century made it possible for France to be represented as a nation with complete sovereignty over its territorial space. In reality, at different times since the sixteenth century, French space was divided up by power struggles. France as we know it only came into being after World War I, when Alsace-Lorraine, lost to Germany in 1871, was restored to the French territory by the Treaty of Versailles. Even the current familiar image of France dates only from the early nineteenth century, thanks to the creation of a nationwide administrative structure during the Revolution and its increased centralization under Napoleon (Branch 2014, 150–162).

- 6 Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư (hereafter, TT) (1993, 1:219).
- 7 In the Treaty of 1084, the two sides identified eight passes as forming the limits of Song territory: Gengjian/Canh Liêm; Khâu Cự/Qiuju; Khiếu Nhạc/Jiaoyue; Thông Khoáng/Tongkuang; Gengyan/Canh Nham; Dunli/Đồn Ly; Duoren/Đa Nhân; and Gounan/Câu Nam. The entire area lying outside these passes—territory that included the six prefectures of Bao/Bảo; Le/Lạc; Lian/Luyện; Miao/Miêu; Ding/Đinh; and Fang/Phóng and the two mountain settlements of Su/Túc and Sang/Tang—were given over to Jiaozhi/Giao Chỉ (Vietnamese) administrative management. See Li Tao (1985, Q.279:6831).
- 8 TT (1993, 1:280).
- 9 *Thiên Nam dư hạ tập* (hereafter, TNDH) (14??, 10:56).
- 10 *Ming shilu* (hereafter, MSL) (1962, vol 9: Shizong shilu, 4262)
- 11 *Qing shilu* (hereafter, QSL) (1988, 3:988).
- 12 TB (1991, 31).
- 13 TB (1991, 33).
- 14 TB (1991, 48).
- 15 QSL (1988, 5: 984–985).
- 16 TB (1991, 27).
- 17 TB (1991, 32).
- 18 *Khâm Định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* (hereafter, CM) (1998, 2:982).
- 19 CM (1998, 2:862).
- 20 *Hung Hóa xứ phong thổ lục* (hereafter, HH) (1778, 14).
- 21 QSL (1988, 19:793)
- 22 *Zhongguo Gudai Zhongyue Guanxi Shiliao Xuanbian* (hereafter, SLHB) (1985, 556–557).
- 23 CM (1998, 2:952).
- 24 TB (1991, 327).
- 25 TB (1991, 327–328).
- 26 TT (1993, 2:370).
- 27 Thanks to Bradley C. Davis for translating these titles.
- 28 ĐNTL (2004, 3:60).
- 29 ĐNTL (2004, 3:61).
- 30 ĐNTL (2004, 3:62).
- 31 ĐNTL (2004, 3:188–189).
- 32 ĐNTL (2004, 3:190).
- 33 ĐNTL (2004, 3:215).
- 34 TT (1993, 2:448).
- 35 TB (1991, 34).
- 36 *Gongzhongdang Yongzheng Zouzhe* (hereafter, GZD) (1977, 3:368).
- 37 QSL (1988, 7:479–480); GZD (1977, 3:651–652).
- 38 GZD (1977, 3:771–772).
- 39 1 *shi* = 100 liters
- 40 QSL (1988, 7:479).
- 41 QSL (1988, 7:480).

- 42 TB (1991, 108).
 43 CM (1998, 2:808); TB (1991, 108).
 44 CM (1998, 2:809); TB (1991, 108).
 45 CM (1998, 2:810).
 46 *Qingdai Dangan Shiliao Xuanbian* (hereafter, QDA) (2010, 2:611–612).
 47 QDA (2010, 2:615).
 48 QDA (2010, 2:615).
 49 QDA (2010, 2:617).
 50 QDA (2010, 2:620–621).
 51 GZD (1977, 3:368).
 52 QSL (1988, 60:543).

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