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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Introduction to “Mapping Vietnamese-ness”

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Vietnam and China are currently engaged in a map war, with each country using ancient maps to buttress its claims to territorial sovereignty over some uninhabited islands in the South China Sea (in Chinese terminology), also known as the Eastern Sea (in Vietnamese). But what do maps in fact represent? What is meant by “territory”? How are territorial limits conceived? These questions were raised in a May 2015 workshop inspired by Thongchai Winichakul’s *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (1994), a groundbreaking book that traces the transformation of Thai geographical consciousness as a result of Siam’s encounter with Western powers in the nineteenth century. While many of Thongchai’s insights apply to the Vietnamese case, as the first of the three articles included in this special issue of *Cross-Currents* shows, some of the 2015 workshop participants’ conclusions departed from his, especially regarding the formation of a Vietnamese geographical consciousness before the colonial period.¹ This is true of the other two papers, which focus specifically on the construction of borders and the associated production of maps in the nineteenth century before French colonial conquest.

The first known Vietnamese maps, collated between 1467 and 1490, are known collectively as the Hồng Đức maps. The original maps are no longer extant. The current maps date from the mid- to late seventeenth century and were most likely heavily revised and updated. A map drawn by the Jesuit priest Alexandre de Rhodes and published in 1650 by the Vatican (map 1) seems to have been based on one of the maps in the Hồng Đức collection, substituting Latin for Chinese characters but preserving the map’s orientation with north to the right. It also shows that, by 1650, Đại Việt had become divided into two realms, known to Westerners as Tonkin in the north and Cochinchina in the south. The latter did not yet incorporate the Mekong Delta, the region that would become French Cochinchina in the 1860s. Some of the maps that

have survived since the seventeenth century were representations of routes—crucial for military campaigns—and administrative units. Other maps were topographical. The poetic term for the Vietnamese territory is “our mountains and rivers,” each mountain and each river having its own guardian deity. Maps therefore also had a cosmological purpose as representations of Vietnam’s sacred geography. Maps did contain lines of demarcation, but no distinction was made between lines dividing provinces within the empire and lines distinguishing the empire from a neighboring country. This could be taken to support the idea that Vietnamese-ness was a cultural rather than a territorial construct. Yet disputes between China and Vietnam were not really about actual cultural characteristics, despite invocations of “civilization” versus “barbarism.” In northern Vietnam, the label of barbarian (*man di*) applied to non-ethnic Vietnamese, although the Vietnamese themselves had become barbarians (Ch. *manyi*) in Chinese eyes after they regained their independence from the Ming. In the Vietnamese south, the barbarian label was applied to Cambodians, while ethnic Vietnamese (*kinh*) were considered *hoa*, or civilized, whether they were literate or not (which was the overwhelming case).



Map 1. 1650 map of Vietnam by Alexandre de Rhodes, based on the 1490 Hồng Đức maps. Source: Vatican.

In this special issue, Liam Kelley sets the scene by discussing premodern Vietnamese notions of their country's geography. Contra historian Momoki Shiro, Kelley argues that premodern Vietnamese situated their country in relation to China, which they considered both a source of moral principles and geomantic power as well as the locus of their national origins through descent from Shennong, the “divine agriculturalist.” The ur-text in which the Vietnamese myth of origins is developed is the *Complete Annals of Dai Viet* (Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư), which was commissioned by Emperor Lê Thánh Tông shortly after his victory over Champa in 1471 greatly expanded the size of his empire. This was the same emperor who commissioned the Hồng Đức maps of 1490, which showed the annexed land as part of Vietnamese territory. It is perhaps no coincidence that, while the empire expanded southward, Vietnamese scholars looked northward to confer instant antiquity on it (see Tai 2001, 921).

It took the introduction of Western cartographic techniques to create a new conception of the Vietnamese national space that did not rely on its relation to the Middle Kingdom but had an independent physical reality measurable in square kilometers and located in Asia—thus diminishing the role of China as point of reference in the Vietnamese geographic imagination. These new practices were first adopted by the reformist, but classically trained, scholar Lương Trúc Đàm in 1907 after the country had become a part of the French imperium. The Treaty of Huế of 1884 that sealed the end of Vietnamese independence was accompanied by the melting down of the seal of investiture granted eight decades earlier by the Chinese emperor to Gia Long, the founder of the new Nguyễn dynasty. French colonialism divided the country into three regions: French Cochinchina in the south and the Protectorates of Tonkin (in the north) and of Annam (in the center). These divisions were not truly new, however, as they replicated the administrative units of the early Nguyễn dynasty. A truly unified Vietnam had existed for only a short time, from the end of the viceroyship over the southern provinces in 1834 to the loss of the three southeastern provinces in 1862. Lương Trúc Đàm's *Geography* was thus transgressive—the name Vietnam was prohibited and the three regions were treated as three separate states—but also nostalgic. It was a document of past loss as well as a hopeful road map for the future.

Although he challenges Momoki Shiro's contention that geomancy provided premodern Vietnamese with the concept of a geo-body, Kelley does not contest the utility of the concept itself. In fact, the process whereby Vietnam was detached imaginatively from China parallels the one whereby Siam was detached from India and the Buddhist universe. But is the analogy

between territorial space and the human body entirely apt? Solid lines on maps that are meant to represent recognizable—and recognized—borders do give the impression of a self-contained physical entity, making it possible to imagine it as a well-defined body similar to the human one: in other words, a national geo-body. But who does the imagining? If we move from cartography to the actual terrain, does the idea of a geo-body still hold?

Thongchai avers that it was the Thai encounter with Western colonialism and Western cartographic practices that led to the emergence of modern Thai nationalism through a new conception of Siam's place in the world and a clear delineation of its borders. This would seem to apply to Luong Trúc Đàm. But Luong Trúc Đàm, like the early Thai adopters of Western cartography, was a member of the educated elite. What about ordinary people, especially those living at the edges of empire? The two remaining contributors to this special issue consider how Vietnamese borders were established *before* the advent of Western colonialism. In the first of these two essays, Vũ Đường Luân focuses on the role of local populations in creating a borderline between China and Vietnam. He suggests that tribal chieftains and local officials played a major role in precipitating tensions between the Vietnamese and Chinese courts over several centuries. Seeking to preserve their autonomous power, tribal chieftains sometimes switched their allegiance from one empire to the other and exploited their status within the administration of each to advance their own interests. The “Zomia” of Willem van Schendel (2002) and James C. Scott (2009)—the massif that runs from Yunnan in southwestern China through Laos, northern Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar—was not just a refuge from expansionist states, as Scott argues; in fact, tribal chieftains often were the cause of state involvement in the border area. Purely local conflicts, even mere intra-clan competition, often brought the Chinese and Vietnamese courts to the margins of their respective empires.

From the perspectives of the two courts, the border conflicts were not about civilization—most of the people at the center of those disputes were neither Han Chinese nor ethnic Vietnamese—nor even about territory, but about subjects who could be taxed, mobilized, and conscripted. As such, they needed to be constrained within well-defined administrative areas, rather than allowed to move freely from one imperial jurisdiction to another. The attempts by the Chinese and Vietnamese states to prevent tax-paying subjects from moving beyond their reach led to the formation of a borderline that eventually became the basis of the 1887 treaty between China and France. In other words, the absence of cartographic symbols such as dotted

or solid lines on precolonial maps did not mean that borderlines did not exist in reality. While it did not appear on premodern Vietnamese maps, the border between the two countries assumed at times quite concrete form—whether as natural features, such as rivers or mountains, or man-made ones, such as walls or bamboo fences. Yet, because it cut through communities that shared a common ethnicity and language, ties of kinship and networks of trade, the border that was meant to contain them was also made to be transgressed. While the notion of a geo-body is closely associated with the emergence of a national identity, border communities may be considered transnational subjects *avant la lettre*. This did not mean that the border was irrelevant; in fact, its existence could at times prove extremely useful to individuals seeking escape from capture or taxation.

The final author included here, Vũ Đức Liêm, considers the formation of a border between Cambodia and Vietnam in the first half of the nineteenth century. Reprising themes from the first essay—in particular, the discourse of civility and moral virtue—he examines the failed Vietnamese expansion into Cambodia under Emperor Minh Mệnh. Debates in the Vietnamese court pitted a civilizational discourse advocating both cultural and territorial expansion against a more pragmatic assessment of the state’s capacity to defend its existing borders. In the end, this author suggests, expansion into Cambodia was stymied not only by Siam and by Khmer resistance, but also by the challenging terrain, by the logistical difficulties of provisioning an army of occupation, and, especially, by the scarcity of ethnic Vietnamese who could conceivably be expected to carry out the civilizing mission. Eventually, the successors to Minh Mệnh had to bow to the pragmatic necessity of maintaining a defensible borderline and to accept the canal linking Hà Tiên to Châu Đốc as the geographical limit of the Vietnamese empire in the southwest. Yet, as in the case of the Vietnamese northwest, the border with Cambodia cuts across a multiethnic, polyglot human landscape. The sharpness of the image of a national geo-body becomes increasingly blurry the closer one gets to the margins.

European cartographic practices did have an impact on the Vietnamese geographical imagination, as did the introduction of the Romanized alphabet. Besides making it possible to bridge the gap between elite and commoners through expanded literacy, the Romanized alphabet gave the Vietnamese a new way of imagining their country. Today, Vietnamese routinely refer to their country as “this S-shaped land.” While this metaphor would have been inconceivable before the adoption of the Romanized script, it also emphasizes the coastline at the expense of the land

borders that were fought over and settled well before French colonial conquest. Yet the fight over islands that lie beyond the S-shaped coastline points to cartographic excess, while the renegotiations of the border between China and Vietnam over the last two decades suggest that the national geo-body is far from a settled space.

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Notes

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