Introduction

The notion of free trade is commonly associated with European, particularly British, overseas expansion during the nineteenth century. Scholars consider the establishment of Singapore and Hong Kong as free ports to have facilitated the penetration of Western capital and Indian opium into the markets of East Asia. The vast quantities of coins, bullion, and drugs that flowed through these nodes contributed to the triumph of a global economic system centered upon an industrialized core in Western Europe and, later, North America.[1] What is less known is that just a century earlier, a port operating along similar principles already flourished in maritime East Asia, that vast region encompassing the East and South China Seas and extending southward to the Strait of Melaka. This port, situated on the Gulf of Siam coast, along the present-day boundary of Vietnam and Cambodia, benefited from its location at the intersection of the sea-lanes between China, Japan, and Southeast Asia, and mainland and island Southeast Asia. It was an ideal transshipment point for vessels from all these places and an exporter of natural resources from its own hinterlands. It also became a thriving financial center, minting coinage and concentrating capital in the form of bullion.

True to its position as a cosmopolitan maritime crossroads, the settlement went by a dizzying variety of names and orthographic variations. It originally belonged to Cambodia, which called it Peam, or "seashore." At times, it constituted its own province (*khaet*), or belonged to another province: Banteay Meas, the "golden citadel." Accordingly, the settlement also came to be known as Ponteamas or Ponthiamas to the Europeans; Phutthaimat to the Siamese; and Yindaima, Jundaima, or Bendi to the Chinese. The Austronesians, including Malay and Cham, would refer to it as Pantai Emas. Although a transcription of Banteay Meas, the term has its unique meaning of "golden seashore," a more

[1] Trocki, *Opium*, pp. 50–63, 220–221.

accurate geographic description of the place.[2] Alternatively, the Austronesians might refer to it as Kuala, or "river mouth." The Portuguese picked up on this term and spelled it Coal or Coalha. They also gave it their own name of Palmeiro or Palmerinha, perhaps a reference to a distinct variety of palm trees concentrated in the area whose fruit formed an essential ingredient in locally made cakes and sweetmeats.[3] The Lao viewed the place as their "city of gold," or Muang Kham. It could also be Muang Kram, a hybrid Tai-Lao and Cham term meaning either "city of bamboo" or "city in a place submerged by water or next to the sea."[4]

The settlement's heyday occurred from the late seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries, when it came under the control of the **C: Mo** V: Mạc, a Chinese creole clan. The leaders probably borrowed from European – most likely Portuguese – corruptions of Peam, including Atiam or Athien, in giving it the Sinicized name of Hexian, or "fairy river." After **C: Mo Jiu** V: Mạc Cửu (1655–1735), the clan patriarch, submitted as a vassal to the south-central Vietnamese regime of Cochinchina in the early eighteenth century, its Nguyễn rulers accorded the settlement, transcribed in Vietnamese as Hà Tiên, the status of a frontier garrison (*trấn*). Chinese sojourners and merchants, whose ships frequently paid call at its shores, simply gave it the name of Gangkou. Rendered in various European sources as Cancao, Kankao, or Kangkhauw, it literally means "The Port."[5] It is descriptive as it is succinct, so I will mainly use this term to describe the place.

Mo Jiu, the entrepreneurial genius behind The Port's rise and emergence as a prominent trading hub in maritime East Asia, was an immigrant from the Leizhou Peninsula in southern China's Guangdong Province. During the late seventeenth century, amid the collapse of the ethnically Han Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and its replacement by the Manchu Qing (1644–1912), he left his native place to seek his fortunes abroad. He ended

[2] Sellers, *Princes of Hà-Tiên*, p. 9; Ibn Ahmad, *Precious Gift*, p. 126; Li Qingxin, 'Mao shi,' pp. 121–130. In using the term "Austronesian," I refer more precisely to speakers of Austronesian languages residing on the present-day Malay Peninsula and in Indonesia, The Philippines, Cambodia, and Vietnam. I do not mean to imply that all of these people belong to the same ethnic group. In fact, speakers of Austronesian languages are often characterized by striking differences in culture and lifestyles, ranging from forest-dwellers to sea nomads to urban-based merchants. Nonetheless, there is linguistic, archaeological, and biological evidence of some level of shared ancestry in prehistoric times. See Bellwood, Fox, and Tryon, "Austronesians in History, " pp. 1–6. Moreover, as Bruckmayr, *Cambodia's Muslims*, pp. 10–13 argues, a great degree of mobility and fluidity of identities characterize certain Austronesian-speaking groups, such as Malay, Minangkabau, and Cham. Therefore, the use of the term "Austronesian" also aims at avoiding confusion. I adopt more specific ethnic labels, such as Malay and Cham, in accordance with their mention in primary sources and scholarly studies in particular contexts.

[3] Malleret, *Delta du Mékong*, vol. 1, p. 14.

[4] Trương, *Nghiên cứu*, vol. 2, pp. 14–15; Thurgood, *Ancient Cham*, pp. 339, 358.

[5] Malleret, *Delta du Mékong*, vol. 1, p. 14; Mak, *Histoire du Cambodge*, pp. 365–366.

up in Cambodia, where he gained the trust of the king, and became head of the country's foreign mercantile community. He acquired from the ruler the territory of The Port as his personal fiefdom. Although he never formally renounced his ties to Cambodia, he simultaneously rendered tribute to Cochinchina in the early eighteenth century. This double allegiance guaranteed his autonomous power over The Port, which he proclaimed to be open and welcome to merchants from all lands.

C: **Mo Tianci** V: Mạc Thiên Tứ (d. 1780), Jiu's eldest son with a daughter of Viet pioneers, succeeded him after his death in 1735. Under Tianci, The Port's fortunes reached their height. He stood at the apex of a personal and militarized chain of command that oversaw tens of thousands of troops and hundreds of warships. At the same time, he embraced Chinese elite culture by promoting Confucian values and education and sponsoring literary exchanges with Qing and Viet literati, conducted both remotely by long-distance junks and in-person as his guests of honor. He also espoused a policy of tolerance, welcoming everyone to settle in his realm regardless of ethnicity or religious belief. Chinese, Viet, Khmer, Austronesians, and Europeans could reside and move about freely. Buddhist temples and monks received his support and patronage. Christian missionaries could establish parishes openly amid ongoing restrictions and persecution across most of East Asia. Not far away from their grand church in the center of town stood a mosque.

Tianci took advantage of the fierce geopolitical conflict between Siam and Cochinchina for influence over Cambodia to dominate the Cambodian throne in 1757. He moved up the Cambodian hierarchy until he became viceroy (*oupareach*), ranked third after the main ruler. He expanded The Port's territory to comprise the entire western Mekong Delta and Cambodian coastline, stretching from the South China Sea to the border with Siam. In subsequent years, he set out to exercise similar influence in Siam and Cochinchina after invasions, rebellions, and disorder plagued both kingdoms.

Although they were fully capable of doing so, the Mo avoided transforming The Port into a fully fledged state like its neighbors in mainland Southeast Asia. Instead, they exercised a deliberate ambiguity in representing their status to the outside world, while utilizing political and military resources in the service of economic expansion and profits. Apparently, their true aim was to establish an integrated civic space across East Asia where goods, people, ideas, and information could freely circulate. In this manner, the Mo could, like the head of a modern multinational company, better control and manipulate governments and the flow of money and resources.

The Port's period of prosperity overlapped with what scholars such as Carl Trocki and Leonard Blussé have termed a "Chinese century." The period witnessed a remarkable expansion of junk trade between China and Southeast Asia, driven by China's demand for Southeast Asian

tropical products and the need for outlets for its products and labor. Qing merchants and sojourners forged an informal empire through the construction of durable networks that connected different ports across the China seas. They also opened new land in the sparsely populated Southeast Asian interior.[6]

Much of the scholarship has treated the explosion of Chinese commercial activity as somehow independent of the Chinese state, which exhibited indifference, at best, and often outright hostility toward this development. Yet, the rejuvenation of Chinese naval power in maritime East Asia, first achieved under the quasi-governmental Zheng organization based in Taiwan during the 1660s and later inherited by the Qing, also played a significant role. In fact, the innovative revisionist studies of Zhao Gang, Zheng Yangwen, and Ronald Po reveal that the Qing court recognized the value of overseas commerce and actively encouraged and protected the maritime activities of its subjects.[7] The Qing further reformed the China-centered tributary system of its Ming predecessor and adapted it better to the realities of trade and the presence of Europeans in the region.[8] The informal and indirect cooperation between state and merchant successfully marginalized the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and other European trading monopolies and colonial powers. As a result, Blussé shows, they were relegated to a few outposts and could only operate on limited routes.[9]

The Mo capitalized upon this larger economic and geopolitical climate to transform The Port into a center for Chinese junk shipping and capital. They became the biggest beneficiaries and intermediaries for the offshoring of the Chinese economy to Southeast Asia. Mo Tianci, in particular, also came to view the Qing as a protector of last resort. When the Myanmar invasion of Siam and the tragic death of the Siamese king in the 1760s threatened to upset the balance of power in mainland Southeast Asia, Tianci frequently exchanged envoys with the Qing court and Guangdong officials. He provided them with the latest news and intelligence regarding The Port's neighbors. He further attempted to enlist the Qing's assistance in backing his candidate for the vacant throne of Siam. Although the contingency for an alliance existed, given the Qing's own border conflict with Myanmar, it ultimately failed to materialize.

Tianci's disastrous unilateral invasion of Siam in the late 1760s led to a severe reversal of his fortunes. The campaign brought him into direct conflict with merchants and settlers from Chaozhou, in eastern

[6] Blussé, 'Chinese Century'; Trocki, 'Chinese Pioneering.'
[7] Zheng Yangwen, *China on the Sea*, pp. 321–326; Zhao Gang, *Qing Opening*, pp. 41–56; Po, *Blue Frontier*, pp. 143–180.
[8] Chia, 'Lifanyuan,' pp. 158–168. [9] Blussé, 'Chinese Century,' pp. 113, 121.

Guangdong. These newcomers spoke a different dialect from Tianci's compatriots from Leizhou and neighboring Hainan Island and were much less acclimated to the cosmopolitan local culture. They came in large numbers to the eastern Siamese frontier and soon infiltrated into the territory of The Port. With their support, Taksin (1734–1782, r. 1767–1782), a half-Chaozhou Siamese nobleman, successfully expelled Tianci and proclaimed himself king of Siam. In 1771, Taksin invaded and briefly occupied The Port before returning it to Tianci as part of a deal with Cochinchina to become the joint overlords of Cambodia. As a result, Tianci lost his dominant influence over the Cambodian court.

Six years later, Tianci's home territory was again conquered, this time permanently, by the Tây Sơn rebels and their Cambodian allies, fighting against the Nguyễn rulers of Cochinchina. In an ironic twist of fate, he sought asylum in Siam and placed himself at the mercy of his former rival, King Taksin, now a common enemy of the rebels. Tianci and his exiled followers were given a plot of land on the northeastern bank of the Chaophraya River in the heart of modern Bangkok. They made a tremendous yet overlooked contribution to the development of the city. But soon, Taksin suspected Tianci of plotting to seize the throne. He ordered the massacre of Tianci's family members and exiled the rest of his retinue across Siam. Witnessing with despair the bloodbath around him, Mo Tianci committed suicide. Two years later, Taksin received his own comeuppance when native Siamese nobles toppled him and put him to death.

The tragic demise of both men resulted from, and contributed to, the formation of consolidated states in mainland Southeast Asia. It also coincided with the decline of the Qing and the penetration of European maritime power into the South China Sea. As a result, overseas Chinese gradually became coopted into the service of European economic expansion and imperialism. The Port lost influence as a commercial hub until it became the sleepy, backwater Vietnamese border town of Hà Tiên. At the most basic level, this study provides a comprehensive narrative of The Port, from the rise and fall of the Mo clan and the vast scale of its trade and cultural exchanges to the everyday lives of the multiethnic and multi-confessional men and women residing in its territory.

Escaping the Relentless Southern Advance

Mainstream studies of The Port still rely heavily or exclusively upon a corpus of Vietnamese primary records. Although detailed and informative, these sources, including geographic gazetteers and travelogues, a genealogical biography of the clan, and official histories, mostly date from the nineteenth century. By then, Hà Tiên had become, at least partially, integrated into a unified Vietnam under the Nguyễn dynasty

(1801–1945). As Brian Zottoli points out, nearly all of the documents underwent editing by official hands, subjecting them to censorship and reinterpretation of historical events for the glorification of the ruling dynasty and Confucian ideological correctness.[10]

The publication and mass distribution of these and other classical texts during the late nineteenth century and beyond have resulted in further rounds of standardization. Large-scale translations were undertaken of the original Classical Chinese and demotic *nôm* scripts into Romanized Vietnamese (*Quốc ngữ*), making them widely available and accessible to the public. These efforts both reflected and stimulated the emergence of modern Vietnamese nationalism.[11] However, since multiple versions of the original texts exist that differ slightly to substantially in content from one another, publications often privilege one particular manuscript at the expense of omitting important content found in the others.[12] In addition, many printed works only provide the Romanized translation without the Classical Chinese text base, making it difficult to check for accuracy and meanings lost in the conversion.

Because these highly edited, published primary sources provide the most convenient narrative of The Port, later studies tend to position the polity and the Mo clan mainly within the Vietnamese historical experience. They focus on the Mo's contribution to the shaping of the country's present-day boundaries. This scholarship is strongly influenced by the narrative of the Southern Advance (*Nam tiến*), which sees the current Vietnamese state as the product of a centuries-long expansion of its territory and majority Viet ethnic group from the Red River valley around Hanoi to the south. A conscious vision of state-sponsored migration in this direction had taken shape as early as the eighteenth century. However, under the influence of early twentieth-century nationalism, the Southern Advance came to be redefined as the main driver of Vietnamese historical development. It was presented as a continuous process in which the Viet protagonists, under the sponsorship of successive dynasties from antiquity to the nineteenth century, expanded all the way down to the Mekong Delta and Gulf of Siam littoral. In the process, they overpowered, displaced, or assimilated the Cham of the south-central coast and the Khmer of the Mekong Delta and Gulf of Siam littoral.[13]

[10] Zottoli, 'Reconceptualizing Southern Vietnamese History,' pp. 16, 290.
[11] For more on the connections and contradictions between mass publication, the use of Romanized script, translation, and the emergence of modern Vietnamese nationalism, see Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, pp. 125–131.
[12] See Zottoli, 'Reconceptualizing Southern Vietnamese History,' pp. 33–51, for an analysis of how multiple versions of the same primary source differed in their contents.
[13] Ang, 'Regionalism,' pp. 3–7.

The terminus of this migration was a vast, fertile floodplain that mostly lies below sea level. It forms the core of what the Vietnamese call their "Southern Area" (*Nam Bộ*). Since it once belonged to Cambodia, the Khmer know it as Kampuchea Krom (Lower Cambodia), in contrast to the country proper, which was situated on a higher floodplain. Scholars have followed the key geographic feature of the Mekong Delta and Gulf of Siam littoral in labeling the area the water world or water frontier.[14]

During the Cold War, historians in the southern Vietnamese regime celebrated the Southern Advance as a historical inevitability.[15] In contrast to the Cham and Khmer, who appeared mostly as passive subjects, scholarly attitudes toward Chinese creoles such as the Mo proved more ambivalent. Nguyễn Nhã, for instance, welcomes them as important players in their own right. For him, The Port marked the terminus of the Southern Advance, and the Mo were transitional figures whose submission to Cochinchina set the stage for the territory's eventual absorption into the Vietnamese nation. Sơn Nam, on the other hand, credits the Viet migrants as the first ones to open new land in and around The Port and therefore the primary agents of the Southern Advance. The Mo simply established the infrastructure for their continued settlement and expansion.[16]

Until the 1970s, the communist north avoided mention of the Southern Advance, whose celebration of the majority Viet and territorial expansion contradicted official efforts to forge an identity that could encapsulate all the ethnic groups living within the boundaries of Vietnam. At the same time, it went against the state-sanctioned narrative of victimization and resistance of the masses against oppression from domestic elites and foreign invaders and colonizers.[17] The northern historian Phan Huy Lê attempts to forge a more ethnically inclusive narrative about The Port. Phan Huy Lê claims that as soon as Mo Jiu paid tribute to Cochinchina, he had voluntarily "become a naturalized Vietnamese citizen" (*nhập quốc tịch Việt Nam*). He and his son were, from then on, "Vietnamese of Chinese descent" (*người Việt gốc Hoa*).[18] Phan Huy Lê thus celebrated cultural diversity and the agency of non-Viet actors but subsumed them within Vietnam's overall history and identity.

After the country's unification in 1975, followed by the onset of liberal economic reforms in 1986, the Marxist narrative of the north gradually merged with the ethnocentric discourse of the south. Scholarly works of this period follow the framework of the Southern Advance but make

[14] Sakurai, 'Chinese Pioneers,' pp. 36–39; P. Taylor, *Khmer Lands*, p. 7.
[15] Ang, 'Regionalism,' pp. 11–13.
[16] Ang, 'Regionalism,' pp. 14–15; P. Taylor, *Khmer Lands*, pp. 20–22.
[17] Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, pp. 69–112. [18] Phan, 'Đánh giá,' p. 42.

significant modifications to it. They describe the process of Viet expansion into the water frontier as natural and primarily peaceful. The land was empty, except for some sparse Khmer settlements. These scholars cite international law in asserting that Cambodia lacked the capacity, institutions, and population to exercise sovereignty. The Cochinchinese state, on the other hand, possessed the political, military, and legal mechanisms to fill the vacuum, allowing Viet and Khmer, together with later Chinese arrivals, to jointly open new land. The Southern Advance thus became a multiethnic project. Through cultural exchange and borrowing, a fraternal bond formed between the three groups. With the Viet leading the way as the elder brother, they would integrate the frontier and themselves into a unified Vietnam. Within this context, the Mo served as agents of the Nguyễn rulers in overseeing and sustaining migration to The Port and its surroundings, where Vietnamese expansion reached its natural limits.[19]

Strangely enough, this portrayal of the Mo fits well into the prevalent historiography of Cambodia, which embraced an anti-Vietnamese stance. This perspective took shape in the early 1970s amid the emergence of a Khmer-based nationalism cultivated by Lon Nol (1913–1985) and his Khmer Rouge successors. It takes pride in the ancient civilization of Angkor, which flourished from the ninth to fourteenth centuries. Although Angkor, at its height, enjoyed a sphere of influence over most of mainland Southeast Asia, historians took special interest in what was viewed as the lost Cambodian territory of Kampuchea Krom. There was simultaneously an attitude of hostility toward the ethnic Chinese and, especially, Vietnamese minorities in the country. This ethnocentrism was bolstered by a narrative of victimization of the Khmer in the face of relentless expansion from Vietnam, which flooded the water world with settlers and resorted to various stratagems and tricks to take away their land.[20] Despite the bitter moral castigation, the Cambodian historiography ironically validates the Southern Advance hypothesis. The Mo, perhaps on account of their Chinese background, receive little mention other than being portrayed as collaborators and facilitators of the Vietnamese land grab.[21]

[19] P. Taylor, *Khmer Lands*, p. 21; *Vùng đất Nam Bộ*: Nguyễn, vol. 4, pp. 166–174; *Vùng đất Nam Bộ*: Vũ, vol. 8, pp. 29–58; Đỗ Quỳnh Nga, *Tây Nam Bộ*, pp. 19–29, 324–338; Trần, *Nam Bộ*, pp. 8, 45–46, 79–154.
[20] Edwards, *Cambodge*, pp. 21–22, 250–253; P. Taylor, *Khmer Lands*, pp. 21–22.
[21] Some examples include Nuon, *Damnaer chhpaohtow tisakheanglich*, pp. 13–19; So, *Bravottesastr preah reachea nachakr Kampouchea*, pp. 27–28, 49, 90–91; Tea, *Rueng reav nei tukdei Kampouchea kraom*, pp. 58–59, 156–157.

Scholars based in the West have questioned the linear progression of the Southern Advance. In her pathbreaking work, Li Tana points to many examples of how the southward thrust of the Viet was reversed several times and for prolonged periods because of setbacks at the hands of the Cham. She argues that the outcome occurred more because of contingencies and accidental circumstances than because of any long-term design.[22] However, when it comes to the Mekong Delta and The Port, many studies continue to defer to the Southern Advance explanation. Confining the Mo to the role of facilitators of the final round of southward expansion proves limiting even if we are to only assess their significance for Vietnamese history.

Li has highlighted how Cochinchina represented a "new way of being Vietnamese" distinct from Tonkin, its northern rival based in Hanoi. Tonkin, under the Trịnh lords, looked toward the Chinese state in fashioning a Confucian bureaucracy and agrarian-centered economy. The Nguyễn, on the other hand, oversaw a militarized but decentralized order in a newly opened frontier that primarily relied on maritime trade for revenues. According to Li, the Viet in Cochinchina lived in a cosmopolitan and multipolar environment. They were heavily influenced through their interactions with Cham and other indigenous highlander groups and merchants, travelers, immigrants, and religious figures from China, Japan, Southeast Asia, and Europe.[23]

It is true that Cochinchina was subject to multipolar influences, but over time China increasingly became the dominant external and domestic factor. The Nguyễn rulers were highly pro-Qing and pro-ethnic Chinese in their outlook and policies. For instance, Qing subjects, even if they committed the most egregious crimes, such as sedition and outright rebellion, could not be executed. They could only be repatriated to China for capital punishment.[24] Knowledge of spoken Chinese became a requirement in examinations to qualify for a central government post. In 1702, one Nguyễn lord went as far as to seek investiture from the Qing as a tributary vassal separate from the north. Although Tonkin and Cochinchina were already de facto independent of one another, both continued to pay allegiance to a powerless Lê (1428–1788) court in Hanoi, because it was the only political authority recognized by the Qing. The Trịnh, too, had to exercise their power through Lê puppets. The Qing predictably refused the Nguyễn request.[25]

[22] Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, pp. 18–33.
[23] Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, pp. 59–116.
[24] Nguyễn Dynasty, *Thực lục*, vol. 1, pp. 140, 148.
[25] K. W. Taylor, *History of the Vietnamese*, pp. 326–327; Goscha, *Vietnam*, p. 41.

Nonetheless, because of Cochinchina's decentralized character, its people were exposed directly to all levels of Chinese, particularly southern Chinese, society and culture. The degree and depth of this influence certainly exceeded Tonkin, with the possible exception of interactions among the uppermost elites. Merchants, sojourners, and settlers from the Ming and, later, the Qing became the preeminent foreign presence from the mid-seventeenth century. Buddhist monks from China were treated as guests of honor at the court in Huế, which utilized the religion to enhance the prestige and bolster the legitimacy of the Nguyễn rulers.[26]

Large numbers of Chinese refugees flooded into Cochinchina amid the Ming-Qing transition. The Nguyễn assigned them to a special category: Minh Hương (Ming Incense; the last character was changed to mean Village after 1827). As Charles Wheeler notes, they formed their own communities and enjoyed exemption from taxes. At the same time, they could participate fully in Cochinchinese society. Over several generations, the Minh Hương and their descendants became creolized through intermarriage. They came to constitute a unique intermediary class able to bridge the Chinese and Vietnamese worlds. Although most retained their identification with their native places in China, their interests and careers were firmly tied to Vietnam, and they adopted its language and dress. This double affiliation allowed them to enjoy a position of privilege that exceeded the purely Chinese and Viet. They became diplomats, officials, and supervisors of foreign merchants in the Cochinchinese and, later, early Nguyễn dynasty bureaucracies.[27] Just as with the Viet, Cochinchina offered its Chinese residents a new way of being Chinese.

The Chinese character of Cochinchina, a much more creolized and eclectic version of the original through exposure to a multipolar and multiethnic environment, certainly held appeal for the Mo and explains, in part, why they were willing to render vassalage. Indeed, Mo Jiu himself took a Cochinchinese wife, who conceived his son and successor Tianci. Although the Mo and the Chinese creole elites and subjects of The Port enjoyed close ties with the Minh Hương, they were distinct in that they did not depend solely upon Vietnamese hierarchies. Nicholas Sellers sees Mo Jiu's act of submission to the Nguyễn as "less a genuine dependency … than … an assertion of independence from Cambodian rule."[28] He and his son hoped to leverage the formidable political and military resources of Cochinchina in preserving a balance of power in their

[26] K. W. Taylor, *History of the Vietnamese*, p. 326; Goscha, *Vietnam*, pp. 12, 39.
[27] Choi, *Southern Vietnam*, pp. 39–41; Wheeler, 'Placing,' pp. 40–41.
[28] Sellers, *Princes of Hà-Tiên*, p. 24.