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# Re-thinking the Sea in Vietnamese History: Littoral Society in the Integration of Thuận-Quảng, Seventeenth–Eighteenth Centuries

Charles Wheeler

*This article challenges conventional notions of geography in Vietnamese historiography that overlook the role of the sea as an integrative social space capable of uniting ostensibly segregated regions economically, socially and politically. Viewing history from the sea-shore instead of the rice field, it highlights the littoral inhabitants who connected interior agricultural and forest foragers to coasting and ocean carrier trade, and underscores the importance of the littoral as the 'great river' that encouraged Vietnamese political expansion and state formation along a southern trajectory.*

*The typical village of Viet Nam is enclosed within a thick wall of bamboo and thorny plants; the villagers used to live behind a kind of screen of bamboo . . . perhaps it was more like living in the magic ring of a fairy tale. . .*

Paul Mus[1]

*Ra vờ i mới biết nông sâu, ở trong lạch hói biết đâu mà dò?*
Leave the shore, only then will you know what is deep and what is shallow.
Among the creeks and ditches, who knows where or what to fathom?

Vietnamese Proverb[2]

Vietnamese society and world history matter to each other. Yet, few connections have been drawn. Perhaps the often-evoked symbol of Việt Nam's bamboo hedge helps to illustrate why. The archetype of the anonymous peasant – day after day plodding behind his buffalo through a wet rice paddy, and by night retreating behind the bamboo hedge that protects family and village from change – recurs again and again in scholarly

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1 John T. McAlister and Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and their revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 46.

2 Adapted from quote in Huỳnh Sanh Thông, 'Water, water everywhere', *Việt Nam Review*, 2 (1997): 95. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

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and popular literature; this vision symbolizes Việt Nam present and Việt Nam's past, real or imagined. The market, it is assumed, has no significance in this peasant world, because it sits beyond the bamboo hedge – though one could certainly say the same about the rice paddies. In the nationalist imagination, this village hedge stands as a microcosm of the national barrier, which is fashioned partially by inland political borders and partially by seashore, fencing in what is deemed relevant to the nation and fencing out what is not. This territorial creation has been reified into an icon of nation which further reinforces the mythology of a closed society.

Yet, as this essay will show, Vietnamese society grew deeply invested in the world, long before the French interventions of the mid-nineteenth century. It did so of its own agency. That investment projected both ways, drawing Vietnamese into world society and the world into Vietnamese society. Without this engagement, Việt Nam as we know it would never have come to be. In what arena did this interdependence grow? Outside the bamboo hedge, alongside the market, close to the rice fields and fish ponds, there flows a river. Downriver, just a short distance for most Vietnamese of the past, lay the sea. Here, Vietnamese encountered the world.

The geography of the water has been an important arena for social interaction among those who would influence Vietnamese history. The watercraft was the principal technology of travel and transport in Vietnamese societies before recent innovations were introduced, and remains a common sight. As carriers of humans and all that moves with them, waterborne traffic channelled the flow of environmental products, material and information in directions that shaped specific consequences for the culture of society and state in the Red River Delta where the first Vietnamese polities developed. In other words, the shore falsely symbolizes the limits of Vietnamese social interactions. The seacoast was part of this earlier world, and grew more important when Vietnamese militaries attempted to project permanent force beyond the delta during the second millennium CE. Once beyond, they entered a coastal stream that merged with one of the largest thoroughfares for oceanic shipping in Asia.[3] The circulation of wealth and power in Vietnamese society and state diversified to include this maritime artery along the coast. Moving southward along this coastal stream, they secured a string of small coastal estuaries; in those estuaries, Vietnamese-ruled seaports replaced their previous incarnations, subsuming their plural communities. In this colonial, coastal milieu many of Việt Nam's major cities today began.[4] The speed and intensity of this trend increased dramatically in the seventeenth century, coincident with the intensification of intra-Asian commerce. By the nineteenth century, the elongated contours of today's Vietnamese nation-state could

3 Momoki Shiro sees the sea trade as indigenous to Vietnamese political economy since at least the era of Chinese rule, yet transformed as the result of independence in the eleventh century, which threatened to diminish that trade and hence encouraged territorial expansion. Li Tana and I have argued instead that a military-commercial political economy emerged later due to the influence of local Cham environments. See Momoki, 'Đại Việt and the South China Sea trade: From the 10th to the 15th century', *Crossroads*, 12, 1 (1998): 1–34; Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1998); Charles Wheeler, 'Cross-cultural trade and trans-regional networks in the port of Hội An: Maritime Vietnam in the early modern era' (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2001), ch. 2. The truth probably involves a more complex interaction between both processes.

4 I share Nola Cooke's view that 'it may be fruitful to conceive of Nguyễn rule in early Đàng Trong as a form of colonialism'; Cooke, 'Regionalism and the nature of Nguyễn rule in seventeenth-century Đàng Trong', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* [henceforth *JSEAS*], 29, 1 (1998): 123.

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be imagined. Ironically, Việt Nam's national territory is the product of the very maritime engagement its Vietnamese nationalist perspective ignores.[5]

In this way, through the sea, the world has mattered to the outcomes that favoured Vietnamese. If the sea matters so much to Vietnamese, though, why has it been absent from Vietnamese history? This essay represents an effort to undermine the catholic belief in the detachment of Vietnamese society from the sea, and to show how Vietnamese have connected with larger streams of sea traffic, and why. Solving this latter problem proves impossible without resolving the first. Therefore, the first section of the article will address the assumptions that shape the geography that shapes history. A combination of ingrained values has set multiple intellectual barriers that lead us back to the same libretto of the universal peasant. A resilient epistemology disciplines the research to place merchants before labourers in analyses of cross-cultural contact and exchange, equate hinterland with inland, marginalize non-agrarian functions of economy and ignore water bodies as legitimate social arenas. All of these tendencies effectively efface coastal dwellers and conspire to reinforce a geographical imagery that traps us intellectually in a recycling of longstanding stereotypes about society and region.[6]

With these obstacles recognized and removed, the following section will develop a geography (or perhaps hydrography) that establishes the littoral as a distinct space, by describing a place in time wherein littoral societies acted as the first point of local contact between mariners and merchants; transacted commercially with them; and in doing so, developed interdependently with them. I will then introduce a littoral group of people, subjects of the Vietnamese kings of Đàng Trong (Cochinchina), a *de facto* independent Vietnamese realm credited with the rapid expansion of Vietnamese rule and settlement across the coastal plains of the eastern mainland of Southeast Asia during its most intense phase in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[7] These inhabitants performed indispensable functions in the facilitation of overseas and coastal commerce that connected ships with ports, goods with markets and markets with each other. In doing so, this littoral society aided the ambitions of their Nguyễn overlords to incorporate newly conquered populations into a cohesive society disciplined to the norms of a Vietnamese state.

To understand the complete legacy of Việt Nam's relationship to the world beyond, we must shake the dogma of the timeless peasants in their solitary world and begin anew, taking stock of people as we find them and methodically tracing their movements and interactions with their contours, rhythms and tempos, in the hopes of perceiving the

5 The process described in this paragraph is elaborated in Wheeler, 'Cross-cultural trade'. It should be said here that, despite the criticisms directed against specific points made by these scholars, the ideas behind this article develop primarily from Anthony Reid's maritime perspective, Victor Lieberman's models for Southeast Asian state formation and global comparative history, and especially Keith Taylor's and Li Tana's visions of multiple possible expressions of Vietnamese culture.

6 The ideas expressed in this article owe much to Martin W. Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The myth of continents: A critique of metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); 'Oceans connect', a special issue of *Geographical Review*, 89, 2 (1999); Philip E. Steinberg, 'Navigating to multiple horizons: Towards a geography of ocean-space', *Professional Geographer*, 51, 3 (1999): 366–75; and Steinberg, *The social construction of the ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

7 I use 'Cochinchina' in its original sense as one of several European names for the realm of Đàng Trong, rather than as the French colonial term for the Mekong Delta region which the Vietnamese call '*Nam bộ*'.

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form their circulations take.[8] Monarchs and mandarins may have sniffed their disdain for commerce, and merchants inscribed only their own achievements, but below the high ground of their temples – on the rivers, lagoons and canals – a mundane traffic flowed. In these deeper circulations of society the logic of Vietnamese integration formed. It began at water's highest reaches, and merged as it descended, until riparian, coastal and overseas crosscurrents converged, somewhere between the sea and the lagoons.

## Why there is no sea in Vietnamese history: The epistemology of a space

*The harmony between the Vietnamese . . . and their environmental conditions has proved to be so deep that no race has been able to resist their advance.*

Paul Mus[9]

*[In] occupying Annam and Cochinchina, [the Vietnamese] have created a nation very much unified with regard to its language and the character of its civilization but established on the world's least coherent territory.*

Pierre Gourou[10]

Việt Nam specialists have not normally thought of the sea as an arena of social interaction in Vietnamese history, either among Vietnamese themselves or between Vietnamese and other cultures. True, we typically invoke the centrality of water in Vietnamese cultural life whenever we talk to our students. We might also underscore the sea's importance in food production, whether seafood or sea salt. We have begun to talk about their interaction with agents from overseas. However, with few exceptions such facts have remained germane only as supplementary or complementary elements in an enclosed, earthbound, agrarian society.[11] We have not pursued the history of Vietnamese beyond the shore despite the fact that when we are in Việt Nam, we are never very far from it. Why this disregard for the sea? Below I offer several interrelated hypotheses.

### *The agrarian model*

Việt Nam's regional concepts are partly rooted in, and much reinforced by, the agrarian model invoked in the introduction above and its sacrosanct status in most historical analysis – not to mention nationalist historical mythology, party dogma and even the war-era politics of non-Vietnamese. Paul Mus and Pierre Gourou were among its most eloquent advocates in the Western world. According to this socio-historical idea,

8 By circulation, I mean something 'more than the movement to and fro of men and goods', or even ideas. Instead, I mean circulation as a transitive process, whereby 'things, men and notions', in the process of circulating across space, 'transform themselves' as well as others. The littoral people I discuss below, not to mention their merchant counterparts, exemplify this concept well. These quotations are from 'Introduction', in *Society and circulation: Mobile people and itinerant cultures in South Asia, 1750–1950*, ed. Claude Markovits and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), pp. 2–3.

9 McAlister and Mus, *Vietnamese and their revolution*, p. 47.

10 Pierre Gourou, *Les paysans du delta Tonkinois: Étude de géographie humaine* (Paris: Mouton, 1965 reprint), p. 8.

11 Keith Taylor presages a 'sea-oriented culture' in *The birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 1–6, but understandably does not further develop his claim in ways that suggest political-economic possibilities.

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the cultural ecology of riziculture has produced 'a contract between the society itself, the soil, and the sky'. This sacral-social compact produced 'a repetition of villages', socially and commercially closed, toiling *en masse* over a chessboard of paddies to support a Confucian, anti-mercantile ruling elite.[12] Non-farm industries produced supplemental, rather than fundamental, goods to this agrarian base. The market, beyond the 'sacred boundary' of the village hedge, 'symbolized the low status of commerce'. What commerce existed would 'therefore imply the economic, social, and political re-equipment of these village settlements'. The sea has no place in this feudal world, except as a challenge to hydraulic engineers.[13]

This closed, agrarian society is thought to have produced a psychological detachment from the sea as a result, from which it was impossible to recover. Thành Thế Vỹ, in the first monograph devoted specifically to the subject of pre-colonial foreign trade, argued that Vietnamese were characteristically detached from both the sea and commercial enterprise and therefore produced no great sea fleets like the British or Dutch.[14] The logic self-reinforces: since they did not produce such fleets, they must have been disinterested in sea commerce; since they were disinterested in the sea, they did not produce fleets. Moreover, Thành's evidentiary criteria are limited to Western prototypes, so smaller but more numerous coastal carriers creating economies of scale evaded his detection. An underlying ideological contrast between dynamic West and fatalistic East no doubt made it impossible to consider adaptation as a Vietnamese response, at least prior to Western contact. Here too, the toiling peasant does not stand too far from mind. In a different arena, pioneer historians of Asian carrier trade in Vietnamese realms perceived an importance in the junk trade; South Vietnamese and Western historians of the 1960s and 1970s acknowledged it as well.[15] Yet they never acknowledged the presence of Vietnamese themselves engaged in this trade – beyond the royal court, which allegedly kept this foreign trade at arm's length.

Scholars in the 1990s began to question or fine-tune this thesis about Vietnamese alienation to argue a role for maritime commerce in the political economy of Đại Việt, most likely in response to the recognition of Asia's indigenous shipping and commerce overall. However, even assertions of a more open society and engaged state in the South

12 There are many renderings of this concept in Vietnamese, French and English writings; one which has influenced thinking about Vietnamese society outside Việt Nam is Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Tradition and revolution in Việt Nam* (Berkeley, Indochina Resource Center, 1974), pp. 17–20. The 'contract' quotation is from McAlister and Mus, *Vietnamese and their revolution*, p. 46.

13 Ibid., pp. 52 (sacred boundary) and 46–7 (re-equipment); the comment on 'low status of commerce' is from Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 34. See also Pierre Gourou, *The peasants of the Tonkin Delta: A study of human geography* (New Haven: HRAF, 1955), pp. 105–7; this is a translation of his *Paysans du delta Tonkinois.*

14 Thành Thế Vỹ, *Ngoại thư'o'ng Việt-Nam hồi thế kỷ XVII, XVIII và đầu XIX* [Việt Nam's foreign trade during the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries] (Hà-nội: Sư' học, 1961), pp. 23–8.

15 Ch'en Ching-ho (Trần Kinh Hòa), Fujiwara Riichiro and Yamamoto Tatsuro are the most notable examples. This literature is discussed more fully in Wheeler, 'Cross-cultural trade', pp. 11–19. For a South Vietnamese example, see Phan Khoang, *Việt sử: Xứ Đàng Trong, 1558–1777* [Vietnamese history: Đàng Trong 1558–1777] (Sàigòn : Khai Trí, 1970). A Western study that presaged the importance of the junk trade to Vietnamese economy is Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese model* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); on the junk trade, see pp. 261–76 and 321.

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assert that '[while] agriculture defined power, trade adorned it'.[16] The few who have argued for the commercial orientation of early Vietnamese regimes tend to accept the agrarian ideal of Vietnamese lives implicitly, as evidenced in studies that depict overseas trade as solely the business of big ships and foreign brokers. This has reinforced the 'land-lubber view' of Vietnamese society that limits our search for Vietnamese history to arable land. This is apt for the Red and Mekong Delta regions but ill-suited for the territory between them, where arable land was poor in comparison to the riches that mountains and sea offered.

Such persistence in perspective is not surprising, since trade history in general tends to privilege the role of merchants and monarchs above all others and, in fact, too seldom considers the multitude of necessary economic supporting roles that must be played in order for commerce to proceed. These were the very functions that put local inhabitants in direct contact with merchants and mariners from abroad, functions most likely to be played by Vietnamese- (or non-Vietnamese-) speaking locals. Hence the dismissal or marginalization of non-agrarian activities by Vietnamese historians effectively erases this group from history altogether. This is reinforced by a myopic focus on merchants, monarchs and big-ship operators in the literature on sea trade. Even where we find Vietnamese aplenty aboard great ocean-going vessels, these are pirate ships and thus denied recognition as a legitimate category of economic analysis. As a result, the notion of physical and psychological detachment from the sea prevails.

### *Regional fragmentation*

Another ideological source of Vietnamese alienation from the sea is our set of geographical conceptions about Việt Nam.

#### *The bipolar model*

This imagines a kind of dialectic between a fixed Northern centre, set in the Hà Nội vicinity, and a relative Southern antipode. According to this view, the 'North' (*Bắc bộ* or *miền Bắc*), set within the Red River Delta, acts as normative centre – in other words, as 'the cradle of Vietnamese civilization'.[17] Here, Mus's monochromous and impervious village society clones itself. The usual theoretical suspects appear: 'the subordination of the individual to collective discipline of family and village'.[18] In contrast, Vietnamese who left North for 'South' (*Nam bộ* or *miền Nam*) created a cultural ecology that was more 'open' than their Northern forebears, moving easily with the 'more predictable and

16 Kenneth R. Hall, 'The economic history of early Southeast Asia', in *The Cambridge history of Southeast Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tarling, vol. 1, pt. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 262–9; Keith W. Taylor, 'The early kingdoms: Vietnam', in the same volume, p. 145 (from where the quotation on agriculture and trade is taken); and John K. Whitmore, 'Literati culture and integration in Dai Viet c. 1430–c. 1840', in *Beyond binary histories: Re-imagining Eurasia to c.1830*, ed. Victor Lieberman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 226–7. One early argument for this commercial adornment can be found in Thanh-Nha Nguyen, *Tableau économique du Viet Nam aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris: Éditions Cujas, 1970). Vietnamese scholarship since the 1980s seems to have pursued an agenda focused on 'demonstrating historic "good friendships" between Vietnam and countries important to Vietnam today, a way of promoting *Đổi Mó'i* through the past'; on this and for further references see Wheeler, 'Cross-cultural trade', pp. 22–3.

17 Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Tradition and revolution*, p. 20.

18 Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 5. For a summary of standard views on the closed village model for Việt Nam, see Michael Adas, 'The village and state in Vietnam and Burma: An open and shut case?', in Adas, *State, market and peasant in colonial South and Southeast Asia* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1998), pp. 1–22.

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benign' rhythms of the Mekong, allowing a less corporate, 'more tolerant [attitude towards] individual initiative and cultural heterodoxy'. As a result, 'new ways of being Vietnamese' were manifested.[19]

Vietnamese society is thus portrayed as having been polarized between North and South, and again the bamboo hedge symbolizes this new cultural contrast – by its presence in the North and its absence in the South. This model continues to dominate geographical thinking about Việt Nam. Even recent attempts to complicate Vietnamese regionalism invoke this North–South dialectic – a battle between a static, East Asian North and a dynamic, Southeast Asian South. Depending on which period you choose, this produces either an enterprising lot or 'a rootless and restless peasantry' that undermines social cohesion relative to the North. Mus preferred the latter, as did the Hà Nội-based Marxists, while more recent generations of scholars favour the former.[20] Nonetheless, underneath this bipolar Vietnamese world, the agrarian economic base prevails.

What is most fascinating about this model is that the South is a relative, not an absolute concept, unlike the North. As Vietnamese pioneers moved southward, the scope of what constituted the 'South' migrated with them. Though we associate contemporary Southern virtues (or vices, depending on your generation) with the Mekong Delta region, in fact the geographical location of this Southern pole shifted historically, and situated in environments wholly unlike the delta. Change 'South' to 'West', and one would almost believe Frederick Turner himself scripted this narrative. In the centuries prior to incorporating the Mekong, this morality play acted itself out on a thin strip of coastal plain, pinned between mountain walls and sea abyss; yet whether occupying sandy beaches or rich alluvial plains, the South performs with identical *esprit*.[21] This should lead to questions about the reputed role of environment in shaping culture, but it has not. Once the Southern pivot was permanently implanted in Gia Định (Sàigòn) at the end of the seventeenth century, territory that fitted poorly with either 'South' or 'North' required a new anatomy for the Vietnamese geo-body. Hence, Central Việt Nam (*Trung bộ*, *Trung kỳ* or *miền Trung*) was born.

### *The tripartite model*

This matter of regional division is important to our consideration of the sea, for it has direct impact on the portrayal of that by-product of the southward-migrating South: that is, the 'Centre', whose geography presents the greatest possibility of maritime engagement. Central Việt Nam is a region that does not appear until the 'South' settled down permanently in the Saigon vicinity. It is typically only used in discussions of post-Tây So'n Việt Nam (after Việt Nam's long division between Trịnh 'North' and Nguyễn 'South'), but assumptions about this region project back into the past in many

19 Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, p. 12; Li Tana, 'An alternative Việt Nam? The Nguyễn kingdom in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', *JSEAS*, 29, 1 (1998): 118. The comments on the North–South contrasts are from Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, pp. 3–5.

20 For an enterprising depiction see ibid., p. 5; an alternative view is in McAlister and Mus, *Vietnamese and their revolution*, pp. 82–3.

21 The question about where 'North' and 'South' stood before the tenth century I will leave aside, but adhering to this moral scheme, the conservative 'North' would have to be the Chinese empire and the dynamic 'South' the Red River Delta. If this logic holds true, then the Northern pole was anchored in the delta with the emergence of Đại Việt after the tenth century, while its Southern antipode shifted until it settled in the Mekong River Delta near the end of the seventeenth century.

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ways.[22] It is the most problematic of regional conceptions, and yet most historians seem to prefer this classic tripartite division of Việt Nam into North, Centre and South – metaphorically characterized by 'two rice baskets on a pole' – to describe the agrarian-rich North and South held together by the poor but hard-working Centre.

Mountains, sand and sea leave little room for riziculture in the Centre and 'skimpy' watersheds to feed it; from this geographical fact, historians have assumed that the region had little to recommend it, despite centuries of Vietnamese efforts to conquer, dominate and settle it. As a result, 'most of the economic, political, and cultural activity are [*sic*] in two core areas', namely our more farmer-friendly Red and Mekong Deltas.[23] The previous agrarian-rooted, bipolar perspective has already determined the logical outcome. One would almost conclude from this model that Vietnamese sought the Centre only as a bridgehead to the South, as if motivated by a sense of predestination. In any case, once the South moved on, these regions became part of the penurious Centre, poor because it possessed so little arable land. Otherwise, North and South remain history's agents and the arbiters of Vietnamese cultural identity. We are back to a bipolar, landlocked world.

### *The 'archipelago' model*

Even recent historians who work against the grain of earlier dogma about an earth-bound monoculture assume *a priori* the inhibitive effect of the sea upon Vietnamese behaviour. In recent years, Western historians have adopted an alternative scheme often used in Việt Nam as well, which emphasizes historical regions produced by a criss-cross of overlapping mountain ranges that fragments Vietnamese society into diverse enclaves. In this scheme, physical geography has created, in effect, 'the least coherent territory in the world', a geographical characterization attributed to French geographer Pierre Gourou and dating to the 1930s.[24] Those who invoke Gourou's judgement have done so in order to promote the much-needed recognition of greater but long-ignored diversity among Vietnamese across space as well as time, in order to break Vietnamese historiography 'free of the strangling obsession with identity and continuity mandated by the nationalist faith that has animated virtually every twentieth-century historian who has written about Việt Nam', as Keith Taylor so aptly put it.[25] This concept of fragmented

22 Nola Cooke (personal communication) points out that Emperor Minh Mạng introduced the idea of '*Trung kỳ*' (one term for 'Central Việt Nam') in his administrative reforms of the 1820s. This formalized the idea of a tripartite division of Vietnamese territory, which the French maintained when they created *Tonkin*, *Annam* and *Cochinchine*. The idea predates Minh Mạng, however; Cooke notes that the territorial outlines of his *Trung kỳ* almost exactly fit those of the original Đàng Trong of his earliest ancestors, which included the Thanh-Nghệ region further to the North before the Trịnh-Nguyễn wars of the seventeenth century shifted the border southward to Đồng Hới. The emperor probably understood that. Western conceptions of three regions called '*Tonkin*', '*Haute* [Upper] *Cochinchine*' and '*Basse* [Lower] *Cochinchine*' date to at least the mid-eighteenth century, which also contributed to the French North-Centre-South regionalization created in the 1800s.

23 Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 3; on the poor conditions for agriculture in the Centre see Nguyen, *Tableau économique*, p. 181.

24 Gourou, *Peasants of the Tonkin Delta*, p. 3; for the original French, see *Paysans du delta tonkinois*, p. 8. The perspective of historical fragmentation is best summarized in Keith Taylor, 'Surface orientations in Vietnam: Beyond histories of nation and region', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 57, 4 (1998): 949–78; see also Victor Lieberman's chapter on '"The least coherent territory in the world": Vietnam and the eastern mainland', in Lieberman, *Strange parallels: Southeast Asia in global context, c. 800–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 338–460, esp. pp. 338–44.

25 Keith W. Taylor, 'Preface', in *Essays from Vietnamese pasts*, ed. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1995), p. 6. The first to break free from the unitary narrative was Li's *Nguyễn Cochinchina*.

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socio-cultural geography has had its negative political-economic aspect, however: with diversity comes disaggregation. Victor Lieberman asserts that Việt Nam has been 'disadvantaged in that its elongated domain lacked a central river artery', a feature that allowed peoples settled along the Chao Phraya and Irrawaddy river systems to form the economic and administrative cores of modern Thailand and Burma.[26] Environment, then, could not lend a hand to Vietnamese socio-cultural or political unity, as it had to its neighbours.

According to this model, geographical fragmentation prevailed over coherence, encouraging cultural fission. Alpine compartmentalization thwarts homogenizing trends, while a perceived 'lack of any direct link' by water inhibits physical, political and cultural convergence. This 'archipelago' effect is most notable in Central Việt Nam, where mountains disaggregate the Centre into autonomous regional expressions of being or acting Vietnamese. Gone is the basket-and-pole; instead, the archipelagic geography produces a kind of episodic history.[27] However, in this scheme, North and South remain largely intact as Đông kinh and Nam bộ, and only the former Centre fragments into multiple 'islands', reinforcing beliefs about two powerful antipodes weakly linked. In the chain of alluvial plains between North and South, environment inhibits rather than enables Vietnamese agency. The roads that struggle against the transversal mountains separating regions are not enough to integrate the 'islands' of this Vietnamese archipelago. Cultural diversity – or rather, 'new ways of doing Vietnamese' – results.[28] Other scholars utilizing this model see culture providing the enduring bond that integrates what environment would break apart. Lieberman, in his study of socio-political integration in early modern Việt Nam, describes how Vietnamese (really, Sino-Vietnamese) culture militated against disintegrated regions: 'the integrative implications of Sinic culture . . . reinforced a contextually circumscribed sense of commonality that defied an exceptionally fissiparous physical environment'.[29] Either way you look at it, the sea presents an obstacle for Vietnamese to overcome.

All of this is convincing, but it is worth digressing for a moment to consider the context of Gourou's original statement about the 'least coherent territory in the world' which has been so often invoked in the past few years. Doing so reveals that Gourou's judgement may have been derived not so much from empiricism as from ideology. In another work, he declares that

> 'the shape of French Indochina would not seem to destine the country to unity; the relief . . . makes communication difficult between east and west, and between north and south. It is therefore not surprising that, *until French intervention, eastern Indochina never formed a political unit. . .*'.

He goes on to say that 'French Indochina is the rational creation of France . . . . Political unity has favored the birth of economic relations, which reinforce it.'[30] In other words,

26 Victor Lieberman, 'Transcending East–West dichotomies: State and culture formation in six ostensibly disparate areas', in Lieberman ed., *Beyond binary histories*, p. 31; see also Lieberman, *Strange parallels*, pp. 338–460.
27 This episodic form of history is proposed in Taylor, 'Surface orientations'.
28 Ibid., p. 951.
29 Lieberman, *Strange parallels*, p. 342.
30 Pierre Gourou, *Land utilization in French Indochina* (a translation of *L'utilisation du sol en Indochine Française*) (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1945), pp. 6–7; emphasis added. To be clear, Gourou places as much emphasis on North–South fragmentation among Vietnamese as he does on East–West differences between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese.

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without French impositions the unifying skeleton to the Vietnamese 'geo-body' would never have formed; French willpower rationalized the earth and so brought unity to Vietnamese where none had apparently existed before. Can we regard Gourou's concept of fragmentation, then, as anything but an extension of an oft-used justification for French colonialism in Việt Nam?[31] His scheme was problematic then, and it remains problematic today, whenever cultural exceptionalism offers the only means of socio-political integration, whether that culture is French or Vietnamese. The segregating effect of mountains is no doubt real, but clearly reliance upon echoes of Gourou's imperialist conclusions has unwittingly set aside important questions about the relationship between environment and history.

Archipelagos can just as easily be considered nodes of interaction as they can distant enclaves. Yet all that remains are two great river deltas – capable of autonomous integration, separated by the multiple 'islands' of the archipelagic Centre, briefly dynamic and powerful when considered a part of the shifting 'South' but thereafter abandoned by History to languish in isolation, trapped betwixt the dual curse of mountain barriers and oceanic void. (If only they had a boat.) Underscoring the importance of the sea to Vietnamese history demands a refinement of the archipelago thesis, not a rejection of it. Nor does it suggest a rejection of the agrarian thesis, but rather questions the limits of the agrarian model in providing a typology for generalizing Vietnamese society and state throughout history.

This point becomes apparent when we shift our attention towards the people most important to the coalescence of a Vietnamese society into its modern human geography, the people of the littoral. As Vietnamese speakers (nowadays at least), they have been lumped into the larger agrarian society, despite their amphibious culture. The sea was vital to the survival of this coastal society, because it provided a 'resource in its own right'.[32] Like all littoral peoples, aquaculture was the norm, and the shore marked the beginning, rather than end, of their habitat. Agriculture supplemented aquaculture, as did a range of foraging, predatory and commercial activities. Lagoon, littoral, sea and offshore islands provided an aquacultural base distinct from their rice-growing cousins upriver, encouraging an interdependence perhaps best illustrated by the two well-known staples of fish and rice.[33] Moreover, littoral society and overseas traders related symbiotically.

Such a sea-oriented village could in no way conform to an agrarian way of life or mimic the classic peasant village (though not for lack of state efforts to make it so). If it seems to conform, it is only because the taxonomy of agrarian-mindedness demanded it. This situation applies most significantly to the so-called Centre, the 'pole', where rice agriculture is meagre and the resources of both littoral and mountainous hinterlands (historically) far richer in comparison. In fact, at one time these non-agrarian peoples and resources provided the economic base that enabled, in the long run, the creation of the Vietnamese society, state and 'geo-body' that have evolved since the turn of the

31 Besides, what has held Vietnamese together since France abandoned its colonial enterprise in Việt Nam? Or, was it postcolonial mimicry of former masters? The triumph of Vietnamese will over nature? Such ideological explanations suggest the sort of unitary interpretation of Vietnamese society and history that those who have invoked Gourou sought rightly to undermine in the first place.

32 Donald K. Emmerson, 'The case for a maritime perspective on Southeast Asia', *JSEAS*, 11, 1 (1980): 142.

33 Ibid.

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nineteenth century. Through this littoral ecozone and its society, Vietnamese connected to the sea, and though the sea to the world beyond.

In the next section, I will explore the world of the coastal inhabitants who were deeply invested in sea trade, in ways characteristic of a littoral culture. In conclusion, I will argue that their activities exemplify an amphibious orientation common to all Việt Nam's littoral inhabitants, one that fused together earthbound and sea-drift worlds. This littoral zone constituted its own economic sphere and functioned in some ways like a hinterland in relationship to the commercial and political centres set in estuaries and on alluvial plains. These people not only supplied the commercial centre and protected the political centre; they also served as the essential integrative link between downriver ports and their big-ship merchant-mariners. Their responses to neighbouring or foreign groups influenced regional dynamics. Such a function demonstrates how Vietnamese did not need to man big ships in order to play a vital role in oceanic trade (though they did), or operate large-scale mercantile houses in order to be fundamentally shaped by that trade. However, in order to locate these people, we must first define the arena of their activities.

### A synoptic hydrography of Thuận-Quảng[34]

In order to locate this littoral society, we must first locate the littoral itself, that is, the 'zone of transition between sea and land' and its 'habitat that extends well beyond its [physical] limits'.[35] To do that, we will start with the more familiar elements of 'archipelagic' geography and adapt them to more precisely reflect the environmental characteristics that matter most to human movement, in order to detect the contours of societal circulations that suggest regions. This will be done from a hydrographic perspective, which 'reverses the gaze' of our landlubber meta-geography by emphasizing water- over land-based connections. The aim is not to blot out the land, but to find its aquatic complement, the better to locate the littoral and its society, which is primarily amphibious in its circulation.

We will begin with an important cluster of 'islands' in this archipelago of coastal plains known as Thuận-Quảng.[36] Thuận-Quảng is an abbreviation of Thuận Hóa and Quảng Nam, the two southern frontier territories within the Lê empire (1428–1788);

34 Portions of this section draw upon Charles Wheeler, 'One region, two histories: Cham precedents in the history of the Hội An region', in *Việt Nam: Borderless histories*, ed. Nhung Tran and Anthony Reid (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, forthcoming).

35 David Sopher, *The sea nomads: A study of the maritime boat people of Southeast Asia* (Singapore: National Museum, 1977), p. 4. The term 'littoral' as a social category is still somewhat vaguely understood. In an oceanographic sense, the littoral can be defined as narrowly as the stretch between high and low tides, or as widely as the expanse of land and sea affected by the biology or societies of the shore. Michael Pearson provides the best conceptualization for social and economic historians, arguing that three characteristics distinguish the littoral from terrestrial or maritime zones of social organization. The first is location, as described above. Occupation and culture, the other two, distinguish the littoral zone from its terrestrial and maritime neighbours, both by its distinctly littoral characteristics and by 'a symbiosis between land and sea'. See Pearson, 'Littoral society: the concepts and the problems', paper presented at the conference on Seascapes, Littoral Cultures and Trans-Oceanic Exchanges, Library of Congress, February 2003. Also see, Pearson, 'Littoral society: The case for the coast', *The Great Circle*, 7, 1 (1985): 1–8.

36 I use 'Thuận-Quảng' as defined in Taylor, 'Surface orientations', p. 958, and expressed in Đỗ Bang, *Phố cảng Thuận-Quảng thế kỷ 17 và 18* [The ports of Thuận-Quảng in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries] (Huế: Thuận Hóa, 1996).

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they formed the original base of power for governor-*cum*-warlord Nguyễn Hoàng (r. 1558–1613). Hoàng created the autonomous military-commercial regime commonly called 'Đàng Trong' (also known as Cochinchina) that would preside over the most aggressive phase of Vietnamese political and demographic expansion southward, an event mythologized as *Nam tiến*, the 'march to the South'.[37] It marks the end of a long period when Vietnamese rule incorporated previously Cham-governed seaports with centuries of experience with seafaring merchants. Political power settled in Thuận Hóa and eventually centred at Phú Xuân (associated with modern-day Huế), while commercial power rested in Quảng Nam, where trade gravitated towards the downriver seaport called Hội An.

I have chosen Thuận-Quảng as a unit of analysis for three reasons. First, it is a practical tool for analysing a space within the classic Central region before the latter fully manifested itself as a geographical referent in the early nineteenth century. Second, as stated above, I believe the archipelagic model provides the best means so far of understanding the variant 'surfaces' of Vietnamese history, and should be further developed.[38] However, the model is capable of far more than offering novel ways of viewing a shifting North–South polarity. We can study historical regions like Thuận-Quảng autonomously of North, South or any other Vietnamese regional unit, however conceived. In doing so, we can begin the work of detecting those spaces within the habitat of Vietnamese-speakers whose social, cultural, political, economic and even ethnological precedents developed independently of Vietnamese (as in the case of Thuận-Quảng) or whose cultural ecology seems a misfit from any Vietnamese perspective (as with littoral society). Finally, as the centre of the Central Region, Thuận-Quảng allows us to analyse a portion of the classic 'bamboo pole' region in order to test the claim that these models have misled our understanding of the territory's society and its place in the political economy of past Vietnamese states. Thus, Thuận-Quảng provides a useful unit of analysis.

For analytical purposes, given our socio-economic agenda, we will regard Hội An as Thuận-Quảng's centre. Hội An formed the nexus of a far-flung network of commerce and trade, making it one of the most important export and transshipment markets in the South China Sea. The port catalyzed economic development, political consolidation, social reorganization and cultural transformation in Thuận-Quảng and integrated Đàng Trong's archipelago of alluvial plains along an axis defined by a coastal stream. Downriver from Thuận-Quảng's inland administrative centres, in a zone where land and sea merged, the littoral appears. Here, in the littoral and its thoroughfare of estuary, lagoons, offshore islands and coastal stream between, Gourou's territorial incoherence transforms into a stable, amphibious consolidation.[39]

Thuận-Quảng lies near the exact centre of a long strand of small, parallel river plains that snakes around a North–South axis between the great deltas of the Red and Mekong Rivers. Recalling the view from his coastal vessel, Lê Quý Đôn noted: 'Across the entire horizon it is all mountains and water'. The mountains, he marvelled, 'look like a great

37 The two territories are also considered a composite of several smaller regions (listed here from North to South): Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, Thừa Thiên – Huế, Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi (Taylor, 'Surface orientations', p. 950).

38 I am referring to Taylor's definition of 'surfaces' as 'particular times and terrains upon which human activity took place' (Ibid., p. 954).

39 The term is borrowed from Victor Lieberman's characterization of Siam as a 'stable, maritime consolidation' in *Strange parallels*, pp. 212–337.

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wall.'[40] Wrote the missionary Benigne Vachet about his visit to the Nguyễn capital of Phú Xuân in 1674: 'The homes of the Cochinchinese . . . rise from the edge of the sea to the mountains, where in a space of about a league, a string of big sand dunes and terraced earth in three levels is outfitted with lovely bamboo palisades.'[41] To many historians, Thuận-Quảng's mountainous characteristic supports the standardized view of Việt Nam as 'the least coherent territory in the world', where Vietnamese history was restricted to a 'narrow alluvial ribbon' on which peasants precariously balanced their existence, backed up against a wall and looking into a watery abyss.[42]

However, what mountains divide, waters unite. A remarkable example of the way a terrain-centred approach affects perspective is to see how the same region is perceived by different sets of historians. Scholarship on Vietnam sees the mountains and small arable plain and judges Thuận-Quảng as isolated 'islands' in a loose-knit unit; Champa scholarship sees navigable water and judges the regions to be intimately connected with each other and the world beyond.[43] In their analyses of geography, scholars of maritime Southeast Asia have employed an 'upstream–downstream' model, first described by Bennet Bronson, to explain economic exchange and political economy in their island world.[44] Along a shore lie a string of parallel watersheds, segregated by transversal mountain ranges and flowing at steep grades, with habitat settled along the upriver-downriver continuum but concentrated at the alluvial plains near the river-mouths. Champa historians have incorporated Bronson's model into their own analytical schemes, in order to theorize a likeness between Cham 'island-clusters' and Malayic insular environments.[45]

40 Lê Quý Đôn, *Phủ biên tạp lục* [Desultory notes from the frontier] (henceforth *PBTL*) (Sàigòn: Phủ Quốc vụ khanh Đặc trách Văn hóa, 1972–3), vol. 1, pp. 139, 140. Lê Quý Đôn, an official of Đàng Ngoài (Tonkin), had been sent to govern Thuận Hoá after armies of the Northern realm conquered the Nguyễn-ruled territory in 1775.

41 Léopold Cadière, 'Mémoire de Bénigne Vachet sur la Cochinchine, 1674', *Bulletin de la Commission Archéologique de l'Indochine* (1913): 14.

42 Gourou, *Land utilization*, p. 57.

43 *Proceedings of the seminar on Champa: University of Copenhagen on May 23, 1987*, ed. P.B. Lafont and tr. Huỳnh Đình Tế (Rancho Cordova, CA: 1994); for the perspective on Cham geography, see the essay by Quach Thanh Tam, pp. 21–37. Earlier Champa scholars, however, held the same beliefs in a disaggregated way, isolating geography as their Vietnamese counterparts; see Georges Maspéro, *Royaume de Champa* (Paris and Brussels: G. Van Oest, 1928), ch. 1. Recent advances that greatly advance our understanding of the Cham precedent in regions like Thuận-Quảng include William A. Southworth, 'The origins of Campā in Central Vietnam: A preliminary review' (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 2001), pp. 63–112. Southworth also emphasizes the importance of the coasting route along the Cham coast (which includes Thuận-Quảng); see Southworth, 'River settlement and coastal trade', paper presented at the Symposium on New Scholarship on Champa, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 5–6 August 2004.

44 Bennet Bronson, 'Exchange at the upstream and downstream ends: Notes toward a functional model of the coastal state in Southeast Asia', in *Economic exchange and social interaction in Southeast Asia: Perspectives from prehistory, history, and ethnography*, ed. Karl Hutterer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1977), p. 42.

45 Keith W. Taylor, 'Early kingdoms', in Tarling ed., *Cambridge history*, pp. 153–4. Notable examples of works that establish connections or comparisons between Champa and Malay archipelago societies include Kenneth Hall, 'The politics of plunder in the Cham realm of early Việt Nam', in *Art and politics in Southeast Asian history: Six perspectives*, ed. Robert Van Neil (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Center for Southeast Asia Studies, 1989), pp. 5–32; the collection of articles in *Le Campā et le monde Malais: actes de la conférence internationale* (Paris: Publications du Centre d'Histoire et Civilisations de la Péninsule Indochinoise, 1991); and Graham Thurgood, *From ancient Cham to modern dialects: Two thousand years of language contact and change* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), pp. 14–15, 31–4.

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Assumptions about the sea as a medium (rather than a void) have motivated historians of the Cham regions to search for signs of activity overseas and, conversely, for signs of overseas interactions within Cham territorial domains. Thus regions like Thuận-Quảng, no longer a mainland anomaly but a typical 'island' in a Southeast Asian maritime area, have been usefully compared with similar 'dry zone' environments in maritime East and Southeast Asia.[46]

Aquatic integration was a familiar note to seventeenth-century observations of Thuận-Quảng. Connections were made via river, lagoon, coastal and oceanic streams that intersected at estuarine ports; boat travel linked them all. Lê Quý Đôn's careful inventory of water and land routes in Thuận Hóa in 1776 shows a preponderance of aquatic traffic on river, shore and sea.[47] The Chinese monk Dashan, who visited Thuận-Quảng in 1695, aptly described water's primary function in transportation: 'There is no way to go between two prefectures [via land]. Go to the seaport, and that is the prefecture. If you want to go to another prefecture you must sail from one port onto the sea and, following the mountains, proceed to the other port.'[48] Moreover, commerce, military and administration relied upon this same aquatic traffic mode that converged at the intersection of river, coastal and overseas routes.[49] Vietnamese maps and itineraries from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries confirm the qualitative equivalence of land, river and coastal itineraries.[50] Yet some modes of transport were more useful than others; during the November–December floods, for example, 'the country can be traversed only by boat'. This 'causes considerable advantage . . . because the country being all navigable . . . commodities are very easily convey'd from one city to another.'[51]

The missionary Alexandre de Rhodes remarked that Thuận-Quảng 'is watered by twenty-four beautiful rivers, which make travel marvelously easy, facilitating both

46 See especially Momoki Shiro, 'A short introduction to Champa studies', in *The dry areas in Southeast Asia: Harsh or benign environment?* ed. F. Hayao (Kyoto: Kyoto University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), pp. 65–74.

47 See, for example, *PBTL*, vol. I, pp. 144–50, 158–89, 202–4, 223–4.

48 Dashan, *Haiwai jishi* [An overseas record] (Taibei: Guangwen Shuju, 1969), p. 92. This maritime-oriented administrative geography can be seen, for example, in Yang Baoyun, *Contribution à l'histoire de la principauté des Nguyên au Vietnam méridional (1600–1775)* (Geneva: Éditions Olizane, 1992), pp. 32–41, 195–6.

49 For example, the *Thiên Nam tứ chỉ lộ đồ thư* describes a boat itinerary from the Đại Việt capital of Thăng Long (Hà Nội) to the subjugated Cham capital of Vijaya; see *Hồng Đức bản đồ* [Maps of the Hồng Đức era], ed. Trương Bửu Lâm *et al.* [henceforth *HĐBĐ*] (Sàigòn: Bộ Quốc gia Giáo dục, 1962), pp. 66–149, especially p. 91–5 for Thuận-Quảng. This estuarine nexus is reflected in the pre-nineteenth-century maps analysed in John K. Whitmore, 'Cartography in Việt Nam', in *The history of cartography*, vol. II, pt. 2: *Cartography of the traditional East and Southeast Asian societies*, ed. J. B. Harley and David Woodward (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 481–96.

50 In his analysis of the map, Whitmore notes: 'Although the text of each section seems to speak of routes by land, water and sea [that is, the coastal passage], what they mean is that the maps show the distinctive features of all three environments, differing from route to route.' Hence, he grants equal emphasis to 'land – inns and bridges; water – rivers, canals and harbors; sea – estuaries, currents, shallows, and deeps' ('Cartography in Việt Nam', pp. 490–1).

51 Christoforo Borri, 'An account of Cochin-China', in *A collection of voyages and travels*, ed. A. Churchill (London: Printed by assignment from Messrs. Churchill for H. Lintot [etc.], 1744–6), vol. II, pp. 701b–702a. The comment on travel during flood season is from *Rhodes of Việt Nam: The travels and missions of Father Alexander de Rhodes in China and other kingdoms of the Orient*, tr. Solange Hertz (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1966), p. 44.

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commerce and transportation'.[52] When Lê Quý Đôn inventoried the coast of Thuận Hóa for his 1776 report, he described the function of adjacent rivers in ways that to us resemble Bronson's dendritic scheme – that is, tributaries flowing in short, steep slopes that coalesce briefly at the foothills and fan out across the plain to empty into deeply inset estuaries or bays. In fact, the waterways of Thuận-Quảng usually offered year-round conveyance to boats travelling between the headwaters and the river mouth below. Rafts charted the upper reaches of tributaries nestled within forested highlands, picking up goods from local markets where their route intersected with roads and footpaths. From there, goods descended onto the alluvial plain through a network of local markets.[53] At the place where tributaries converged and highland became lowland, their journey ended at regional markets, where local traders barred from downriver ports could barter their goods for lowland, littoral and foreign wares. (Often, the primary regional market sat opposite the provincial garrison, as in the case of Hội An.) Highland goods were then transshipped on river carriers which criss-crossed the rivers, rivulets, lagoons and lakes that fanned out across the alluvial plain. At any number of lowland markets in this aquatic maze, boats took on the agricultural and manufactured products of lowland settlements. Some of these goods were destined for local markets, some for the downriver ports of Thuận-Quảng.[54] From there, coasters might further transship items to Hội An; these goods would again be relayed, either for domestic redistribution on coastal ships or for export on foreign ships.[55] This process illustrates how coastal waters, rivers, lagoons and canals wove through roadways and knit together markets, posts and settlements in the region's three ecozones to form a cohesive economic unit. Thuận-Quảng's subregions follow Bronson's Malayic model.

One factor Bronson's scheme overlooks, and one which is crucial to understanding Thuận-Quảng, is the coastal corridor. The evidence for a separate coastal zone of aquatic traffic can be found just by peering at the sea from Vietnamese shores, by the very number and variety of boats whose technology developed specifically to maximize coastal travel.[56] Sources documenting Thuận-Quảng during Hội An's heyday include

52 Ibid.

53 The *Phủ biên tạp lục* offers numerous examples of the downriver gravity in Thuận-Quang local economies. See, for example, the description of headwaters in Thuận Hóa Territory in *PBTL*, vol. II, pp. 146–50, and of select river routes in Thuận Hóa, pp. 193–7. Unfortunately, the Hội An (or Thu Bồn) River in Quảng Nam is not among them; however, see 'Quảng Nam tỉnh lục', in Lê Quang Định, *Hoàng Việt nhất thống dư địa chí* [Imperial union atlas] (henceforth *HVNTDĐC*) (1806) (Manuscript no. A. 584 at the Viện Hán-Nôm in Hà Nội or EFEO microfilm A.67/103).

54 See *quyển* 2 of PBTL (esp. vol. I, pp. 144–89, 202–4, 223–4). The most notable secondary ports were Thanh Hà, which served Phú Xuân, and Nước Mặn, which served Qui Nhơn. For a thorough study of this aquatic maze, see the collected itineraries between Huê and outlying provinces in *quyển* 1–4 of of *HVNTDĐC*.

55 Nearly all of this export trade lay in the hands of Chinese junks (*yangchuan*) based in Hội An. A small portion of the carrier trade involved shipping on European vessels (usually from Macau) out of the village of Đà Nẵng. Both ports sat at the estuaries of deltaic branches of the same Hội An riverine system.

56 One can still find a wide variety of vessels, albeit with aluminium, steel and plastic added to the inventory of building materials along with the likes of wood, bamboo and rattan – ever adapting to the particularities of local exigencies; Françoise Aubaile-Sallenave, *Bois et bateaux du Việt Nam* (Paris: SELAF, 1987); *Blue book of coastal vessels, South Việt Nam* (Washington and Saigon: Remote Area Conflict Information Centre, Battelle Memorial Institute, Columbus Laboratories, 1967); and J. B. Piétri, *Voiliers d'Indochine* (Saigon: SILI, 1949).

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many references to this coastal traffic and technology as well. The monk Dashan describes his journey from the Nguyễn capital to Hội An in 1695 aboard a naval coaster. The missionary Vachet recounts his 1686 voyage from Ayudhya to Nha Trang aboard a 'Sinja' – rather, a *thuyền giã*, the standard *prau*-type vessel populating the Đàng Trong coast.[57] Into the nineteenth century, foreign observers regularly commented that 'small vessels are constantly sailing' the coast.[58] Vietnamese military movements followed this stream repeatedly since the tenth century.[59] Patrolling the coastal corridor between the lagoons and the islands was a primary responsibility. Even Nguyễn Hoàng's departure for the southern frontier in 1600, which led to the creation of Đang Trong, took place on a coastal vessel.[60]

State histories and statutes alike demonstrate the importance of marine surveillance. This coastal logic can be detected in geographies, nautical guides and travelogues of Western, Chinese and Vietnamese provenance.[61] Lê Quý Đôn's survey of Đàng Trong's archives includes many references to the kingdom's coasting traffic, and even a bit beyond: for example, a sailing itinerary from So'n Nam (in today's northern Nam Định Province) southward; descriptions of river, coastal and sea craft, along with royal galleys; and lists of coastal post relays, estuaries, bays, lagoons and coves. All of these are

57 Dashan, *Haiwai jishi*, pp. 101–3 ; Léopold Cadière, 'Un voyage en «Sinja» sur les côtes de la Cochinchine au XVII[e] siècle', *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hué*, 8, 1 (1921): 15–29. De Rhodes travelled often on coastal boats; Thomas Bowyear was issued two *sinja* by the Nguyễn court when he traded there in 1695, as was Pierre Poivre in 1747 (see the discussion on towing below).

58 Charles Gutzlaff, 'Geography of the Cochin-Chinese empire', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, 19 (1849): 94. Two European visitors to Thuận-Quảng during the 1790s detailed this coasting traffic, which flourished even in the midst of the Tây So'n cataclysm; John Barrow, *A voyage to Cochinchina* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975 reprint), p. 319; and Pierre J. L. de la Bissachère, *État actuel du Tunkin, de la Cochinchine, et des royaumes de Cambodge, Laos et Lac-Tho* (Paris: Galignani 1812), pp. 159–64. Western descriptions of coasting traffic and trade are much more thorough in nineteenth-century works.

59 The references to naval organization and actions in Vietnamese historiography are so numerous they deserve their own study. This naval component to Vietnamese military history dates at least to the days of Chinese rule, where the dynamics of the Vietnamese-Cham conflict developed. Even then, battles involved naval forces competing along the coastal stream, closely complementing land forces. On the use of naval forces in the fifteenth-century conquest of Champa, see John K. Whitmore, 'Two great campaigns of the Hong-duc era (1470–97) in Dai Viet', *South-East Asian Research*, 12, 1 (2004): 124–30. See also examples from the Trịnh-Nguyễn era below. Even in the twentieth century, coasters played a vital role in military campaigns, as they did during the Vietnamese revolution; on the Việt Minh use of coasters, see Christopher Goscha's fascinating study, 'The maritime nature of the wars for Việt Nam', paper presented at the 4th Triennial Vietnam Symposium, Vietnam Centre, Texas Tech University, 11–13 April 2002, available online at http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/vietnamcentre/events/2002_Symposium/2002Papers_files/goscha.htm accessed April 18, 2004). The strength of this phenomenon is well illustrated in the *Blue book of coastal vessels*.

60 Examples of naval activity in the Trịnh-Nguyễn era abound. For example, see Nguyễn Hoàng's campaigns against the Mạc during the 1550s, his final voyage South and his descendants' battles with the Trịnh and the Dutch (in 1644), not to mention the campaigns of the Tay So'n war, including the Battle of Cẩm Sa between Tây Sơn and Trịnh forces in May–June 1775; *Đại Nam thực lục tiền biên* (henceforth *ĐNTLTB*) (Hà Nội: Viện Sử học, 1962), pp. 33–41, 73, 83, 252–3.

61 The sixteenth-century *Ô Châu cận lục* (*c.* 1550s), nineteenth-century *Khâm định hội điển sư lệ*, and early twentieth-century *Đại Nam nhất thông chí* all plot central ports and markets near river mouths. For state-produced texts the significance of the coast is most evident in nineteenth-century works like the one just mentioned, where statutes relating to boat traffic far outnumber those for land and naval forces draw as much attention as land forces; see *Khâm định hội điển sư lệ* [Collected statutes of Royal Đại Nam] (Huế: Thuận Hóa, 1993): pp. 48, 50–1, 172–3, 212–15, 217–20, 252, 254, 256.

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contained within a chapter of his six-volume survey devoted solely to geography, whose structural elements comprise headwaters, river routes, canals, landings, ferries, estuaries, islands, lagoons and the roads that complemented them.[62] Numerous other extant Vietnamese materials – works of cartography, court gazetteers, administrative statutes, imperial edicts, geographical narratives – document the coastal axis that united estuarine-centred provincial units between the Red and Mekong Deltas. The state depended upon coastal transport to maintain its populations in the north of the realm, which by the early 1700s were sustained by the redistribution of rice from China, Siam and the new Vietnamese 'South', Saigon.

This coastal zone is important for four reasons. First, land and sea commerce had to move through it in order to gain access to one another. This placed littoral communities in an intermediary position between maritime and terrestrial societies, an important fact whose consequences will be discussed at length below. Second, Đàng Trong's entire coastal stream south of Culao Cham merged with the primary oceanic passageway connecting China and the Indian Ocean to form a single stream, before navigational technologies allowed ships to cross through the dangerous middle sea.[63] Paralleling the Đàng Trong coast, the Paracel (Hoàng Sa) and Spratley (Trường Sa) Islands constitute two of three clusters of islands, sands and shoals that spread across the South China Sea's diameter and posed grave danger to anyone who dared to pass through them.[64] Nearly all these islands were desolate. Shoals too numerous to count lay scattered about, most of them submerged like mines across the middle of the sea. Unfortunate was the ship that drifted into this 'unexpected strings of . . . shoals . . . covered with sand', which are 'coarse and hard like iron. For a ship, one gore will go and tear it to shreds.'[65]

Powerful eastward-flowing currents meant that danger grew fatal whenever the tradewinds died. In order to avoid cataclysm, large-capacity ships sailing between China and the Indian Ocean hugged the Đàng Trong coast between the islands of Culao Cham and Côn Đảo (Pulo Condor). The sea shoals effectively hemmed ships into a single route along that coast. Thus, the expansive blue on conventional maps belies the fact that, in the days of sail, this stretch of littoral functioned more like a strait than a sea. The marine savvy of this region had exploited this bottleneck for bounty from trade, raid or both. Consequently, the Cochinchinese coastal stream offered potentially great power to the ruler who could effectively control local marauders and provide safe haven to the mariners who were compelled to sail it (hence the reason for the name 'Hội An', 'safe

62 In addition to previous citations, see the coastal itinerary given by Merchant Chen in *PBTL*, vol. II, pp. 72–3 and also vol. I, pp. 180–1.

63 Chinese nautical guides for this period document the island nexus of the Chinese *Xiyang* route that traced the South China Sea's western rim, which followed the Đàng Trong coast from Culao Cham south to Pulo Côn Đản. This confirms the merger of Đàng Trong's coasting route with the primary oceanic hub linking China with the Indian Ocean. See, for example, Xiang Da, *Liang zhong haidao zhenjing* [Two navigational compasses] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1961), pp. 13–99, 101–95.

64 The third is the Qizhou (Viet. Thất Châu). An English-language introduction to the islands and their names in ancient historiography, which is useful despite the obvious patriotic distortions, is Lưu Văn Lợi, *The Sino-Vietnamese difference on the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa Archipelagos* (Hà Nội: Thế giới, 1996), pp. 9–17, 31–47. Contemporary and historical maps of the clusters are available online at the South China Sea Virtual Library, http://community.middlebury.edu/~scs/maps_images.html.

65 Dashan, *Haiwai jishi*, p. 86; see also *HĐBĐ*, p. 95a.

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haven').[66] This offers another factor to add to the political logic of Nguyễn military and political expansion during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A third reason was that the coastal stream was also part of a continuum of coasting vessels that stretched far beyond Thuận-Quảng. Scholars have ignored this interstate coastal commerce in favour of big ships, but Thai, Chinese and Vietnamese vessels plied the coast at least as far as ports in southern China and Siam, adding a new factor to our understanding of foreign exchange in Thuận-Quảng's economy. It not only augmented export and import beyond the overseas trade, but, more importantly, sustained commerce and communication between rival Nguyễn and Trịnh domains. The people of Thuận-Quảng, situated at the chokepoint of a hemispheric sea interchange, could not help but be connected to larger streams of commerce, not to mention each other.

Finally, all the above-mentioned points only compound the importance of the coastal stream's function as a kind of great, unifying river, in the way that urban, administrative, military and commercial centres all converged at the same estuarine nexus of riparian, coastal and oceanic streams. Just as the Irrawaddy and Chao Phraya rivers are said to have provided a central artery for unifying societies and creating centralizing states, this coastal stream provided an aquatic means for integrating allegedly fissiparous populations.

Two elements further enhance the coastal stream, and again amend the Bronsonite scheme. One element is lagoons (*đầm*). Long coastal sand bars once protected equally long lagoons and lakes, many of them navigable yet protected from the sea. Some made ideal anchorages. The best documented of these lagoons is the Cổ Cò, a conduit of water running between Hội An's Cửa Đại Chiêm estuary and Đà Nẵng's Cửa Hàn.[67] Another, shallower, lagoon linked Hội An by small boat with Tam Kỳ to the South. These complemented the mesh of deltaic branches and canals that serviced much of Hội An's alluvial plain. Lagoons provided passage and anchorage for deep-sea and coastal ships, while offering greater integration between inland and coastal/oceanic streams of traffic.

Offshore islands also change our Bronsonite scheme for Thuận-Quảng, for they play an important role in the integration of overseas and coastal streams of traffic. Thousands of small islands settle around the South China Sea's rim, broadcast amidst the great islands of the Indonesian Archipelago and off the Asian mainland's shore. (China's Guangdong province alone counts over 700 of them.) These offshore islands provided convenient navigational markers, and those like Culao Cham, which had fresh-water sources, had been used for refitting and re-supplying ships for at least a millennium

66 Control of the coastal corridor also effectively blocked the naval power of Đàng Ngoài (Tonkin) and commercial access to the Tonkin Gulf, protecting Nguyễn autonomy. 'It is true that the Tonquinois, that have galleys and other ships in the sea almost without numbers, could undertake a descent into the remoter provinces [that is, Cochinchina]. But there are. . .obstacles to overcome: the first is the Paracels, which are a bank of shoals which extend twenty-four leagues from their coast and which are separated by a space that isn't considerable, the kind that the European ships never pass' (Cadière, 'Mémoire de Bénigne Vachet', p. 15). Control of the coastal corridor between Culao Cham and Côn Đảo and the elimination of Cham piracy probably added another facet to Nguyễn military expansion southward.

67 Although the Cổ Cò was silted in the nineteenth century, signs of its use for inland transit and anchorage have been exhumed from the sands. Some eighteenth-century European maps illustrate this lagoon well; see the reprints in Alastair Lamb, *The Mandarin Road to old Hué: Narratives of Anglo-Vietnamese diplomacy from the 17th century to the eve of the French conquest* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), pp. 104, 170–1.

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before Vietnamese rule arrived. They allowed ships to harbour, refit, and even do a little trade without anchoring ashore. Unlike China, however, their numbers were small enough that they could be more easily controlled, denying safety and succour to pirates. Island inhabitants and their coastal neighbours profited from servicing seafarers and securing the island for their Vietnamese overlord. Thus the Nguyễn benefited from the strategic value of the islands.[68]

Hydrography presented environmental possibilities that encouraged first exchange across ecological zones (upriver-downriver) and later commercial circulation (legal or otherwise) through Hội An and its secondary ports along Thuận-Quảng's coastal corridor. This is not to say that land transportation was unimportant or irrelevant, however. Geographical data that document the importance of foot travel as well as transportation by horse and elephant suggest that overland and aquatic networks complemented one another, and at their intersections lay markets. In this heavily watered region, bridges were few; elephants, when available, could ford most inland waters. Ferries were ubiquitous (and probably cheaper for most), and no long-distance overland trek could go far without utilizing one.[69] Just as aquatic transport predominated as one went downstream, land transport predominated as one ascended the highlands. At either end, foreign traders gathered and local inhabitants interacted with them. Land and water transport worked together in the same way that upriver and downriver or forest, rice plain and littoral all complemented each other. Yet, ultimately, the monsoonal clock set the rhythms of commerce. This oriented Đàng Trong society – directly or indirectly, wholly or partially – to the sea.

Our revised Bronsonite scheme for Thuận-Quảng is now complete. The river unified its hinterlands around a downriver primary port, set on the largest deltaic flow. Each port was accompanied by a fort (*trấn*). Usually, secondary ports and forts were established at smaller estuaries that handled smaller coastal craft. Each watershed doubled as a province of the Nguyễn state. Like their Cham predecessors, Nguyễn rulers situated their regional administrative centres slightly upriver, at the foothills where tributaries in these short, steep and swift river systems merged before quickly fanning out across a deltaic plain. The central regional market (*chợ*) was also located here; sometimes, as in Hội An's case, it sat opposite the provincial garrison command (*dinh*). Headwater stations (*nguồn*) protected markets where licensed downriver traders met with upriver non-Vietnamese peoples. Inland passageways led West to the Mekong societies beyond, and North to Đàng Ngoài (Tonkin) and China. Commercial and naval circulation following the coast's arterial flow integrated parallel regions through estuarine ports. Extensive lagoons further enhanced inland–coastal integration by providing protected passage parallel to the coast as well as numerous anchorages. Overseas traffic merged

68 The significance of these islands is elaborated on in Wheeler, 'Cross-cultural trade', pp. 52–3, 117–18. On navigational charts they look more like connect-the-dots than landforms, which only emphasizes their role in sea travel. I am indebted to the generosity of Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ of Việt Nam National University's Faculty of History, for enlightening me on this point. On the islands off the Guangdong coast see Dian Murray, *Pirates of the South China coast, 1790–1810* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 9.

69 As evidenced in Lê Quý Đôn's itinerary of his overland journey throughout the territory surrounding the Nguyễn capital of Phú Xuân (*PBTL*, vol. I, pp. 171–8). The importance of ferries as a tax source is just one more bit of evidence of their place in Đàng Trong's regional economies; see *PBTL*, vol. I, pp. 161–2, 174–5, 177–8, 206, 240, 372; and vol. II, pp. 29–33.

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with coastal due to the hazards of the middle sea. Through estuaries, lagoons and offshore islands, coastal/overseas streams of commerce connected Thuận-Quảng's riparian regions to ports and markets abroad.

Interestingly, these geographical features are not confined to Southeast Asia. As the Chinese sojourners and settlers who dominated Hội An – especially the Hokkien (Fujianese) – reached their new, strange land, Thuận-Quảng must also have looked quite familiar. The influence of Fujian's mountains and sea on its development has long elicited the attentions of Chinese economic historians and anthropologists. Descriptions of Central Việt Nam's geography in its fundamental aspects differ little from that of most maritime regions of southern China – in particular Fujian.[70] In fact, with the exceptions of the Pearl, Red, Mekong and Chao Phraya Rivers, the mainland Asian coastline from the Yangzi to the Melaka Straits conforms to Bronson's archipelagic model. Of course, in such a wide comparative context, the similarities soon break down under the weight of particulars like climate, habitat and so on. Thuận-Quảng's shores are much sandier, Fujian's coasts more rugged, and the Archipelago composed of so many more islands, but the fundamental geographical similarities are real. The permeable sea mitigated isolation in this world of crested valleys.

From this hydrographic perspective, Hội An typified neither East nor Southeast Asian worlds, but rather a South China Sea one. In this scheme, great rivers are the exception, rather than the norm. Or rather, the littoral often usurped the power of great rivers in creating core commercial and political zones. Where scholars of mainland Southeast Asia might see dissolution in the region's lack of a unifying river like the Mekong or Irrawaddy, or mutual isolation in its transversal mountains, scholars of insular Southeast Asia perceive a unity made possible by coastal vessels. This quality intensifies with the convergence of coastal and oceanic traffic along the Thuận-Quảng coast. The littoral, then, served a central role as a unifying thoroughfare in the economic lives of Đàng Trong subjects, performing a function essentially the same as the great rivers of the mainland. This feature does not rule out the divisions created by mountains, but rather counterpoises them. This littoral dynamic, where mountain and sea complement one another through a coastal artery, defines the basic structure within which economies, polities and societies developed in a South China Sea world, and it is within this littoral context that we must make sense of Thuận-Quảng, Đàng Trong and the classic Centre.

### Placing littoral society

Twentieth-century French scholars who studied Việt Nam, despite their agrarian bias, did notice the aquatic culture around them and its littoral environment. 'The shores

70 Floy Hurlbut, *The Fukienese: A study in human geography* (Muncie, IN: The author, 1939); Hugh Clark; *Community, trade and networks: Southern Fujian province from the third to the thirteenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 3–10; Hans Bielenstein, 'The Chinese colonization of Fukien until the end of the Tang', in *Studia Serica Bernhard Karlgren dedicata*, ed. Søren Egorod and Else Glahn (Copenhagen: E. Munksgaard, 1959), pp. 98–122. As with Champa and Central Vietnam, historians believed that geography 'played a negative role' in Fujian's history as well; Evelyn Rawski, *Agricultural change and the peasant economy of South China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 60. In contrast to these two regions, however, Chinese scholars considered Fujian's rice-poor, mountainous, maritime geography as the impetus – rather than the inhibitor – promoting the province's mercantile, mariner culture.

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lend themselves to sea life', Gourou wrote. Wherever the seas cut recesses into the land, 'innumerable shelters amid landscapes' offered places where 'coast fishing boats of considerable tonnage could find countless shelters; but they could also utilize the safe harbors which comprise the river mouths in the alluvial zones . . . and the lagoons, access to which is usually provided by channels deep enough for fishing boats'.[71] However, fisherfolk were seen as a world apart, if they were regarded at all. 'They have become two distinct branches of the same race, that of riziculture-commerce and that of fisherfolk', wrote J. Y. Claeys in one of the few studies ever made of Vietnamese relationships to the sea, drawing on the work of previous French scholars.[72] In one rhetorical swoop, fisherfolk were segregated from commerce and the interior; the peasant model's monopoly was again preserved.

Yet the literature on Thuận-Quảng indicates that the people of the littoral were exogenously engaged with their inland neighbours, with their Nguyễn overlords and with sea commerce itself. Littoral settlements provided economic and political benefits derived from their habitat, including proximity to major land and sea interchanges, access to littoral resources and the technological knowledge for exploiting them. In return, they enjoyed access to upriver and overseas goods and filled key niches in servicing the commerce and state, which enabled their aquacultural livelihood. They preyed on commerce, too, and subverted state norms, just as readily as they served them. This interdependence among Thuận-Quảng's littoral society, upriver neighbours, landed political elite and long-distance traders was nothing new in the seventeenth century; such integration into complex regional and foreign trade networks had existed before. Archaeological evidence suggests littoral inhabitants developed exchange relationships with upriver neighbors by the sixth century BCE, and linguistic evidence suggests even earlier interactions. Indeed, the habit of exchange in Thuận-Quảng's littoral society long predated its participation in overseas trade, typical of littoral societies worldwide.[73]

### *Upstream and downstream in the making of littoral society*

The productive capacities of Thuận-Quảng's littoral alone drew locals and sea traders into long-term commercial exchange relationships. Ethnographic sources provide sufficient data to confirm a range of commercially-oriented activities, the techniques and

71 Gourou, *Land utilization*, pp. 429–30. Maurice Durand and Pierre Huard's popular *Connaissance du Viêt-Nam* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1954) contains numerous images of fisherfolk.

72 J. Y. Claeys, 'L'Annamite et la mer', *Bulletin de l'Institut Indochinois pour l'Étude de l'Homme* (1942): 19. Very little has been done in any language; one publication that addresses coastal life in antiquity is *Biển với người Việt cổ* [The sea and ancient Vietnamese], ed. Phạm Đức Dương *et al.* (Hà Nội: Văn hóa Thông tin, 1996).

73 On the archaeological and linguistic evidence see Wheeler, 'Cross-cultural trade', pp. 96–7. Other students of 'forager-traders' have found, too, that commercial foraging began in upstream–downstream trade in comestibles and other goods, which then integrated with larger networks of trade. This in turn inspired shifts in local economies, which affected the political economy of regions like Thuận-Quảng. See, for example, Laura Lee Junker, 'Long-term change and short-term shifting in the economy of Philippine forager-traders', in *Beyond foraging and collecting: Evolutionary change in hunter-gatherer settlement systems*, ed. Ben Fitzhugh and Junko Habu (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2002), pp. 339–86; and *Forager-traders in South and Southeast Asia: Long-term histories*, ed. Kathleen Morrison and Laura Lee Junker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Thuận-Quảng seems to fit this model well.

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technologies of their production and the nexus of their exchange. Fishing provides an obvious example. During the fishing season, coastal fishers caught a variety of fish, shellfish seaweeds and other foods to sell in local markets. Most of it would be converted into *nước mắm*, the staple fish sauce; the rest was dried to be marketed locally, overland and overseas. Two European observations give us some sense of the scale of this production. Christoforo Borri, a Jesuit missionary who lived in Đàng Trong during the 1610s, remarked that 'so many boats go out a fishing . . . it is remarkable to see the long rows of people carrying fish from the shore to the mountains; which is duly done, every day, for four hours before sun-rising'.[74] Two centuries later, *en route* between Hội An and Huế, a French ship captain observed:

> At night we lodged at the foot of the great pass . . . . All along the foot of the hills is a vast lagoon, separated from the sea by a natural bank of sand, in breadth about 100 fathoms, and in length sixteen miles. . . . The lagoon or salt lake abounds in fish, which produces great profits to the numerous villages on its banks.[75]

These and many other similar observations confirm Gourou's observation of weirs and boats harvesting coastal, estuarine and lagoon waters.[76] On land, salt-making provided a vital commodity to the entire region, for its preservative value among other uses.[77] Major Vietnamese sources for the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries confirm these aquacultural enterprises for Thuận-Quảng.[78] Judging from tax records for 1768–73, the volume of transactions these products inspired comprised a steady and large portion of the Đàng Trong economy: according to these records, the Nguyễn court took 14 per cent of its total tax revenues from fishing, suggesting that the state depended in no small way on aquaculture. This is a much smaller share than revenues from forest products (47 per cent) – the kingdom's most lucrative source of revenue – but much larger than that from overseas or domestic shipping (4.2 and 4.3 per cent respectively). If we add salt, lagoon and other littoral-related taxes to this inventory, the share would be even larger.[79] This is surprising, given the conventional assertion that customs revenues from overseas entrepôt or transshipment trade formed the economic base of the Nguyễn kingdom.

74 Borri, 'Account of Cochin-China', p. 704a.

75 L. Rey, *Voyage from France to Cochin-China: In the ship* Henry (London: Sir Richard Phillips and Co., 1821), p. 121.

76 Examples include Thomas Bowyear, 'Voyage to Cochinchina [c. 1695]', in *Oriental Repertory*, 1 (1808): 53. One late-eighteenth-century account remarked on the abundant fish, which provide much of the diet, and the large industry in fishing, using boats, stake-nets, weirs, etc.; John Crawfurd, *Journal of an embassy to the courts of Siam and Cochin China* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967 reprint), pp. 480, 513. This is confirmed for the nineteenth century in the same source, pp. 480, 490, 513, 520; George Finlayson, *The mission to Siam and Hue, the capital of Cochin-China, in the years 1821–2* (London: J. Murray, 1826), pp. 327–8; and John White, *A voyage to Cochin-China* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1972 reprint), pp. 54–9.

77 References to the salt trade are numerous, but those mentioning production are very few. Lê Quý Đôn notes that 'the salt produced in Di Luân Estuary is very flavourful' (*PBTL*, vol. I, p. 149).

78 On fishing in Thuận Hóa see ibid., vol. I, pp. 154, 158, 165, 197–98, 200, 210–13. On the trade, see vol. I, pp. 146, 153, 155–6, 160, 167–8, 174–6, 181–92, 193, 196–7, 206, 208. Markets are also identified through inventory of goods in *quyển* 6 (vol. II, pp. 367–449).

79 These figures come from Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, p. 122, drawn from tax data recorded in *PBTL*, vol. I, p. 240. See evidence of market activities in estuaries through lagoon and market taxes in *PBTL*, vol. II, pp. 24–30.

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Vietnamese records also provide details about where sea products were marketed. They show us that these commodities moved both inland and overseas. Upriver peddlers would descend to estuary markets to buy dried fish, seaweed, shells, fish sauce and salt, which they took upriver to sell at plain and highland markets, moving by road and river. These littoral goods penetrated deep into the interior. Sea products were also typical of Thuận-Quảng's downriver ports.[80] At Hội An market, where 'people buy and sell vegetables, fish, fruits, and shell-fish all day', inventories list these everyday items alongside an array of marketable marine resources: tortoise shell, shark's fin, abalone, pearl, snails, shrimp and other shellfish, alligator, sea slugs, eels, molluscs, red crab, seaweeds and a host of other flora and fauna from the sea, in addition to dried seafood and high-grade fish sauce. All of these were standard commodities in the Chinese markets where most of these goods went. Such inventories are common to texts written during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries.[81] Littoral production, then, reached two very different kinds of markets; the first supplied necessities of habitat to their lowland and forest neighbours, while the second supplied delicacies to Chinese and other foreign markets. The first market was domestically generated, less elastic and subtended beneath Hội An's international trade, while the second, export-oriented market was mostly contingent upon outside exigencies. In either case, the sea catch was important to littoral societies for its market value, which enriched them by providing a commercial component to their economic strategies.

In contrast to its overseas exchanges, the littoral's inland exchanges provided necessities, not supplements. The forest exotica and medicinals that drove overseas commerce in Hội An only augmented Thuận-Quang's quotidian littoral–highland exchanges; they did not create them. Instead, littoral peoples looked to the highlands for woods, resins and other boat-making materials 'as fundamental as fish' to their aquacultural existence.[82] After all, the net productivity of a littoral settlement depended directly upon the quality of boat construction. Factors like speed, range and mobility, which determined logistical strategies, depended as much on the quality of materials as they did on technological know-how. Because of this reality, boat construction could not proceed without a reliable supply of bamboo, wood, cordage and resins, each of which had a specialised application. The need for reliable supply necessitated reliable relationships with upriver forest societies.[83] Bamboo was used to construct hulls for the local *ghe bầu*, while wooden hull shipbuilders preferred *kiền kiền*, an extremely hard, parasite-resistant wood.[84]

80 Ibid., vol. I, pp. 156, 200; vol. II, pp. 13–18. For example, shells played an important role in the monetary history of inland regions like Yunnan. Zhang Xie names Đàng Trong (which he calls 'Jiaozhi') as a source; Zhang Zie, *Dongxi yangkao* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1981), p. 13. For more on this, see Laichen Sun, 'Ming–Southeast Asian overland interactions, 1368–1644 (China, India, Myanmar)', (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2000). John Barrow, for example, noted the uses of seaweed in lowland diets (*Voyage to Cochinchina*, p. 315).

81 Dương Văn An, *Ô Châu cận lục*, tr. Bùi Lương (Sàigòn, Văn hoá Á châu, 1961), p. 26; Zhang, *Dongxi yangkao*, pp. 12–19; Borri, 'Account of Cochin-China', pp. 703–4; *PBTL*, vol. I, pp. 202–4; vol. II, pp. 73–5. Barrow recorded the markets and prices for sea slugs (*Voyage to Cochinchina*, pp. 354–5). The quotation about the market is from Dashan, *Haiwai jishi*, p. 107.

82 Kenneth M. Ames, 'Going by boat: The forager-collector continuum at sea', in Fitzhugh and Habu, eds., *Beyond foraging and collecting*, p. 21.

83 Ibid., pp. 22, 31–32, 39, 45; Junker, 'Long-term change', pp. 339–40.

84 Aubaile-Sallenave, *Bois et bâteaux*, pp. 13, 106–7.

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Regardless of hull type, highland wood varieties were specialised to meet diverse specifications of boat components, and every boat needed seals and resins. All these products came from the highlands to be traded in all the downriver ports of the Thuận-Quảng littoral.[85] The other example is, of course, lowland rice. In this way, inland dependency on the littoral had its obverse, and we see a longstanding interdependency between three ecozones that necessitated exchange relationships, long predating Đàng Trong's commercial heyday.[86]

### *The interdependence of seafaring and littoral societies*

Pierre Gourou wrote that Cochinchinese tended to stay close to shore, leaving Chinese from Guangdong and Hainan to do all the deep-sea fishing.[87] While it appears true that as a general rule, littoral Cochinchinese predominantly stuck to the coast, scrutiny of the literature reveals exceptions. For example, Vietnamese have been identified among the ranks of big-ship seamen. In his memoir of travel to Thuận-Quảng in 1695, the monk Dashan recalled the ability of one Vietnamese sailor aboard his vessel one night during a fierce storm: 'the deckhand was a Việt, not fully twenty, strong, robust and lively. Atop each sail that he hung, he left a kerchief. He maneuvered through the rigging as if he were treading upon flat earth.' Jean Chesneaux claimed that 'English agents sent to Viêt Nam by the East India Company acknowledged that the Vietnamese were the best sailors in the Far East.'[88] Many Đàng Trong seafarers served as pilots. For example, Alexandre Dalrymple tells about a 'Cochin-Chinese pilot' who steered the ship *Amphirite* in 1792. Đàng Trong subjects also offered their services in places like Bangkok and Kampot, not to mention their own ports. Reports of indigent subjects cast adrift in places as far away as China and Japan can also be found in Western, Chinese and Japanese literature.[89]

Such identifications of Vietnamese sailors are rare, that is, in the literature of legitimate trade. The literature on piracy in the South China Sea suggests that Vietnamese

85 These woods are widely inventoried in *quyển* 6 of *PBTL*, while *quyển* 2 provides a geography of their production and exchange within riversheds. See also Jean Koffler, 'Description historique de la Cochinchine (1803)', *Revue Indochinoise*, 5 (1911) : 459. On the uses of *kiền kiền* wood in boatbuilding, see Aubaile-Sallenave, *Bois et bâteaux*, pp. 13, 17, 129, 149, and its botanical description on pp. 106–7. She inventories the fauna used in the construction of Thuận-Quảng boats – most of which come from interior forests (pp. 79–147, with Hội An-specific resources listed on pp. 78–83, 84, 96, 105, 136, 139) – and explains their historic exploitation (pp. 37–48). Borri, like many European observers, exclaims on the 'finest trees in the world . . . high as the clouds, so thick two men cannot fathom them' ('Account of Cochin-China', p. 705a).

86 An excellent rethinking of trade along ecological rather than civilizational lines is David Christian, 'Silk Roads or steppe roads? The Silk Roads in world history', *Journal of World History*, 11, 1 (2000): 1–26.

87 Gourou, *Land utilization*, p. 434.

88 Dashan, *Haiwai jishi*, p. 18; Jean Chesneaux, *The Vietnamese nation: Contribution to a history*, tr. Malcolm Salmon (Sydney: Current Book Distributors, 1966), p. 11. Whether all of these Vietnamese or Đàng Trong sailors originated from Thuận-Quảng cannot be proven, but I think it is safe to assume that some of them did.

89 See *PBTL*, vol. II, pp. 160–8. Đàng Trong pilots serving elsewhere are mentioned in Christopher E. Goscha, *Siam and the Southeast Asian networks of the Vietnamese revolution, 1885–1954* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), p. 14. For one account of pilots in Đàng Trong, see Le Gentil de la Barbinais, *Nouveau voyage autour du monde* (Paris: Briasson, 1728), p. 8. Dalrymple's observation is in Alexander Dalrymple, *Memoirs and journals* (London: George Bigg, 1786), vol. II, pp. 1–18.

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were prominent in deep-sea as well as coastal waters.[90] They were probably no less important to maritime smuggling. Đàng Trong subjects 'often go by boat to meet with the many Chinese ships' on the deep sea between Thuận-Quảng and China's Hainan Island.[91] Whether they did so as sailors or pirates, fishers or smugglers, the evidence of their sea adventures suggest that more should be done to trace the actual range of littoral habitats in order to determine the extent to which the deep sea was a part of them.

A more expansive range seems more likely from a technological perspective as well. John Barrow marvelled at the 'excellence in naval architecture' in all types of craft he found in and around Hội An in the 1790s, and 'in the coasting trade, the fishing craft, and those which collect the Trepan [sea slugs] and swallows' nests among the cluster of islands called the Paracels'.[92] Westerners offered similar praise during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Surveying the Thuận-Quảng coast, Barrow judged local boats as adhering to two basic traditions, 'many of them, like the Chinese Sampans . . . others, resembling the common *proas* [*prau*] of the Malays', though in both forms 'the Cochinchinese tradition of bamboo is held'.[93] The *ghe bầu*, a Vietnamese transliteration for *prau*, remains prevalent along the coast from Hội An south to Phan Thiết.[94] Instead of 'Malayic', however, these craft can be traced more exactly to prototypes of the Cham, the culture that predominated in the region before Vietnamese arrived. Coasters from as far North as the border with Tonkin operated regular trading runs down the coast to Gia Định in the Southern frontier. Estimates of annual coastal shipping run into the hundreds and even thousands of vessels.[95] This coastal stream extended North and South, to China and Siam. This demonstrates the heavy volume of coastal traffic (in addition to

90 Even in the arts of subversion, watercraft influenced Vietnamese history, whether utilized by Tây Sơn-era freebooters or Việt Minh smugglers. A handful of works that identify a Vietnamese presence in South China Sea piracy during the Tây Sơn era suggest that it played a significant role in the outcome of the war; it certainly impacted the Chinese coast. See examples of Vietnamese cases drawn from Qing Chinese interrogations in Robert J. Antony, *Like froth floating on the sea: The world of pirates and seafarers in late imperial South China* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2003), pp. 6–7, 38–43; and Thomas C. S. Chang, 'Ts'ai Ch'ien, the pirate king who dominates the seas: A study of coastal piracy in China, 1795–1810' (Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, 1983), pp. 40–41, 58–9, 99–101, 146–9, 166–7. On the Việt Minh see Goscha, 'Maritime wars'. Curiously, as Cham pirates disappear from historical literature in the sixteenth century, Vietnamese pirates emerge along the Central coast.

91 *PBTL*, vol. II, pp. 212–13.

92 Barrow, *Voyage to Cochinchina*, p. 319. For a contemporaneous observation, see De la Bissachère, *Etat actuel du Tunkin*, pp. 159–64.

93 Barrow, *Voyage to Cochinchina*, p. 321; Finlayson characterized them in exactly the same way (*Mission to Siam*, pp. 327–8). Foreigners associated Hội An seacraft with Malayic *prau*, which locals call *ghe bầu*, confirming the Cham origin of these boats; they were also known as *thuyền giã*; Nguyễn Bội Liên *et al.*, 'Ghe bầu Hội An – xứ Quảng' [*Ghe bầu* of Hội An and Quảng Territory], in *Đô thị cổ Hội An* [The ancient town of Hội An], ed. Nguyễn Đức Diệu *et al.* (Hà Nội: Khoa học Xã hội, 1991), pp. 141–4. A redacted translation can be found in *Ancient town of Hội An* (Hà Nội: Thế giới, 1993), pp. 86–9.

94 *Blue book*, pp. 12–14, and section on boat types, *passim*; Aubaile-Sallenave, *Bois et bâteaux*, pp. 6, 13–4, 40, 65, 82, 84, 90, 96, 105, 107; Nguyễn Bội Liên, 'Ghe bầu', p. 142. On the range of bamboo craft from Central Việt Nam, see Aubaile-Sallenave, pp. 6–8. Other illustrations are in Durand and Huard, *Connassance du Viet-Nam*, p. 282, and Piétri, *Voiliers*.

95 *PBTL*, vol. I, pp. 167–8. Halbout, a French missionary who lived in Đàng Trong during the late eighteenth century, claimed that thousands of ships regularly plied the seacoast, mainly to supply cities like Phú Xuân and Hội An with Mekong rice; see his letter dated July 1775 in *Nouvelles lettres édifiantes et curieuses* (Paris: A. Le Clère, 1818), vol. VI, p. 285. This can be verified by numerous accounts held in the Société des Missions Étrangères archive in Paris (Nola Cooke, personal communication).

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the already large number of oceanic vessels) and the great variety of ship types that resulted from local adaptations designed to specialise capacity, durability, range and mobility to local environmental and historical exigencies. It is reasonable, then, to claim that Thuận-Quảng's littoral society maintained the local Cham precedent in boat-building traditions, and put them to the same uses in order to maximize their habitat along the coast and across the sea.

The mobility and range of their aquatic technology enabled littoral peoples to collect a variety of potentially valuable sea life, birds and salvage that they acquired for exchange, not subsistence. The Nguyễn took full advantage of littoral abilities to assert monopoly power over the most valuable share of these commodities by establishing compacts with specific villages and granting them the exclusive rights to form 'brigades' (*đội*) that would collect riches of the sea in specified areas, in exchange for the best share of the spoils. The most lucrative of these brigades gathered its wealth from the debris of human disaster, strewn across the shoals of the Paracels and Spratleys to the east of Thuận-Quảng. The monk Dashan wrote of what he heard in 1699. If winds died, and ships foundered too long, the sea currents took them eastward into death. 'For even if [one's ship] is not damaged, a man is without water or rice and so he becomes a hungry ghost'. This, commented a Vietnamese source, leaves 'merchandise everywhere'.[96]

This littoral society had been turning seafarers' misfortune into lucre for centuries, and the Nguyễn wasted no time getting in on the enterprise as soon as they established themselves as overlords in Thuận-Quảng. Dashan writes that 'since the time of Nguyễn Hoàng, fishing communities are dispatched each season to collect gold, silver, arms and stuff on pitiable [wrecked] ships'.[97] Lê Quý Đôn explained how it worked:

> In the past, the Nguyễn family established a Hoàng Sa Brigade comprising seventy soldiers, using men taken from Yên Bĩnh Village. Every year they rotate with each other in going to sea . . . .The Hoàng Sa Brigade issues everyone a month's rations. They row five small boats out to sea for three days and three nights before reaching the [Hoàng Sa] islands. They take on shares of salvage, freely caught birds and fish to eat, and many things like swords, copper horses, silver earrings, silver bullion, silver necklaces, copper items, block tin, black lead, rifle barrels, tusk, golden honey, 'animal hair cloth', woolens and ceramics.
>
> In the third moon, when the brigade returns, they go to the garrison at [the capital] Phú Xuân to submit things already salvaged. People weigh, examine and determine the class of items, and after that [the court] invites this brigade to sell their shellfish, *hải ba* and sea slugs. At that time the brigade can receive a pass to return to their home. The scavenged items obtained out at sea are so numerous that no small amounts are noted. There are also times when they go out and then return with nothing.[98]

96 Dashan, *Haiwai jishi*, p. 86; *HĐBĐ*, p. 95a.

97 Dashan, *Haiwai jishi*, p. 86.

98 *PBTL*, vol. I, p. 210; reiterated in *ĐNTLTB*, p. 222. See also *HĐBĐ*, p. 95a. For example, Lê Quý Đôn reports: 'I scrutinized a number of letters of the brigades supervisor. . . In 1702, the Hoàng Sa Brigade collected 30 *thoi* [ingots] of silver; in 1704, 5000 *cân* [catties] of tin; in 1705, 126 *thoi* of silver. In 1709, during a five-month period, they collected many *cân* of sea slugs and tortoise shell. Also, many pieces of tin, many 'stone' bowls and two copper cannon barrels' (*PBTL*, p. 211). After winning control of the Mekong region, the Nguyễn court created the Bắc Hải Brigade, a group of '*thuyền tư* and small fishing boats' that went out to the Côn Đảo region of the sea, producing the same inventory of commodities to fill Nguyễn storehouses for later sale in Hội An (pp. 211–12).

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Thus selected villages all along Thuận-Quảng's coast, in return for tax and *corvée* exemptions, ventured eastward into Hòang Sa (the Paracels), to harvest sea life but primarily to harvest the debris of wrecked ships. This economic arrangement was so important that brigade villages preserved their charters in the village temples into the twentieth century.[99]

Another way in which the Nguyễn utilized this brigade form of village-court compact was through the gathering of sea-swallow nests, a delicacy always fetching high prices in Chinese markets. As with the Hoàng Sa and Bắc Hải brigades, the Nguyễn court granted nest-gathering rights to specific villages in return for a monopoly on their sale. For example, in the village of Thanh Châu in Thăng Hoa prefecture just south of Hội An, the brigade operated during certain months of the year, circulating throughout Đàng Trong's coastal settlements and offshore islands to gather nests themselves or collect them from local inhabitants. After they returned to Thanh Châu, they would offer the highest-quality nests to their Nguyễn sovereign in an annual tribute. The court could then make quite a profit, selling them in China and Japan, where 'a *livre*'s-worth ordinarily sells for 40 or 50 *livres*'. The Nguyễn allowed the brigade to sell the remainder on the market. Thanh Châu also enjoyed exemption from all taxes and corvée labour.[100]

In compacts with other littoral villages, the Nguyễn court officially assigned select fishing villages exclusive rights to perform towing services in specific areas; in return, 'the King [forgave] these Fishermen their Tribute for their Services in helping in the Ships'.[101] As deep-hulled foreign ships neared the Thuận-Quảng coast, these selected brigades were dispatched to meet them and steer them toward the offshore island of Culao Cham, designated for ocean ships trading in Hội An. When the ship anchored, representatives of the state were on hand to inspect the cargo; once satisfied, these inspectors sent messenger boats to Hội An Fort, while the ship awaited their return with the stamp that would permit passage to the coast.[102] Thomas Bowyear, who travelled to Đàng Trong in 1696, recalled the arrival of his ship off Culao Cham's shores:

> The 20th [of August, 1695], with our Colours out, to invite the Fishermen on board, having many in sight, but none offering to come near us, in the Afternoon I sent the Purser on shoar, to acquaint the People at the Isle, that we were bound in, and desired Boats to help us. . . . The 21st in the forenoon He and the Surang were brought off, in two Boats, with two small officers, belonging to the isle, and ten other Boats with them, all Fishermen, which they told us should help the Ship in.

In a few days, Bowyear's ship received its clearance from Nguyễn officials to enter Đà Nẵng Bay, to which the state restricted European merchants and their deep-keeled

99 John Donoghue, *Cẩm An: A fishing village in Central Việt Nam* (Washington, DC: Agency for International Development, 1961).

100 *PBTL*, vol. I, pp. 203–4, 380; vol. II, p. 65 (on tax submission). For a history of the Thanh Châu Brigade in English, see Donaghue, *Cẩm An*. See also Leonard Blussé, 'In praise of commodities: An essay on the crosscultural trade in edible bird's-nests', in *Emporia, commodities and entrepreneurs in Asian maritime trade, c. 1400–1750*, ed. Roderich Ptak and Dietmar Rothermund (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1991), pp. 317–38. The quotation on prices is from Cadière, 'Mémoire de Bénigne Vachet', p. 70 ; a *livre* is a pound sterling.

101 Bowyear 'Voyage to Cochinchina', vol. I, p. 75.

102 Dashan, *Haiwai jishi*, p. 19.

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vessels. That evening 'the ship moored before the Custom-house, being towed up the River, by Fishermen'.[103] Once arrived at the two main river outlets feeding into Hội An port, ships were towed by local fishing vessels into safe anchorages within the estuary and lagoons, ascending on the diurnal tides. A Japanese scroll produced in the 1640s illustrates this process from start to finish, as it depicts a collection of boats towing a Japanese vessel from Đà Nẵng Bay's Hàn Estuary down the Cổ Cò Lagoon (*đầm*) that paralleled the coastline and to the Hội An River, where it finally anchored.[104]

Even though littoral peoples often undermined the interests of the Nguyễn court through activities like piracy and smuggling, they were also the state's most likely police. Merchants were often given a guard who transported them by coastal sailors or long rowboats of 40 oarsmen through interior and coastal waters. 'The guard is made up of inhabitants of the villages along the seacoast. These villages are exempt from corvée, and pay no tribute to the King.'[105] Thus Đàng Trong's littoral society manned the boats that formed the Nguyễn's powerful navy, so key to the protection, operation and reach of the Nguyễn state. Galleys (*thuyền*) headquartered in each province patrolled the coast. Hội An had 35 galleys, a fleet second in size only to that of the capital in Phú Xuân (Huế). These galleys headquartered in the estuarine forts, which in turn were linked with regional networks that interlinked inland waterways and unified administrative and exchange networks around the state, in harmony with the revised Bronsonite pattern.[106] Thus littoral society contributed to deepening the reach of commerce and state by integrating the kingdom's regions into an interdependent political-economic unit.[107]

Littoral communities had other obligations to the state. With the development of the Mekong region, coastal craft were requisitioned to transport grain to Thuận-Quảng's rice-deficient populations. These coastal convoys could number in the hundreds and

103 Bowyear, 'Voyage to Cochinchina', vol. I, pp. 75 (long quotation) and 79 (mooring).

104 Dashan also describes how 'dozens of fishing vessels towed [our ship] out of the harbor' (*Haiwai jishi*, p. 111). The tides raise the level of the Đại Chiêm Estuary considerably, helping to facilitate passage; Vũ Văn Phái and Đặng Văn Bào, 'Đặc điểm địa mạo khu vực Hội An và lân cận' [Geomorphological features of Hội An and its vicinity], in *Đô thị cổ Hội An*, pp. 89–90 (English version in *Symposium on Hội An*, pp. 56–7). Sometimes, ships were anchored in the Cổ Cò; however, most appear to have anchored at Trà Nhiêu Lagoon across the river from Hội An, which could 'hold trading ships that came from across the sea from many countries' (*HĐBĐ*, p. 92b). The Japanese scroll is reproduced in Noël Péri, 'Essai sur les relations du Japon et de l'Indochine au XVI$^{e}$ et XVII$^{e}$ siècles', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, 23 (1923): 1–13.

105 Henri Cordier, 'Voyage de Pierre Poivre en Cochinchine (suite): Journal d'une voyage à la Cochinchine depuis le 29 aoust 1749, jour de notre arrivée, jusqu'au 11 fevrier 1750', *Revue de l'Extrême-Orient*, 3 (1887): 366 (quotation) and 370. Dashan provided the liveliest details; amidst a storm, he seems awestruck by the 'oars assembled like spears. . . . I recall the red ship cutting through the water, and the powerful strength of its men. Although the billows churned, they were able to quell its power and aright [the ship]' (*Haiwai jishi*, pp. 101–3). The missionary Vachet also describes a Đàng Trong galley (Cadière, 'Mémoire de Bénigne Vachet', pp. 19–20).

106 Forts (*trấn*) were a typical feature of river mouth gateways to coastal-centred sub-regions of Thuận Quảng, and to the provinces of Central Vietnam generally; this is reflected in Whitmore, 'Cartography in Việt Nam'. For the Chúa Nguyễn period see *ĐNTLTB*, pp. 156–7; a description of the forts near Hội An is on pp. 68–69, and water and land stations established are mentioned on p. 17.

107 Đặng Phương Nghi, *Les institutions publiques du Viêtnam au XVIII$^{e}$ siècle* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1969), pp. 128–30. The maritime post circuit is described in *ĐNTLTB*, p. 122, and the *bình thuyền* on pp. 34–7. For a composite of the Nguyễn navy, see Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, pp. 41–2 and Yang, *Contribution à l'histoire*, pp. 105–7.

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even thousands, and this was in addition to the private trade that thrived alongside it.[108] These rice transfers have usually been seen as the result of some deficit on the part of these northern regions of Đàng Trong and thus as a predicament of urbanization and commercialization, but they could just as easily be seen as the consequence of Nguyễn policy of exploiting comparative advantages in different regions in order to promote a diversified strategy of political development that embraced agriculture in one region in order to promote the continued development of urban commercial society in another. From this perspective, then, these coastal convoys aided the commercialization of Thuận-Quảng by facilitating its regional specialization, increasing the dependence of both rice-rich and rice-poor regions upon the state's maintenance of norms as a result – all to the benefit of Nguyễn political ambitions.

### *A stable, amphibious consolidation*

Just as Thuận-Quảng's local inhabitants were crucial to the operation of great sea ships, they were vital to the functions of the sea trade, whether through production, transport, subversion or violence. They best illustrate, in my mind, the primary position of the sea in influencing economic organization locally and the importance of seemingly disengaged local societies in the functions of global enterprises. Inhabitants of the coast depended upon the sea for their livelihood not only as fishermen, but also as sailors, salt-makers, petty merchants, boat-builders, prostitutes, innkeepers, labourers, pilots, refitters and transporters; as predators and smugglers; and even as the state's coast guard. They actively sought to expand their strategic repertoire, whether operating within the bounds of political and social conventions, venturing beyond them or shifting between both – one day adopting the role of a fisher or coastal transporter, the next day that of a smuggler or pirate. As 'the economic forces which govern their lives' moved 'amphibiously from land to sea', their occupations shifted accordingly.[109]

Exchange upstream was not a supplement; from highland and plain came many of the foundational elements of the littoral culture, starting with wood and rice. Through encounters with the people of the littoral, sea merchants learned of the riches of Thuận-Quảng's forests. Littoral peoples adapted to this new order by finding ways to service and sabotage the ships that sailed Thuận-Quảng's coastal highway. When a Vietnamese elite established dominion over them, the people of the littoral shifted their behaviour to suit the exigencies of a new political order. They utilized their littoral culture to support the state, draw protection from it and even subvert it, for their benefit. In doing so they were agents of a growing world trade but of their own political incorporation as well. Whatever these inhabitants did, however, somehow in the end they all served the aims of Nguyễn political ambitions to build an empire in the 'South', first through conquest and then through the creation of wealth. This would be done through the deepening of control over subject populations, first through economic means like compacts and taxes, and later through cultural means like the appropriation and standardization of sea goddess

108 *ĐNTLTB*, pp. 178–9. See translations and analysis of these grain transports in Li Tana tr., 'The Nguyễn Chronicle up to 1777', in *Southern Vietnam under the Nguyễn: Documents on the economic history of Cochin China (Đàng Trong), 1602–1777*, ed. Li Tana and Anthony Reid (Singapore: ISEAS, 1993), p. 128.
109 Pearson, 'Littoral society', p. 7.

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temples. Each time littoral society transacted with the state, they facilitated its increasing control over their lives and the lives of neighbouring settlers upriver and along the coastal stream.

## Conclusion

We need new, humanistically grounded alternatives for thinking about space and place in Vietnamese history. This article is an attempt to begin to do that, by locating these missing peoples of the littoral and trying to follow the circulations of their lives, in hopes that they will suggest new ways of thinking about the geography behind the history of one Vietnamese society's making. In this article, I have shown the consequences of our unreflexive geographical mentality, by introducing a people that have been 'without history' *à la* Eric Wolf. Their invisibility has directly resulted from geographical imagery that implied they did not matter or did not exist. Yet it is clear from this study that Việt Nam's long littoral mattered very much indeed and constituted its own distinct ecological zone – and with it, its own local political and economic variables that any empire-builder like the ruling Nguyễn could not ignore. The poor, hardworking, marginal Centre region described in the first part of this essay turns out to have been, at a specific place in time, a rich, hardworking, central Centre, both economically and politically (and culturally, too, though not demonstrated here). The second third and sections of the article show this by addressing a region typical of the Centre's environment such as Thuận-Quảng. In other words, Central Việt Nam didn't always fit its 'bamboo pole' stereotype. This all changes in the nineteenth century, however, and the Centre's very real demise should be one of the central questions of early modern Vietnamese history, if not for the field as a whole.

As for placing littoral society within the study of Vietnamese political economy, tendencies toward nationalist generalizations or absolutisms further washed away traces of this long-lived society by insisting upon applying the agrarian definition of Vietnamese political economy with a broad brush to all Vietnamese society. Yet states themselves are rarely so singularly formed. We now commonly accept that political economy in Vietnamese states past relied upon both indigenous and exogenous sources. Likewise, these states also depended upon a complex composite of regional or local economies that sometimes reflected their agrarian ideals (if they embraced them), but just as often did not. The riches that fuelled expansion and colonialism under the Nguyễn banner in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came more from forests and sea than from rice paddies. Political power, then, depended upon the commerce generated within regions like Thuận-Quảng, between upriver and downriver, along the coastal stream and across the sea. Ironically, however, this central region within Đàng Trong found itself in a very different and perhaps difficult situation after it was united with the agriculturally rich Red and Mekong deltas in 1802. The loss of international shipping to the Mekong Delta exacerbated Thuận-Quảng's predicament.[110] Demographic catastrophe in the late eighteenth century and environmental depletion in the nineteenth must have left it

110 Wheeler, 'Cross-cultural trade', pp. 207–11. New navigational and nautical technologies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gradually freed deep-sea ships from hugging the Central Vietnamese coast, breaking the long-time merger of coastal and oceanic routes that had enriched Cham and Vietnamese kingdoms for centuries.

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further weakened.[111] As a result, the prominence of Thuận-Quảng's economy (or even the Centre's) within the larger Vietnamese political economy declined dramatically. Việt Nam's historical political economy should, then, be regarded as a complex, dynamic equation.

Finally, because of our disregard for the subaltern elements of port societies, expressed through characterizations of 'classic' Southeast Asian ports as nothing more than the by-product of merchants and monarchs, we completely miss the genesis and endurance of port economies due to the exchange relationships developed from local groups – in this case, exchange relationships forged between forest highland, rice plain and littoral – which had their nexus through littoral inhabitants. We have ignored the port's essential labour, because our epistemological handbook insists upon big merchants on big ships, travelling great distances. Analysis of sources suggests an important circulation of goods through the coastal carriers, which no doubt had a greater impact on the lives of interior inhabitants than big ships. It was, after all, these coastal carriers that not only collected exports but also redistributed imported wares from abroad, and these same sources show that many of those wares consisted not only of luxuries beyond most inhabitants' means, but a great variety of everyday wares as well. In Thuận-Quảng's case, coastal and sea trade formed a vital component of their littoral society's array of seasonal strategies for ensuring a sustainable habitat.

These people were ignored because, just as we ignore the social production of commerce, we ignore the social production of the state as well. The Vietnamese lords of Cochinchina depended upon littoral inhabitants to ensure production, exchange and incorporation on multiple levels. Without these littoral inhabitants, then, the complex process that eventually produced what we now recognize as 'Vietnamese' manifested itself. Ironically, without this littoral nexus, agrarian Việt Nam could never have been.

111 The Tây Sơn cataclysm decimated the population in regions like Thuận-Quảng. Missionaries claimed that as much as half the population of Đàng Trong perished (Wheeler, 'Cross-cultural trade', pp. 190–6). Thanks to Nola Cooke for pointing out the relevance of this disaster to long-term regional decline. Environmental decline has yet to be documented, but most of the highland and littoral goods that once enriched regions like Thuận-Quảng are extinct or nearly so.

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