

CROSS-CURRENTS



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Stories and Histories from the China-Vietnam Border

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In keeping with the mission of *Cross-Currents*, I have selected four articles for this issue whose common trait is their focus on the border between China and Vietnam. I am deliberately eschewing the term “borderland” to describe the area they cover, as one article, by Robert J. Antony, concerns life on the water and piracy. The other articles, however, fit neatly into the category of borderland studies.

Ever since what had been the Protectorate of Annam split from the dying Tang Empire in the tenth century, the border between China and Đại Việt has been a contested area, subject to conflict and negotiation. While Chinese armies repeatedly crossed the border to invade Đại Việt, Vietnamese occasionally staged preemptive strikes against Chinese garrisons. The most famous attack took place in 1075, when Lý Thường Kiệt led one hundred thousand men into a battle near Nanning that lasted forty days. However, the Chinese invasions, whether successful or not, often resulted in the cession of Vietnamese territory. Following his victory over the Qing invading army in 1789, Nguyễn Huệ is said to have contemplated demanding the return of previously ceded areas in Guangdong and Guangxi. His death in 1792 brought to an end whatever plans he may have had.

The modern border between China and Vietnam was established by the treaties of 1887 and 1895 between China and France, which ceded more Vietnamese territory to China. Thus, the Tụ Long mine, which figures prominently in the account of the Nông Văn Vân uprising of 1833–1835 by Vũ Đương Luân, now belongs to Yunnan. In the fishing village of Wanwei in Guangxi, Jing (ethnic Vietnamese) people have a saying: “We used to live in Vietnam; because of the French bandits, we had to become Chinese.” The land border was renegotiated in 1999, giving

rise to further Vietnamese laments that more territory had been ceded to China. Meanwhile, the maritime border between the two countries continues to be hotly contested.

Whether on land or at sea, border areas are not just sites of conflict. For the ethnically diverse communities who live at the margins of empires or nations, border crossing is a facet of everyday life. It may involve trade and smuggling, pillaging raids, flight from fighting or from the state, human trafficking, marriage, or family visits. These historical events and trends are often narrated within the confines of national histories. Yet they highlight the fuzziness of national boundaries and the importance of forms of social organization that cut across borders and unite individuals and communities that nations seek to separate and distinguish. Not only does the study of border areas and border crossings “rescue history from the nation,” to borrow from Prasenjit Duara (1995), but it also points out that the highly local can be transnational, and that apparently remote places can be linked to global currents of people, ideas, and commodities.

Yang Yandi, the subject of Robert J. Antony’s article, appears in both Chinese and Vietnamese histories, but as two distinct personae. In Chinese history—and, as Antony points out, in local legend—he figures as a pirate, the scourge of fishermen and maritime traders in the South China Sea in the late seventeenth century, as well as a heroic, larger-than-life figure. In Vietnamese history, he figures mostly as the founder of a Mekong Delta town and as leader of one of the first groups of so-called Ming loyalists (*minh huong*). This study of his early career should prompt a reexamination of the meaning of this label, not only for Yang Yandi but also for the several thousand other Chinese who arrived in Vietnam in the 1680s in the wake of the Manchu conquest of China.

Vũ Đường Luân’s article on the politics of mining on the China-Vietnam border highlights the role of both local populations (who are now called ethnic minorities) and Chinese miners and traders in the economy of the northern uplands of Vietnam. When an uprising led by the tribal chieftain Nông Văn Vân erupted in 1833, the Qing court decided to observe the frontier between China and Vietnam. The court further refused to allow Qing troops to venture into Vietnamese territory to arrest Chinese participants in the uprising or to let Vietnamese troops pursue the rebels into China. But the rebels had no such compunction, as their networks of kinship and commerce transcended the border.

Bradley Camp Davis takes up the story of the northern uplands where Vũ Đường Luân leaves off. This time, however, the bandits and rebels are Chinese. They are the Yellow Flags,

the Black Flags, and a man named Li Yangcai, who, despite being Chinese, claimed descent from the founder of the Lý dynasty (1009–1225) in Vietnam. The new factor was the entry of French consuls. In the 1870s, northern Vietnam had not yet fallen to colonial rule, but consulates had been established in Hanoi and Haiphong to promote French interests, especially in the northern uplands and into southern China. The consuls considered the model of border management pursued by the Qing and Nguyễn courts inadequate, and they did not hesitate to meddle in Vietnamese domestic affairs a decade before the establishment of the Protectorate of Tonkin. French intervention into Vietnamese affairs reinforced factionalism among Nguyễn officials, who were divided over how to deal with endemic banditry in the highlands and over the appropriate role of China in Vietnam.

Nguyễn Thị Phương Châu's ethnographic research focuses on a very different type of border crossing: that of women from the northern Vietnamese countryside who have married Chinese fishermen in Wanwei, a Jing village in Guangxi close to the area where Yang Yandi once ruled the waves. These women's (illegal) travels to Wanwei and back to their native villages on family visits underlines the continued fuzziness of the border between China and Vietnam and the intertwined stories and histories of the people living on either side of it.

Except for Nguyễn Thị Phương Châu's piece, which is based on her fieldwork over more than a decade, the articles draw on source in French, Vietnamese, and Chinese. In the articles by Vũ Đường Luân and Bradley Camp Davis, diacritics have been incorporated in Vietnamese names of places and people. Chinese names have been rendered in Pinyin. Readers wishing to read those names in the original Chinese characters should contact the authors.

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References

Duara, Prasenjit. 1995. *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.