

*Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750–1880*, ed. by NOLA COOKE & LI TANA (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004). ISBN 9971 69 311 9 (soft)

This slim volume provides an excellent professional perspective on the eighteenth-nineteenth century economic, political, and ethnic evolution of Cochinchina within its broader geographical setting. I approached this book with an “attitude,” a particular point of view, a specific agenda, but probably one with which many readers of this journal would sympathize. In researching Thai history of the turbulent later half of the eventful eighteenth century, the issue of Siam’s relations with its eastern neighbors – particularly Cambodia and Vietnam – raises special problems of reliable documentation and penetrating analysis. This volume, I had hoped, would provide some much-needed insight. And it did not disappoint.

The book’s captivating two-word title, “Water Frontier,” makes a bold reference to its unifying theme that the South China Sea littoral historically formed a single economic zone – a view requiring that simplistic, land-based nationalist interpretations of the region’s development be discarded in favor of a broader land-sea vision stressing the dynamics of ethnic interaction, in this case particularly the interplay between the major autochthonous cultures of Indochina and the overseas Chinese. The subtitle refines the book’s subject matter

to the segment of the Southeast Asian Water Frontier known as the “Lower Mekong Region,” said to encompass present-day southern Vietnam, eastern Cambodia, and southeastern Thailand. One could argue that Thailand’s eastern seaboard lies beyond the Mekong watershed; but that it forms an integral part of the story of Chinese migration, settlement, and economic encroachment along the Indochinese frontier is without doubt, so why quibble.

Recent research currents in “modern” Southeast Asian history have been flowing inexorably across the traditional statist boundaries to view the region in terms of its ever-evolving ethnic tapestry. The introduction to the book here under review modestly states that it “does not claim to be a definitive account but seeks rather to offer a new angle of observation and to inspire a new set of questions for historical analysis” (p. 12). It thus falls well within the revisionist historical perspective exemplified by Victor Lieberman’s pioneering work on the political-economic-cultural evolution of mainland Southeast Asia<sup>1</sup> and presents a fine lowland counterpoint to James Scott’s recent compelling study of the region’s upland societies<sup>2</sup> by visualizing the South China Sea littoral as a dynamic ethnic melting-pot rather than the traditional, essentially

---

<sup>1</sup> Lieberman, Victor (2003). *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Scott, James C. (2009). *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press.

static statist patchwork quilt. This volume is considerably more compact and certainly less polemical than Scott and Lieberman. Furthermore, it deals primarily with one ethnic element, the overseas Chinese, while Lieberman and Scott take more comprehensive views of the regional dynamic. Together, however, they lay the groundwork for what portends to be a new era of “borderless” historical investigation toward unraveling “the ebb and flow of peoples, goods, and ideas” in the region’s long-term cultural evolution.

The book’s ten well-documented papers approach that theme not only from a variety of topical specialties but examine it within strikingly different territorial contexts. Several of the chapters cover the 1,400 km coastal transport route stretching from southern China past Vietnam, Cambodia, and Siam to the Malay Peninsula while others home in on the roughly 400 km Cha Mau peninsular coastline; some range inland only as far as the Cochinchina – Cambodia borderlands while others extend their analysis from the Vietnamese coastal ports via the inland trade routes crossing Cambodia and Laos into Siam. That recurrent kaleidoscopic shifting of focus (despite the editors’ efforts to organize the chapters into some sort of order) requires the reader’s close attention, as it repeatedly alters the narrative’s perspective from such broad issues as the development of Chinese maritime trade and the ongoing economics-driven Thai-Viet political stand-off to detailed examination of the peopling and un-peopling of the

Mekong delta lands by the Cham, Khmer, Viet, and Chinese ethnic groups; the rise and fall of specific ports such as Hatien, Chau Doc, Gia Dinh, and Saigon-Cholon; and the development of the ship-building, rice, buffalo, salt, betel and cardamom, and other local export-oriented industries.

Beyond the useful orientation provided by the book’s introduction (chapter 1), the most interesting chapters deal with the socio-economic dynamics within the lower Mekong region during the late-eighteenth- early-nineteenth-centuries. Yumio Sakurai presents an absorbing discussion of the region’s eighteenth-century Chinese pioneers (chapter 3). “When the first Chinese immigrants arrived there was little significant agriculture in the region and virtually no commerce, a situation that changed dramatically during the eighteenth-century” (p. 39). How that pioneering effort grew into a thriving presence, ultimately prompting Thai military intervention to protect Siam’s economic interests, is a fascinating tale.

Li Tana describes the rise of the region’s trade system (chapter 5). She persuasively extends backwards in time our understanding of the region’s vigorous coastal and overland trade routes reaching into Cambodia and to Siam, and the growth of trade with the economic advance from forest products to cultigens, especially rice. She concludes that the appearance of Nguyen Anh, Taksin, and Rama I “at the same time [more or less] and in the same region [cannot] be properly understood without relating these men and their

accomplishments to the regional trade network that made possible so much of their success” (p. 82).

Li extends her study of the region’s trade system with an analysis of its shipbuilding industry (chapter 8). According to her the Nguyen state shipyards established near Saigon in 1790 preceded by forty years the Siamese state shipyards at Chanthaburi. The new types of fighting ships innovated at those ports were based on a combination of Chinese and Western prototypes which played an important part in the Thai-Viet warfare of the 1830s-1840s. In addition, a number of smaller shipyards turned out both large maritime junks for the China trade and smaller craft for coastal trading, with the sale of junks to China-based trading firms creating an important industry in its own right. “This industry, going hand in hand with rice trade, formed the new economic foundations for southern Vietnam and integrated it into the Water Frontier of Southeast Asia at a level never before seen in Vietnamese history” (p. 120).

Coi Byung Wook analyses the early Nguyen dynasty’s policy towards the Chinese in the region (chapter 6). He clarifies the rising tensions between the Vietnamese court and the enterprising Chinese as each new restriction on Chinese commercial expansionism was circumvented. “This tense cycle of mutual hostility would persist until the Chinese settlers of southern Vietnam finally encountered their future protectors the colonial French, from 1859” (p. 97).

Nola Cooke examines the interaction

of the Chinese and Vietnamese in the region around the middle of the nineteenth century and considers the impact of their penetration of the Cambodian lowlands as far upstream as the Tonle Sap (chapter 9). The Transbassac region is shown by her to have been a multiethnic terrain of considerable complexity, a “floating world of junk traders, smugglers, boatmen, itinerant workers, fishing families, pirates, and hopeful wanderers” (p.141). Even within the broader Chinese community, ethnic subgroups formed their own mosaic, with the Cantonese and Hokkien, led by the prosperous junk traders on the China run, dominant, while the Hainanese operated as “highly mobile small traders keen to elude official notice” (p. 140). By mid-century, Phnom Penh had evolved into a largely Sino-Vietnamese town, so that it had become “part of a well-established regional trade network woven together by the seasonal itineraries of a myriad of riverine, coastal, and seagoing junk traders” (p. 132).

Most directly relevant to what I imagine would be the interests of most readers of this journal is Puangthong Rungswasdisab’s intriguing paper on the continuing contest between Vietnam and Siam for control of the trade and resources of the trans-Mekong basin (chapter 7). The first episode turns on Taksin’s 1769 and 1771 attacks on Hatien, a junk port of Chochin-China that was not only a watering hole for passing ships but also straddled an important trade route leading inland via the Bassac River to the Cambodian

hinterlands. The second refers to the 1827-1828 Chao Anu rebellion as a crisis stemming from Siam's struggle to monopolize trade routes and manpower in southern Laos. And the third, Siam's 1833 assault on the Mekong delta and the ensuing lingering conflict in Cambodia, rose out of the direct challenge posed by Vietnam in the struggle for control of Cambodia's resource base. In sum, "the ability to protect vital trading interests in the Thai competition with Vietnam for control of lucrative forest exports to China was one of the main reasons for the expansion of the Siamese state under Taksin and the early Bangkok dynasty" (p. 115).

The three remaining chapters are of secondary relevance as contributions to the theme pursued in this volume, though each is certainly a useful research study in its own right. The first of these (chapter 4), by James Kong Chin, provides a survey of the major ports of southern China and southern Vietnam and the junk traffic between them. The second (chapter 10), by Carl Trocki, traces the international networking of Chinese revenue farming syndicates by focusing on a lawsuit that was filed in Hong Kong's supreme court in 1880, at the very end of the historical phase covered by this book; "[b]y the time the events analyzed here took place the old eighteenth-century centers of Hatien, My Tho, and Chanthaburi had all become backwaters" (p. 159). The book's subtitle was apparently extended to that relatively late date specifically to accommodate this outlier study. Lastly, the book's second chapter, by Anthony

Reid, presents a background survey of the China trade in Southeast Asia's economic development. It spreads its wings from Fujian and Guangdong to the Malay Peninsula and Singapore, subordinating the lower Mekong region to a much larger story. Its labored incorporation in this volume is reflected in the abrupt insertion of a one-paragraph conclusion titled "Vietnam and the Region" which struggles to connect this paper to the book's Mekong Region Water Frontier theme.

The book's very first sentence states: "The land we call the Water Frontier remained largely underwater or in the swamp not three centuries ago" (p. 1). Quite so! Why was that provocative opening thought not further pursued in this volume? An important missing chapter would have expanded on Sakurai's all-too-brief statement (pp. 36-39) on the Mekong region's changing ecology by examining more incisively its impact on the region's peopling, the rise and fall of its port-cities, and its remarkable economic development, particularly its early emergence as one of the world's prime rice granaries. The book's six very useful maps could have been elaborated to show the changing habitable shoreline, shifting river courses, and major transport canals that were dug in the early nineteenth century to facilitate commercial access to the interior as the delta stretched ever further outward with continued sedimentation, particularly as a result of deforestation in the upstream Mekong basin. Such an excursion into the region's historical geography would have allowed closer

consideration of the rise and fall of Hatien and other early junk ports and their replacement by ports with good anchorage facilities for deep-keeled Western square-riggers. It would have provided a fine counterpart to the similar economically and politically significant ecological evolution of the Chaophraya and Irrawaddi deltas during the same time frame.

Despite the abovementioned caveats, this book of collected essays on the Lower Mekong Water Frontier is a valuable, state-of-the-art contribution to the new wave of “borderless” Southeast Asian history. It is heartily recommended to all those with an abiding interest in the region’s economic, political, and ethnic history.

Edward Van Roy

---

*L’Asia du Sud-Est 2011 : Les événements majeurs de l’année* [Southeast Asia 2011: Important events of the year] by A. LEVEAU & B. DE TRÉGLODÉ. Institut de recherche sur l’Asie du Sud-Est contemporaine (Bangkok: IRASEC, 2011)

One must firstly congratulate IRASEC on its crystal-ball gazing; this review is being written at the beginning of 2011, and already we are told what the important events of the year will be. This bizarre dating, defended by IRASEC (effectively and perhaps correctly maintaining the events of 2010 will be played out in 2011), conceals the fact that the book is a useful summary of events in the year just concluded, 2010, in the South-East Asian region.

The contents comprise a list of contributors, a foreword by the two editors, four essays (on the Jemaah Islamiyah, the evolution of the role of the yuan, South Korean ambitions in the region, and Chinese–South-East Asian relations), and eleven summaries of events in the past year of the countries comprising the region, in fact ASEAN plus Timor Leste (the latter a long-time pet of IRASEC). These résumés constitute the meat in the sandwich, and are topped off with eight annexes providing details of Francophone institutions in the region.

In any overarching publication of this nature, it is difficult to maintain a balance. Events in Thailand in 2010 were certainly dominant and twenty pages are allocated to the Red-Shirt uprising, without mentioning their foot-shooting