Introduction

But we should beware of making the picture too simple. A many-sided and complex affair, brigandage, while serving the interests of certain nobles, might be directed against others ...

As Brantly Womack remarks, the Qing Empire and its officials were chiefly concerned with the management of “an administrative frontier” in the southern borderlands. Maintaining order in the borderlands, the spaces that separated and connected Qing and Nguyễn territory, meant the incorporation of local powerbrokers, influential figures from outside the class of conventional administrators, into formal state authority. This practice formed a vital part of the Vietnamese imperial project in the 1850s as well, despite the aspirations of officials seeking a rationalized administration throughout both the borderlands with China and the entire country. While the stylistic language of the tribute system might have described the overt parochialism of the Qing Empire vis-à-vis neighboring countries, the practical realities of borderlands administration, the context for the administrative frontier, demanded a set of arrangements, policy decisions, and official allies that defied the simplistic notion of tribute.

Here we consider two cases that offer an avenue to a more complex and nuanced understanding of the relationship between China and Vietnam during the nineteenth century. In each case, a powerbroker, an individual allied with state authority but maintaining an independent, perhaps hostile agenda, challenged the terms of state projects concerning the relationship between China

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and Vietnam. In the first instance, a Tai leader exploited official anxieties over sovereignty in an attempt to conceal his own activities, earning him a punishment only reluctantly ordered by Vietnamese officials. In the second, a *soumisionaire* or surrendered rebel in the employ of the Tonkin Protectorate of the French used the China-Tonkin telegraph networks to transmit seditious missives, earning a reprimand that, in its mildness, testified to his power within the structure of French colonial rule. Both these cases show the importance of powerful, unconventional local individuals to the ostensible routinization of state power in China and Vietnam in these borderland areas.

**Hoàng Kim Cúc and the Usefulness of Official Anxiety, 1851**

Beyond China’s southern borderlands, the Nguyễn rulers of Đại Nam had to balance influential local powerbrokers with an imperial project that emphasized strong, routinized administration throughout the country. The institution of the province in the Vietnam-China borderlands, although intended as the transformation of imperial power at the local level, did not alter the role of these powerbrokers in the Vietnamese state. Similar to reforms in the Qing Empire during the eighteenth century, the attempted removal of non-Vietnamese powerbrokers and the institution of direct provincial administration did not eliminate the role of such powerbrokers in the borderlands. In the case of one Tai leader, it afforded an opportunity to forward his own personal interests by taking advantage of imperial anxieties.

In nineteenth century Vietnam (Đại Nam), an effort to strengthen state rule began with a series of imperial edicts by the Minh Mạng emperor (r. 1820–1840), which provided the impetus and outline for administrative reform. These attempts to forge a more routinized administration had an enduring influence on Vietnamese officials throughout the country, chiefly because the reforms promised to resolve a rather problematic issue: the reliance of the state on local powerbrokers whose interests did not necessarily conform to the wishes of those in positions of formal authority.

The most important element of the Minh Mạng Project (roughly 1820–1837) was the creation of the province (*tỉnh*). Provinces, the Court believed, would provide for the “quick deployment of virtuous government in response to

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3 For a recent study of the “Gaitu Guiliu” campaign as well as a convincing re-interpretation, see C. Patterson Giersch, *Asian Borderlands*, The Transformation of Qing China’s Yunnan Frontier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).