

Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750–1880. Edited by Nola Cooke and Tana Li. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004. xiii + 202 pp. Tables, maps, glossary, appendix, notes, index. Cloth, \$65; paper, \$23.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-742-53082-5; paper, 0-742-53083-3.

Reviewed by Wei Leng Loh

The topics covered in this volume address many themes of interest to more than just Vietnamese specialists. Scholars in the fields of Asian history in general, and Southeast Asian history in particular, would undoubtedly be drawn to dip into this book, as would economic, business, and maritime historians, especially those working on matters Chinese. Indeed, before the Asian crisis of 1997, the so-called East Asian miracle captured both the academic and the popular imagination and inspired reams of literature, not only on East Asia but also on Chinese enterprise, and a side industry on Chinese business in Southeast Asia emerged. However, many of these works fell into the category of social science, as they investigated the contemporary scene but generally avoided historical inquiry. In fact, Anthony Reid, one of the contributors to *Water Frontier*, used the phrase “most understudied” in describing “China’s relations with Southeast Asia and the historical role of the Southeast Asian Chinese” (*Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, 1996).

Reid identified three reasons for this state of affairs, which continues today, ten years later. He cites the difficulty of the source materials; western ethnocentric writing, which emphasizes European influence since the “Vasco da Gama” epoch beginning in the fifteenth century; and the “profound and enduring problem” of determining who is Chinese in Southeast Asia, a conundrum that persists long after Chinese migration to this region began, and especially after World War II when these immigrants began to assume the new persona of citizens of independent, postcolonial nation-states. The articles in this book go some way toward adding to our knowledge of this subfield in Southeast Asian history, reversing world historian Janet Abu-Lughod’s observation that, in comparison to other areas, this region “should have had so little to say for itself” (cited on page 21).

In addition, this volume develops another theme that has concerned many scholars from different specializations, namely, the concept of boundaries. Just as world historians argue for a wider canvas that extends beyond national frontiers, so too do some historians of Asian history urge consideration of the continent within which a nation is located, as more Southeast Asian historians join in calling for region-wide studies. The rationale is a response to the limitation of

confining research to a particular country, a strategy that may fail to capture cross-border and transnational interaction and linkages with significant impact on the nation-state. This approach by no means neglects internal dynamics, but rather seeks to redress the narrow focus of writing autonomous national histories by beginning to incorporate both exogenous and endogenous aspects in the analysis and narrative.

Part One, entitled “Permeable Frontiers,” illustrates the value of a broader perspective. Reid’s overview chapter underscores how Southeast Asia’s economic expansion in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was closely tied to China’s economic growth, as its appetite for the region’s products became a strong stimulus to production, commerce, and shipping. Ample evidence is supplied by James Kong Chin’s chapter on the junk trade between South China and Nguyen Vietnam in the same period. Chin elucidates the role played by South China’s maritime shipping in forming an interregional trade system in which Vietnamese emporia served as important collection centers on mainland Southeast Asia. Due to strict control by the Chinese court over foreign entry into Chinese ports, except for the Portuguese in Macao beginning in 1557 and the Europeans in Canton after 1759, private Chinese junk shipping captured the major portion of the maritime trade in the main Chinese markets of Xiamen and Canton. We learn of the sugar and sugar candy of Hoi An, the rice of Saigon, and a range of Southeast Asian products, such as betel nuts, tin, blackwood, nutmeg, clove, deerskin, dried shrimp, rattan, sappanwood, and pepper from Hatien, that were imported into China. In exchange, a long list of Chinese goods were sold in Southeast Asia to serve Chinese settlers, who had been in Vietnam since the fall of the Ming Dynasty in 1644. While Choi Byung Wook focuses on Chinese migrants from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries and official response to their activities, aspects of their multiple roles crop up in every chapter.

Yumio Sakurai’s painstaking, blow-by-blow account of the strongly contested eighteenth-century struggle by four main protagonists over the lower Mekong region illustrates the perennial shifting of boundaries in the face of historic competition between warring neighbors over borderland areas. Here again, we are reminded that a purely national focus would overlook crucial aspects of the centuries of rivalry among the Thais, Cambodians, and Vietnamese over control of territories. Puangthong Rungswasdisab’s chapter documents another instance of Thai-Vietnamese conflict, in this case over the potential gain to be had from the forest products of the trans-Mekong area destined for China.

The articles in Part Two confirm the view that this region should be seen as “one economic unit” (p. 71). Tana Li’s discussion of the regional trade system connects the Mekong Delta east and south to other locations in the Gulf of Siam, as well as areas stretching north into

Cambodia. Li's reference to a fascinating 1810 Vietnamese text (an excerpt translated by Geoff Wade is available in the appendix), which provides detailed information on trade routes and myriad places, small and big, substantiates an ongoing, vibrant regionwide network, connected to the world beyond—a topic that is fleshed out in the remaining chapters by Nola Cooke and Carl Trocki.

This book is a welcome addition to Southeast Asian studies, successfully meeting its objective of “advancing a new approach to considering the shared history of Chinese settlement and interaction in southern Indochina and its surrounding areas.” The authors transcend difficulties such as having to contend with a wide variety of source material, sometimes even employing primary sources that have been scarcely touched before; they revise western historiography to depict a world of porous boundaries, in contrast to the seemingly immutable borders imposed during colonial times; and they investigate a multitude of peoples in the region's history, looking beyond the level of elites and westerners to accord space to small-scale traders, whether Vietnamese, Chinese, Siamese, Khmer, Cham, or Malay. For those seeking to explore questions of historical causality emanating from intraregional dynamics, *Water Frontier* is sure to become required reading.

Wei Leng Loh is professor in the history department at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. Her research interests include the economic, business, and maritime history of Malaysia. Among her recent publications are “Researching Business Networks and Firms in Malaysia,” in Chinese Business History (Fall 2004); “Local Merchant Shipping Companies in Malaysia: Expansion and Diversification,” in Capital and Knowledge in Asia: Changing Power Relations, edited by H. Dahles and O. van den Muijzenberg (2003); and “The Colonial State and Business: The Policy Environment in Malaya in the Inter-war Years,” in the Journal of Southeast Asian Studies (June 2002).