

## Introduction

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Thirty years ago, in Hanoi, the archaeologist and historian Do Van Ninh stood stunned (*choáng váng*) over the thousands of weapons being excavated from the bottom of the city's Ngoc Khanh Lake and from under the fields of water spinach growing nearby.<sup>1</sup> In the 2000s Vietnamese archaeologists further retrieved a large quantity of handguns, bombards, and cannons from excavation sites in the Giang Vo and Kim Ma areas of Hanoi.<sup>2</sup> These weapons were not imports from abroad: most of these firearms were cast locally, in fifteenth-century Dai Viet under Le Thanh Tong. They were part of Dai Viet's enormous store of firearms used to execute its ambitious campaigns of political expansion, which included its decimation of Champa.

Dai Viet under the Le dynasty was, as Sun Laichen put it, a small 'gunpowder empire'. He estimated that during the fifteenth century about 98,800 soldiers, or 38 per cent of the Dai Viet military, carried firearms during wartime. This firepower gave the Le court a military advantage and upended the region's balance of power in the 1470s and 1480s: in particular, among its western neighbours, invading Ai-lao, Muong Phuan, and Lan Sang (roughly all of today's Laos) in 1479 while threatening Sipsongbanna in Yunnan and overrunning Lanna (now northern Thailand) in 1480, and to the south, crushing Champa in 1471 and completing a major thrust in Vietnamese territorial expansion into today's central and southern Vietnam. The range of Dai Viet's 'gunpowder empire' grew so mighty that, in the course of these Le campaigns, troops marched as far as the Irrawaddy River in the Ava kingdom in 1479.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://khaocohoc.gov.vn/kho-vu-khi-co-duoi-long-ho-ngoc-khanh>, accessed 10 Feb 2020. The old placenames of 'bombard field' (*Bai Dan*) and 'shooting ground' (*Truong ban*) are still remembered among the neighbourhood of Ngoc Khanh.

<sup>2</sup> Sun Laichen, 'Chinese-style Firearms in Dai Viet (Vietnam): The Archaeological Evidence', *Revista de cultura* 27 (2008), 43–45.

<sup>3</sup> Sun Laichen, 'Chinese Gunpowder Technology and Dai Viet, ca. 1390–1497', in Nhung Tuyet Tran and Anthony Reid (eds), *Viet Nam: Borderless Histories* (Maddison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p. 102; this is confirmed by the Viet Chronicle itself. See Ngo Si Lien, *Dai Viet su ky Toan thu* [The complete annals of Dai Viet]. Completed 1479, new edition, Chen Chingho (ed.) (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Toyo Bunka kenkyujo), vol. 2: 710: '[Our army] attacked Ailao and defeated them. [We] Went into the Lao capital and obtained their treasures.

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Such brilliant military successes, which significantly shaped Vietnam and mainland Southeast Asian histories, ultimately rested on one thing: the materials for making gunpowder: sulphur and saltpetre. Dai Viet, however, lacked both of the key ingredients. Sulphur could only come from the volcanic soils of places like Java, Sumatra, and Japan. Saltpetre could be found in Dai Viet but only in minimal quantities. During the fifteenth century, saltpetre was available only in China. Indeed, it was so identified with China at the time that the Arabs called it ‘Chinese snow’. The Ming government, understanding its strategic importance, imposed a strict ban on exporting such strategic materials on pain of death. To amass firepower necessary to achieve the scale that Viet chronicles indicate or the scale of military success that the Le court achieved in the 1470s, it must have imported many tons of gunpowder. But how did they obtain it?

Vietnamese had a good reason to withhold any information on the Le court’s source for gunpowder, because they imported through illegal channels from China. One clue comes from an early European source, the travelogue of Portuguese apothecary and voyager Tomé Pires. He visited Dai Viet (which he called *Cauchij* = Jiaozhi) sometime between his arrival in 1511 and his travel to China in 1516–1517, not long after the death of the Viet emperor Le Thanh Tong in 1497. Summarising Dai Viet’s trade, Pires included the following:

This king is much given to war, and he has countless musketeers and small bombards. A very great deal of powder is used in his country, both in war and in all his feasts and amusements by day and night. All the lords and important people in his kingdom employ it like this. Powder is used every day in rockets and all other pleasurable exercises. ... **Sulphur** from China is greatly valued. A very great deal comes to Malacca from the islands of Solor beyond Java ... and from it goes to Cochin China.

A large quantity of **saltpetre** is also of value, and a large quantity comes there from China and it is all sold there [Cochin China]. They rarely come to Malacca in their junks. They go to China, to Canton, which is a large city, to join up with the Chinese; then they come for merchandise with the Chinese in their junks.<sup>4</sup> [Bold added]

Given the timing of Pires’ book, written in Melaka sometime between 1512 and 1515, it is clear that the saltpetre importers sailing to Canton to ‘to join up with’ Chinese there were actually smugglers. They were probably a mix of Chinese and Vietnamese for, at this point in the Ming dynasty, sea trade was illegal and exporting raw materials for arms was doubly forbidden. Pires

Their king escaped so we captured their people and marched to the Kim Sha River (Irrawaddy River) which was at the south of Burma 緬國 where we attained Burmese books and documents and came back triumphantly.’

<sup>4</sup> Tomé Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires: An Account of the East, from the Red Sea to Japan*, written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515 (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1944), vol. 1, p. 115.

seemed to indicate that sulphur travelled to Dai Viet through a triangular trade, sailing to Melaka on Chinese ships before Chinese merchants transshipped it to Dai Viet.<sup>5</sup>

Such statements reveal the surprising existence of a thriving interregional commerce in contraband goods that fed an arms industry sponsored by the Le court. Its structure was far-reaching and sophisticated, comprising travel routes that extended for long distances up rivers, over land, and of course, over sea. The existence of such sophistication in industry, transport, commerce, or political strategy, much less in military technology, would have been inconceivable to Vietnam specialists only a few decades ago.<sup>6</sup>

Le Thanh Tong (r.1460–1497), universally considered the most Confucian king in Vietnamese history, under whose reign the regular triennial Chinese examination system was implemented, and therein where one might least expect to find maritime trade a matter of very high importance to the court. Yet here he is, no doubt well informed about trade operations and even encouraging them to happen. Surely, he must have known that without these Chinese and Vietnamese seagoers, none of his military successes could have materialised.

If Vietnam's most Confucian king could not escape the grasp of maritime commerce, how many other such histories are still buried in lakes, sunk along river bottoms, or submerged along the long, undulating coast of Dai Viet? Such questions first set me on my search. In my pursuit I was enlightened by Momoki Shiro whose words deserve to be quoted:<sup>7</sup>

Many historians consider Dai Viet during these [precolonial] periods to have been an inward-looking, self-sufficient agrarian state, but this is not true. Agrarian bases in early Southeast Asia were in fact not sufficiently developed to sustain large polities, and what agriculture advances took place occurred largely in response to trade stimuli and to the rise of cities—which demanded increased supplies of agricultural products for food consumption and for export—rather than to internal developments.

<sup>5</sup> Copper was another contraband raw material needed for firearm manufacture. It took great quantities of the metal to forge such a large volume of cannonry and guns, but Dai Viet possessed little of it at this point. Nonetheless, it secured sufficient quantities of the strategic metal from a source upriver, in the Chinese province of Yunnan. For evidence, Sun cites among other sources a fifteenth-century Chinese civilian official in Yunnan, who reported: 'Copper was mined by evil people who sold it to Jiaozhi [Dai Viet] to be made into arms.' Sun Laichen, '1390–1497 間中國的火器技術與越南' [Chinese firearm technology and Vietnam, 1390–1497], *Haiyangshi yanjiu* 海洋史研究 [Studies of Maritime History] 7 (2015), 43–44.

<sup>6</sup> Archival materials in the Ming Huong village in Vinh Long help identify how Chinese functioned in the Nguyen economy and state building. One such document lists Chinese community tasks from 1783 to 1847, including importing rice, copper, tin, zinc, and gunpowder for official purposes. See Nguyen Cam Thuy (ed.), *Dinh cu cua nguoi Hoa tren dat Nam Bo: Tu the ky XVIII den 1945* [Chinese settlement in the Southern Vietnam, from eighteenth century to 1945] (Ho Chi Minh City: Vien khoa hoc Xa hoi Thanh pho Ho Chi Minh, 2000), pp. 281–292.

<sup>7</sup> Momoki Shiro, 'Dai Viet and the South China Sea trade from the 10th to the 15th century', *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, 1 (1998), 1–2.

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In other words, agriculture had been stimulated by the growth of overseas trade and urbanisation, not the other way around as I had been made to believe since I was a student.

Moving my gaze away from Confucians, villages, kings and battles, a miracle slowly occurred: fragments of unknown pasts began revealing themselves to me in their hundreds and thousands, like shells and pebbles gleaming in the receding tide. Seemingly scattered at first glance, when they were seen from a new angle patterns appeared among them, patterns that had been overlooked by early historians, beginning with traditional chroniclers themselves. Successive generations of colonial and early post-colonial historians had then followed their lead. In Vietnam, post-colonial Marxist and nationalist historians had also largely omitted these matters from their metanarratives, if only because what peeped out tended to reveal a millennial pattern of foreign, often Chinese, involvement in the maritime trading life of the region now known as Vietnam. For Marxists, foreign merchants were little more than parasites on the feudal agrarian society; while nationalists, almost by definition, exiled them from their highly exclusive fusion of nation, ethnicity, and identity. Analysing this massive quantity of new data over two decades, I came to perceive in these patterns the components of a new historiography and a new master narrative that revealed a very different story from other histories of the ancient lands that form modern Vietnam.

Denys Lombard, in his 1988 discussion of this problem in all areas of Southeast Asian studies, pointed out this trend:<sup>8</sup>

This perception is reflected more or less clearly in all the successive histories of Southeast Asia. Initially written from a colonial perspective, and later from a nationalist one, in either case they were marked by a strong desire to stress that the greatest influences came from the West: first of all, ‘Indianisation’, then ‘Islamisation’ (conceived essentially as coming from Islamised India, or from the Middle East) and finally, of course, ‘Westernisation’, after the early sixteenth century arrival of the Portuguese.

Written originally by Europeans and aiming above all to teach readers to look to Europe (and later the US), these histories minimised the rhythms coming from the North to very little indeed, except for the Japanese commotion of 1942 which, even so, was rightly related as a totally unforeseen and even aberrant cataclysm. In this sort of perspective, the Southeast Asian space naturally remains open to the Indian world, beyond the Gulf of Bengal ... as well as towards the Melanesian world (which we know begins in Indonesian itself, in Maluku, Irian and Timor). Yet, by contrast, it excludes all relations with the Chinese world.

<sup>8</sup> Denys Lombard, ‘Another “Mediterranean” in Southeast Asia’, trans. Nola Cooke, *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 1 (2007), 3, <http://chl.anu.edu.au/chinese-southern-diaspora-studies/chinese-southern-diaspora-studies-volume-one-2007>. Originally published in *Hérodote* 88 (1988), 184–192.

In colonial and nationalist discourse, ‘China’ had too often become generalised and abstracted, so little more than a name representing nothing but a shadow spectre threatening the existence of Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam, with complex historical realities lost in the process.

The theme of ‘resistance to foreign aggression’ has been so central to nationalist historiography that, as Victor Lieberman points out, it became ‘the overriding principle for deciphering the past 2000 years’ and it ‘placed Hanoi squarely at the centre of “national” development’. Quoting Keith Taylor, he attributes this to a ‘strangling obsession with identity and continuity mandated by the nationalist faith ... has animated virtually every twentieth-century historian who has written about Vietnam’.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, as Nhung Tran and Anthony Reid note, scholars ‘unwittingly constructed a model of ‘indigenoussness’ that nationalists would soon appropriate in their construction of the inevitability of the Vietnamese nation. The dominant themes became a distinct, non-Chinese origin, the homogeneity of Vietnamese culture.’<sup>10</sup> Through such discursive manoeuvres, to paraphrase Clare Sutherland’s sharp point, nationalism became a mode of purification,<sup>11</sup> one in which the function of the ‘China factor’ was already firmly established as outside the national body.

With China so essentialised and rejected in the exclusive and dogmatic construction of the Viet nation that has dominated twentieth-century Vietnamese historiography, even interregional interactions like those between northern Vietnam and the Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi were excluded from the dominant discourse. This is important, because the referents behind the names we use to identify early Vietnam can be vague. It was never clear, for example, what constituted the people we call the ‘Viet’ or the ‘Lac’, as Catherine Churchman has shown. Moreover, actions taken in these regions could have important effects on their southern neighbours. Churchman also revealed that it was the Li and Lao chiefdoms in today’s Guangxi and western Guangdong provinces between the third and seventh centuries CE that significantly slowed Han migration from northern China,<sup>12</sup> a development that paved the way for Dai Viet’s independence. Such an important connection eludes those focused solely on internal dynamics.

<sup>9</sup> Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels, Volume 1: Integration on the Mainland: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 342.

<sup>10</sup> Nhung Tuyet Tran and Anthony Reid, ‘Introduction’, in Nhung Tuyet Tran and Anthony Reid (eds), *Viet Nam: Borderless Histories* (Madison: The University Press of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> The exact phrase is ‘Nationalism is one such mode of purification, though its apparent incompatibility with cosmopolitanism is not as clear as may first appear.’ Claire Sutherland, ‘A Post-modern Mandala? Moving beyond Methodological Nationalism’, *HumaNetten* 37 (2016), 91 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.15626/hn.20163705>, accessed 7 May 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Churchman, *The People between the Rivers: The Rise and Fall of a Bronze Drum Culture, 200–750 CE* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

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More recently, historians have begun to recognise the existence and importance of maritime regions in national histories, which has extended to Vietnam as well. The nationalist approach to Vietnamese history, while making early Dai Viet's independence appear like a heroic departure from its inland neighbours, essentially erased the links between the region we now called Vietnam and the maritime world to which it owed so much, as this book will show. It made Dai Viet more like its land-locked neighbours like Laos or Yunnan and appear wholly different from its maritime Southeast Asian neighbours. As Charles Wheeler explains, the distortion of history is particularly notable when considering the role of the sea in Vietnamese history: 'Influenced by the artificial, land-based boundaries that subverted human ecologies to imperial realities, academic disciplines have traditionally ignored fundamental, enduring patterns of cross-cultural exchange, both within and beyond this region.'<sup>13</sup> Ironically, despite its 3,200 kilometres of coastline, until recently the coast and its many ports have been the least likely places through which to approach Vietnamese history in conventional historiography. This book echoes and embraces Wheeler's advocacy of approaching Vietnamese history from the sea; in some ways it is like a dialogue with his work, as we laboured over the same problems in Vietnamese history for decades.

Still, to approach the deeper structures of Vietnamese history through the sea, standard sources are not enough; interdisciplinary efforts are essential. Geographers, archaeologists and geologists helped me to delve into the historical morphology of the coast, in which a constantly shifting boundary between interacting bodies of land and water helped to shape the material cultures of local peoples. It is this new perspective that enables me to 'reverse the conventional gaze', so to speak, and to uncover the submerged history of this coastal region by viewing the land from the sea.

Discovering how this sophisticated process worked on the Dai Viet side challenges us who are committed to understanding Vietnam's historical place in greater Asian and world history. Who created and sustained this economy? Could the traffic between China and Dai Viet have been facilitated by smugglers on both Vietnamese and Chinese coasts? While none of the official documents written at the time is very useful, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Nguyen policy provides some helpful comparisons that suggest sea traders may have transported the contraband into Vietnam openly.

During the nineteenth century, the Nguyen emperor encouraged the import of strategic goods, frequently reducing and sometimes even exempting both import and export taxes for junks transporting goods like iron, tin, zinc, and sulphur, to

<sup>13</sup> Charles Wheeler, workshop abstract, 'Maritime Southeast Asia: The Sea as Center', University of California Irvine, January 2004.

name a few.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Dai Nam had no choice but to rely on imports of sulphur, saltpetre, and other militarily essentials, as the following example shows. In 1834, during the fourteenth year of his reign, Viet Nam's emperor Minh Mang ordered the empire's southern provinces to each store 6,000 *can* (1 *can* = 500 grams) of saltpetre and 1,200 *can* of sulphur, and its northern provinces to stockpile 4,000 *can* of saltpetre and 800 *can* of sulphur. Ha Tien, in the Gulf of Thailand, had to keep 1,000 *can* of saltpetre and 200 *can* of sulphur.<sup>15</sup> Ideally, this means that Dai Nam's provinces were meant to maintain a total store of 131,000 *can* (65.5 tons) of saltpetre and 26,200 *can* (13 tons) of sulphur, excluding a strategic stockpile held in the capital Hue. Yet the empire's 19 mines had at best only produced a meagre 2,350 *can*, or 1.9 per cent of requirement, which had dropped to almost nothing after most were abandoned during the Minh Mang reign.<sup>16</sup> This meant that all of the essential sulphur and most of the saltpetre had to be imported. If this occurred under nineteenth-century Nguyen emperors, it likely also occurred under the expansionist fifteenth-century king Le Thanh Tong. The only feasible explanation for his extraordinary military prowess was that Le Vietnam, like its Nguyen successor, encouraged and protected Chinese merchants who smuggled strategic materials into Vietnam. To put it simply, smuggling by river, land, and sea was official policy in Dai Viet.

As one would expect, the smuggling economy grew large enough to attract an ever-larger number of commodities. Before the twentieth century, literate Vietnamese all read Chinese books, creating a steady market demand that even high prices did not deter.<sup>17</sup> If the Chinese shipping to Nagasaki was typical, such books were often exported together with other commodities.<sup>18</sup> Books sold to Dai Viet thus fetched high prices, guaranteeing a sustained book trade throughout the second millennium – certainly large enough to help sustain a steady sea trade, whatever its size. But beyond market considerations, maritime influences via the book trade surely also influenced two important cultural events in early modern Dai Viet, the fifteenth century Neo-Confucianist

<sup>14</sup> *Kham dinh Dai Nam hoi dien su le* [Official compendium of institutions and usages of Imperial Vietnam] (Hue: Nxb. Thuan Hoa, 1993), 4: 429–431.

<sup>15</sup> 'Ty hoa phao', in *Kham dinh Dai Nam hoi dien su le*, 1: 307–308.

<sup>16</sup> *Kham dinh Dai Nam hoi dien su le*, 4: 240.

<sup>17</sup> In the early seventeenth century, a Fujianese maritime officer named Zhang Xie noted, '[Viet] scholars love books so much that they often pay very high price to buy them'. Zhang Xie 張燮, *Dongxi yangkao* 東西洋考 [A study of the Eastern and Western oceans]. Completed 1617, anno. Xie Fang (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> Oba Osamu, 大庭脩 *Jianghu shidai zhi rizhong mihua* 江戸時代日中秘話 [A secret relation between Japan and China in the Edo Era], trans. Xu Shihong (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), pp. 58–61. At times, Chinese officials sought to block their export, but the court's overriding interest in encouraging Sinitic culture in places like Vietnam prevailed, as occurred in the 1100s the Song emperor Huizong (1082–1135) overrode the objections of his officials to selling books to visiting Viet envoys. 'The country's love of books did not start then or finish then', Zhang observed. Zhang Xie, *Dongxi yangkao*, p. 20.

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expansion and its seventeenth-century literati revival.<sup>19</sup> As technologies of cultural transmission, imported Chinese books undoubtedly influenced local elite readers, sometimes acting as a stabilising factor in Dai Viet's political integration or, in some cases, a subversive one.<sup>20</sup>

These exports, so important – perhaps crucial – to the prosperity of the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries are invisible in either official history (*chính sử*) or unofficial history (*đá sử*). They were also absent from Chinese sources, since these items were precisely the substitutes of Chinese porcelain and silk exports during the Ming and Qing sea bans. Had there been no evidence of agents of Vietnam's incorporation in the international arena – such as seventeenth-century Japanese and Portuguese merchants or Dutch and English factors buying silk in historical records, or the fifteenth-century purveyors of ceramic exports recently revealed by underwater archaeologists – Dai Viet might indeed have seemed similar to Dali and Laos, with no access to the sea and with maritime income into the economy and impacts on the society next to zero.

The many threads teased out and explored in this book suggest a real undercurrent of wealth flowing through maritime Chinese networks moving through Vietnam that the Vietnamese court could tap into during times of political necessity. But the crucial roles played by non-national actors in the foundation, consolidation, and expansion of Viet states rarely attracted the attention of the official or literati histories, probably because Sinitic models discouraged such activities as beneath serious concern. A more accurate understanding of Vietnamese history would have to redeem from undeserved obscurity of those non-national actors, networks, and movements on Vietnam's thousand kilometres of the coast,<sup>21</sup> to reveal their complicated relations with the political powers in the Viet courts.

My examples suggest something important about our understanding of Vietnamese history: Underneath village and Confucian Vietnam there lies a submerged Vietnam, a Vietnam that maintained its connections with both the Southeast Asian interior – James Scott's Zomia, the non-agrarian societies of upland Southeast Asia – and the South Sea in thousands of ways.<sup>22</sup> As this book will show, at many junctures these connections played fundamental roles that profoundly affected the various states that developed in the region we now know as Vietnam.

<sup>19</sup> Nguyen Ngoc Huy and Ta Van Tai, *The Le Code*, 3 vols. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987); John Whitmore, 'The Development of Le Government in Fifteenth-century Vietnam', PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1968; Keith W. Taylor, 'The Literati Revival in Seventeenth-century Vietnam', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 18, 1 (March 1987), 1–23.

<sup>20</sup> Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, vol.1: 341–342.

<sup>21</sup> 'Introduction', in Tran and Reid, *Viet Nam: Borderless Histories*, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

### A Maritime History of Peoples and Commodities

But how to tell this story of maritime Vietnam that spans the two gulfs, the Gulf of Tongking and the Gulf of Siam? The stale nationalist model is not an option, as it folds the coastal Viet, Linyi, Champa and lower Khmer kingdoms into a single, set recipe and cooks them together in the pot called ‘Vietnam’.<sup>23</sup> Another possible approach, which echoes Vietnamese southern expansion, is equally unsatisfactory. Historically this expansion happened along the coast, and it was in coastal areas that major changes occurred first before permeating along rivers and valleys to the hinterland. Seas and rivers were often crucial to shaping regional political changes over the last two thousand years at least, but simply organising their story chronologically risks reproducing a narrative of Vietnamese imperialist expansion south, something about which I am likewise dubious. Among all the Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam is perhaps the one whose maritime history is hardest to tell, full as it is with the hurdles of constantly defining and redefining which of its contemporary coastal areas once belonged to Mon-Khmer, Cham, Ma, Sting, and Khmer speakers. Can there be a relatively neutral approach that allows one to simply tell the maritime story of over 3,000 kilometres of eastern mainland Southeast Asia without giving primacy to modern boundaries?

Charles Higham pointed to one possibility when he wrote: ‘Where did the kingfisher feathers and the pearls, the turtle shells and cowries [found in central China] come from? In reverse, how did jade *yazhang* blades find their way into Neolithic tombs in northern Vietnam? There can only be one answer, through the medium of trade, and the exchange of ideas, between the peoples of greater Southeast Asia and the Chinese nuclear area.’<sup>24</sup> My research supports Higham’s insight: this area is critical for appreciating relations between Southeast Asia and the expansive Neolithic communities, and later states, of the Yangzi and Yellow River valleys. Although the current ‘S’ shape boundaries were barely 50 years old when the French arrived, the interactions of the peoples found within those bounds were tens of thousands of years old. A maritime history of its peoples and commodities deserves to be told, without reference to later state-inspired historiographical frames. This is the best possible way to recover a rich, colourful, and significant past,

<sup>23</sup> Both Christopher Goscha and Ben Kiernan warn against backdating modern geographical conceptions to the past, and Goscha points out that there have been many different Vietnams. Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), pp. 1–3; Ben Kiernan, *Vietnam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Higham, ‘Crossing National Boundaries: Southern China and Southeast Asia in Prehistory’, in Ian C. Glover et al. (eds), *Uncovering Southeast Asia’s Past: Selected Papers from the 10th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006), p. 14.

many elements of which have been drowned in an ocean of forgetfulness or deliberate disregard.

Such a history would need to connect the southern China coast to archipelagic Southeast Asia, India, and West Asia. All naturally belong to the maritime history of what is now Vietnam. To this end, this book focuses on commodities, ideas, and peoples and seeks to trace the history of the multiple exchanges which substantially shaped the civilisations along the shores of the South China Sea (*V. Bien Dong* – ‘Eastern Sea’). By definition, such a maritime history of this coastline must be characterised by discontinuities, ruptures, and gaps, as entirely new forms emerge or old ones pass away, and as sudden redistributions occur along more than 3,200 kilometres coast.<sup>25</sup> In this way as well, the book stands apart from the smooth continuities of reductionist state histories.

### Major Themes of the Book

In this book maritime Vietnam is explored in ten chronological chapters, organised around three major themes. They are urbanism as a way of life; the importance of Muslim networks for both Champa and Dai Viet; and the connections between non-national actors and littoral communities on both coasts of the South China Sea.

#### *Urbanism: A Way of Life*

A major argument of this book is that we need to understand the part of the modern Vietnamese coast that included Jiaozhi in the north and Linyi or Champa in the south (bounding modern north and central Vietnam) differently from the agrarian view that is at best really only appropriate to its later history. So much comes into focus if we instead consider it as a series of major stations or relays between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean world. This new perspective captures the essence of its early history. Trade brought here major religions, ideas, and flora and fauna from distant worlds which were exchanged, and often transshipped via other routes radiating across Asia. The story of valuable items like the ‘wonderful Storax Oil of Jiaozhi’, as told in Chapter 2, when combined with those of the aloeswood that decorated the royal swords in seventh-century Japan and the ‘Linyi music’ played in tenth-century Japanese palaces (Chapter 3), all reveal the important position that Jiaozhi and Linyi once occupied in the high culture of Asia.

<sup>25</sup> William Southworth, ‘The Origins of Campa in Central Vietnam, A Preliminary Review’. PhD dissertation, SOAS, University of London (2001), p. 27, quoting Michel Foucault, *L’archéologie du savoir*, English trans. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 169–170.