This collection of 10 essays had its origin in a workshop organized by Li Tana in 1999 that was entitled “Commercial Vietnam: Trade and the Chinese in the Nineteenth Century.” The editors decided to enlarge the scope of the research in order to reflect on a broader area stretching from modern southern Vietnam to eastern Cambodia and southwestern Thailand on the one hand, and to southern China on the other. For the purpose, Li Tana formulated the concept of “Water Frontier” and laid the emphasis on the economic exchanges and the markets within this part of the South China Sea where warfare was endemic and the population rather fluid. The present volume, which is divided into three parts, aims to reconstruct the lost history of this Water Frontier area by highlighting its commercial networks and its importance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The first part examines the significance of Chinese traders in the region. Anthony Reid provides an overview of their importance in the economic development of the area as regards mining (copper, silver, tin and gold), and agricultural exports (pepper, gambier, cotton, rice etc.), and alludes to the “shipping boom” that resulted from these activities. Yumio Sakurai focuses on the part played by Chinese pioneers in the expansion of the Vietnam water frontiers since the second part of the seventeenth century, up until their integration into the state after Nguyên Anh defeated the Tay Son in 1802. James Kong Chin depicts the maritime shipping from South China to the emporia of the Cochinchinese coast as an interregional trade system that can be traced to the late sixteenth century, when the Ming court lifted the ban on maritime trade.

The four articles in the second part examine the subject at the regional level. Li Tana first deals with the Mekong Delta, its rice trade carried by small and medium boats, as well as navigational routes, as described in a manuscript about a collection of routes to Siam from about 1810, a section of which is translated here in an appendix by Geoff Wade. This manuscript was published in 1966 by the late Professor Chen Chingho, to whom the book is dedicated. In a second article, Li Tana examines Vietnamese shipbuilding, alluding to the borrowing of Western technology — a topic well documented in French sources — and making a comparison with shipbuilding in Chantaburi. Choi Byung Wook examines the attitude of the Nguyên dynasty toward the illegal overseas rice trade, and the resultant anti-Chinese policy, although Vietnamese merchants were also involved in the smuggling. Puangthong Rungwasdisab for his part notes the
attempts made by Siam (after the destruction of the emporium of the Macs in Ha Tiên in 1771) to control the trans-Mekong trading networks and to build up the Battambang region to divert trade benefits there.

The third part deals with some aspects of this water world after the French had entered the picture. Nola Cooke examines the complex evolution of the western part of Cochinchina and eastern Cambodia between c.1850 and 1880 with the spread of Vietnamese and Chinese along the Transbassac waterways that was encouraged by colonial authorities. An accompanying result was the redevelopment of maritime shipping networks that stretched north to China and south to Singapore. Carl A. Trocki analyzes the opium revenue farming networks in 1880 through a law case (reported in the China Mail, an English newspaper published in Hong Kong) that involves a Chinese opium farmer from Hong Kong and another from Saigon. The case shows that the firm, Ban Hap, in Saigon and its associate, the Singaporean Tan King Sing, who was a resident of long standing in Saigon, had tried to dominate the Hong Kong opium farm. As a matter of fact, these transnational opium-farmer networks originating from Singaporean Chinese were not exceptional. We know from other sources that the Babas from the Straits started to prospect in China in the 1830s. They gradually stretched as far as Rangoon and Calcutta to the west, and to Cochinchina, China and Japan to the northeast. This is well documented in the travelogue written by Li Qinghui, the son-in-law of Tan Kim Seng (1805–1864), a famous entrepreneur and philanthropist born in Melaka. One may even speak of a “Baba diaspora,” because these big traders, entrepreneurs and even compradors who migrated to the major harbors of the China Sea, where they promoted their know-how, took their families with them.

This collection of essays allows the reader to follow the ups and downs of the Chinese trade of this part of the South China Sea over more than one century. The fact that national entities are pushed into the background greatly facilitates the comparisons between the different water frontiers and helps to better appraise the repercussions of the various policies implemented within the region, from the time the water frontiers were practically independent of a stronger political control, first by local states and then by colonial authorities. One also gets hints into the manner in which these traders and their heirs adjusted themselves to the successive policies and how they managed to maintain or to reconstruct their networks and their overseas trade activities, be they “legal” or “illegal.”

As regards the lower Mekong area, one may wonder why so little attention has been devoted to the construction of canals and the digging of arroyos that were the backbone of the circulation by boat, and the supply of fresh water to the population. We would have liked to know what attempts were made during the period of the Chinese pioneers, and how they were extended during the Nguyên period. As regards the latter period, Yumio Sakurai only alludes to their strategic