

# No Man's Borderland: Revisiting Ha Tien on the Eighteenth-Century Water Frontier

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## Abstract

This article is a re-examination of the history of the eighteenth-century state of Ha Tien on what is now the southern coast of Vietnam. It argues that past studies of Ha Tien have attempted to fit it into a narrative of state consolidation in Southeast Asia that characterises it as a borderland destined to be absorbed into the nineteenth-century Nguyen dynastic state. The present article will attempt to show that Ha Tien actually expanded its territory and developed its civil and military capabilities in parallel with its larger neighbours, making it a power centre in its own right by the middle of the century. This process made it fundamentally different from other settlements founded by Chinese immigrants in what is now southern Vietnam at roughly the same time. By the 1760s, it had expanded to the point where it was both a serious diplomatic and military player in the region that had the resources to defend its own independence and to compete with its larger neighbours.

The destruction of the Ha Tien's state in the 1770s occurred shortly after the collapse of dynasties in both Siam and the Nguyen domain in central Vietnam, but its fall was not directly caused by the resulting turmoil or by the establishment of new and more powerful states in either Siam or Vietnam. Instead, the reasons for Ha Tien's demise can much more readily be found in the decisions made by its ruler Mo Tianci, who does not seem to have had a knack for picking the right enemies.

Keywords: Ha Tien, Mo Tianci, Water Frontier, Nguyen state, borderland

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## Introduction

On November 1, 1780, Mo Tianci 鄭天賜 (Viet. Mac Thien Tu, b. 1717) died by his own hand in the city of Thonburi in Siam.<sup>1</sup> At the time of his death, Mo was powerless, landless, and at the mercy of Siam's ruthless king. Only a few years earlier though, Mo had been one of the most respected and accomplished statesmen in the region. He had been the ruler of the prosperous city of Ha Tien (Ch. Hexian 河仙) that his father had founded eighty years before on the marshy coast of the Gulf of Siam, west of the Ca Mau peninsula. For much of the eighteenth century Mo and his family had enjoyed wealth and influence brought by their city's integration into the region's maritime trade networks, but sadly for Mo that had all ended a few years before. While he languished in Siamese captivity, his city was under the control of the newly founded Vietnamese Tay Son (Ch. Xi Shan 西山) dynasty. Tay Son rule only lasted about two decades, but its successor, the Nguyen dynasty, would claim Ha Tien and so would all the Vietnamese states that followed it.<sup>2</sup>

Ha Tien's story has proven to be particularly difficult for modern historians to

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1 For Mo and his family, I have opted to use the Chinese *pinyin* transliteration of their names. In English language scholarship, the Vietnamese transliterations are more commonly used ("Mac Thien Tu" for "Mo Tianci" and "Mac Cui" for "Mo Jiu"), but because in their lifetimes, neither Mo Tianci nor his father Mo Jiu was ever the subject of any Vietnamese state, this seems anachronistic to me. For the city they founded, I have opted to use the Vietnamese transliteration "Ha Tien," because it still exists in modern Vietnam and the modern city is known in English by this version of the name. I have chosen to use Chinese or Vietnamese transliterations for the names of other individuals based on their political allegiances. Therefore I use *pinyin* for the names of independent former Ming loyalist pirates of the late seventeenth century, and the Vietnamese transliterations for the names of the Nguyen lords and the scholars who wrote about Ha Tien in the nineteenth century.

2 See Tong Phuc Ngoan 宋福玩 and Duong Van Chau 楊文珠, *Xiem La Quoc Lo Trinh Tap Luc* 暹羅國路程集錄, Chen Jinghe 陳荊和 ed. (Jiulong 九龍: Xianggang Zhongwen Daxue Xin Ya Shu Yuan Yanjiu Suo Dongnan Ya Yanjiu Shi 香港中文大學新亞書院研究所東南亞研究室, 1966), p. 2, for a description of the Nguyen dynasty's assertion of its sovereignty over Ha Tien to the Siamese court in 1810.

pin down. Though the city of Ha Tien became a part of modern Vietnam, the Mo family who founded it and ruled it for most of the eighteenth century were originally from the Leizhou Peninsula in southern China. Unlike many other Chinese “colonies” that flourished in Southeast Asia during the early modern period, Ha Tien and the Mos remained outside of the political control of any traditional state in the region until the 1770s. The city’s story therefore does not fit comfortably into either a Vietnamese state building history or a Chinese diasporic history. Numerous historians have tackled this problem of Ha Tien’s eighteenth-century place in the region, and have usually chosen to emphasise its connections to Vietnam or China, or even Cambodia on whose traditional territory it was founded.<sup>3</sup> But despite these efforts, no dominant consensus has emerged on how to place it within the larger narratives of Southeast Asian or East Asian history, and it usually remains in a historical grey-zone between a Vietnamese or Cambodian borderland and Chinese diasporic centre.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most sophisticated attempts to resolve this problem is contained in a concise and highly detailed article by Yumio Sakurai entitled “Eighteenth-Century Chinese Pioneers on the Water Frontier of Indochina.” In it, Sakurai attempts to redefine the history of the Mo family and Ha Tien by locating them within a historical geographic space and in time as part of two cycles of social and political development

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3 For a relatively Chinese-oriented approaches to Ha Tien’s history see Li Qingxin 李慶新, “‘Haishang Ming Chao’: Mo Jiu Hexian Zhengquan de Zhonghua Tese “海上明朝”: 鄭氏河仙政權的中華特色,” *Xueshu Yuekan* 學術月刊 40:10 (2008), pp. 133-138; Li Qingxin 李慶新, “Mo Jiu yu Hexian Zhengquan (Gangkou Guo) 鄭玖與河仙政權 (港口國),” *Nanfang Huayi Yanjiu Zazhi* 南方華裔研究雜誌 4 (2010), pp.176-188; and Chen, Chingho A., “Mac Thien Tu and Phrayataksin: A Survey on their Political Stand. Conflicts and Background,” in Anthony Reid (ed.), *The Chinese Diaspora in the Pacific*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008). For an article that looks at Ha Tien as part of Vietnamese history, see Fujiwara Riichiro, “Vietnamese Dynasties’ Policies Toward Chinese Immigrants,” *Acta Asiatica* 18 (1970), pp. 44-63. For Ha Tien as part of the story of Chinese immigrants in Cambodia, see W. E. Wilmott, “History and Sociology of the Chinese in Cambodia Prior to the French Protectorate,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 7:1 (1966), pp. 15-38.

4 See Liam C. Kelley, “Thoughts on a Chinese Diaspora: The Case of the Mạc of Hà Tiên,” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14:1 (2000), pp. 71-98, for a critique of the common placement of Ha Tien in Chinese diasporic history.

in Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup> Geographically, she follows Li Tana by describing Ha Tien as falling within Southeast Asia's "Water Frontier," a term I will also use in this article.<sup>6</sup> Basically, from the late seventeenth century until the late eighteenth, the Water Frontier was a relatively under-developed and sparsely populated region encompassing the coastal areas and river networks within what is now southern Vietnam and southern Cambodia.<sup>7</sup> According to Sakurai's description, it can be divided roughly into an eastern and western half. The eastern Water Frontier stretched from the area of modern day Ho Chi Minh City to the main branches of the Mekong River, while the western one stretched west from the Bassac River to the Cardamon Mountains in eastern Siam and Cambodia. The Mekong River delta dominated the eastern Water Frontier commercially, as most trade between the upriver Cambodian heartland where Udong and Phnom Penh were situated. The western Water Frontier was less naturally centred, as it included both the Ca Mau peninsula and the sheltered coastal lands of the eastern Gulf of Siam to its west, but over the course of the eighteenth century Ha Tien's growing commercial and political importance gradually made it the hub of this sub-region.

Historically, Sakurai first locates eighteenth-century Ha Tien in what Anthony Reid has called the "Chinese century," a period from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries when Chinese economic and cultural influence over Southeast Asia reached a peak.<sup>8</sup> In Sakurai's view, Mo Tianci's father, Mo Jiu (Viet. Mac Cuu 鄭

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5 Yumio Sakurai, "Eighteenth-Century Chinese Pioneers on the Water Frontier of Indochina," in Nola Cooke and Li Tana (ed.), *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), pp. 35-36.

6 Li Tana, "The Water Frontier: An Introduction," in Nola Cooke and Li Tana (ed.), *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), p. 1.

7 Sakurai, "Eighteenth-Century Chinese Pioneers," pp. 36-39.

8 See Anthony Reid, "Introduction," in Anthony Reid (ed.), *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies: Responses to Modernity in the Diverse States of Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750-1900*, (Houndmills: MacMillan Press, 1997), pp. 11-14. Reid describes the Chinese century as lasting from 1740 to 1840, but Sakurai implicitly pushes it back to at least the 1680s to include the Chinese who left the Qing empire after the Sanfan Rebellion.

玖, 1655-1735), was just one of several Chinese adventurers who came to the eastern and western Water Frontiers in the late seventeenth century, and Ha Tien was just the most important of several settlements founded by these Chinese in the region. The second cycle she places Ha Tien and the other Chinese Water Frontier settlements in is what she sees as a transitional era between the expansionist seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Southeast Asian states and those established after the period of dynastic collapse in the region (which lasted from about 1750 to 1780). Sakurai therefore understands the Mos and the other Chinese pioneers as a vanguard of the Vietnamese Nguyen court's frontier expansion southward, gradually opening land and developing commercial networks in a frontier region. The Chinese settlements enjoyed various levels of autonomy in this transitional period, but were all ultimately swallowed by Vietnamese expansion between the 1680s and 1780s.

Sakurai's placement of Ha Tien's history implicitly draws on Victor Lieberman's *Strange Parallels* thesis. Lieberman's key argument is that there was a gradual but consistent trend towards political, cultural, and territorial consolidation by three major polities in mainland Southeast Asian history occurring between about AD 800 and the nineteenth century. In Lieberman's view, the political division of the region began with countless centres of power that exercised fluctuating levels of control over culturally disparate smaller centres within the range of their influence. But the particularly powerful centres gradually drew the lesser ones towards them politically and culturally, forming increasingly larger and more internally integrated polities. By the beginning of the European colonial period in the nineteenth century, this process of integration had transformed mainland Southeast Asia into a region dominated by three large states, Vietnam, Siam, and Burma.<sup>9</sup>

In Sakurai and Lieberman's narratives of gradual consolidation, Ha Tien is remarkable mainly for the lateness of the date at which its independence ceased and it

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9 Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830, Volume 1, Integration on the Mainland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

was absorbed into one of the expansionist states. The implication is that Ha Tien's incorporation into the Tay Son and then the Nguyen dynasties' Vietnam, like the Vietnamese annexation of the Chinese settlements in the eastern Water Frontier, was just part of the final stage in a process of frontier consolidation that had been occurring for centuries.

Without denying Lieberman's basic argument or contesting the outcome of Ha Tien's eighteenth-century history (it did become part of the Tay Son and then Nguyen dynasties' realms after all), I will argue in the discussion that follows that using these narratives to understand the pre-1770s history of Ha Tien traps it in a history centred on Vietnamese expansion. This perspective ignores or renders irrelevant the development of Ha Tien itself, characterising it essentially as a passive borderland waiting to be claimed, and this in turn robs the details of Ha Tien's history of any meaning that a perspective looking outwards from the city might otherwise find. As I will attempt to show, there is ample reason to consider factors internal to Ha Tien when explaining both its rise and fall.<sup>10</sup>

To make these points, I have divided the remainder of this essay into three sections. In the first, I will compare the early histories of Ha Tien and those of the Chinese settlements in the eastern Water Frontier. I will argue that despite some superficial similarities, both the circumstances under which they were founded and the goals of their founders were vastly different. In the second section, I will make the argument that Ha Tien was a polity that expanded and consolidated its control of the territory around it while actively seeking to enlarge its political and diplomatic roles in the region. Rather than being frontiersmen serving the interests of the Nguyen

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10 In a recent article John Wong has compared the Mo family to another ethnic Chinese clan who settled within the Nguyen state. Wong's focus is primarily how the two families contributed to the Nguyen state. The present article will look at the relationship from the perspective of the Mo family, and what it meant for them. John D. Wong, "Improvising protocols: Two enterprising Chinese migrant families and the resourceful Nguyễn court," *Journal of Southeast Asia Studies* 50:2 (2019), pp. 246-262.

court, the Mo family sought to develop their own centre in much the same way the Nguyen sought to develop their own state as a political centre separate from its rival, the Trinh-ruled domain in what is modern northern Vietnam. In the final section, I will re-examine the events leading up to the collapse of the Mo family's rule of Ha Tien, and argue that the larger narratives of dynastic collapse and reconsolidation are unnecessary to explain Mo Tianci's downfall. Although the end of Ha Tien's role as an independent polity occurred during a period in which all the largest states in mainland Southeast Asia were undergoing dynastic change, there is a good reason to look within Ha Tien's history itself for explanations for its demise rather than focussing on the political convulsions of its larger neighbours.

## 1. A Comparison of Ha Tien and the Eastern Water Frontier

The two most prominent Chinese settlements of the late seventeenth-century eastern Water Frontier were My Tho (Ch. Meiqiu 美萩) and Bien Hoa (Ch. Bianhe 邊和). According to Nguyen records compiled in the nineteenth-century *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* ("Gazetteer of Gia Dinh") and the *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* ("Veritable Records of the Great South"), both were founded by a group of about three thousand Chinese soldiers and their families who arrived in the summer of 1679 off shore of the Nguyen domain in over fifty warships. They claimed that they were Ming loyalists who had given up hope of seeing the restoration of their dynasty in China, and were willing to swear loyalty to the Nguyen. The Nguyen court accepted their submission, but it was felt that giving them appointments within the Nguyen state would be difficult because of their cultural differences with the local population. It was therefore decided that they could be sent to Gia Dinh (Ch. Jiading 嘉定, the area around present day Ho Chi Minh City) as settlers. The court lacked the manpower to settle and govern the Gia Dinh area in the eastern Water Frontier, and so apparently did their vassal in the region, the

Cambodian king Ang Non, so sending the Ming loyalists southwards served both to rid the Nguyen rulers of the need to rule the Chinese directly and to advance the settlement of the Mekong River delta region.<sup>11</sup>

The Nguyen records go on to state that these Chinese sailed to the eastern Water Frontier and proceeded to build a cluster of communities around the areas of My Tho and Bien Hoa. The communities prospered and became commercially connected to East and Southeast Asia's maritime trading network. Peace and prosperity lasted until 1688, when the leader of these new towns, Yang Yandi (Viet. Duong Ngan Dich 楊彥迪), was assassinated by his lieutenant Huang Jin (Viet. Hoang Tan 黃進), who then proceeded to take control of Yang's forces and ally himself with Ang Non. The two of them built fortresses at key points along the Mekong River, thereby taking control of the riverine trade flowing to and from the upriver Cambodian heartland area. The Nguyen court, apparently unhappy with Huang's usurpation of power, pretended to send an army to reinforce his invasion of Cambodia, but instead ambushed his forces and killed him. Another Chinese officer, Chen Shangchuan (Viet. Tran Thuong Xuyen 陳上川) was made commander by the Nguyen court, and he proceeded to work with the Nguyen forces to intervene in the Cambodian war.<sup>12</sup>

Fortunately this account can be compared against those given to the Japanese customs authorities in Nagasaki by the crews of ships sailing there from Southeast Asia. A ship from Siam that arrived in Nagasaki on August 30, 1687 told the same basic tale of Yang's murder, but with some additional details. According to the ship's crew, Yang and his fleet were deserters from the navy of the Taiwan-based Ming

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11 Trinh Hoai Duc 鄭懷德, ed., *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* 嘉定城通志, in Dai, Kelai 戴可來 (ed.) *Lingnan Zhi Guai Deng Shiliao San Zhong* 嶺南摭怪等史料三種 (Zhengzhou 鄭州: Zhongzhou Guji Chuban She 中州古籍出版社, 1991), pp. 121-122; and Xu Wentang and Xieqiyi 許文堂謝奇懿 (ed.), *Da Nan Shilu Qing Yue Guanxi Shiliao Huibian* 大南實錄清越關係史料彙編 (Taipei 臺北: Zhongyang Yanjiu Yuan Dongnan Ya Quyu Yanjiu Jihua 中央研究院東南亞區域研究計畫, 2000), p. 3. For the story of one of the most prominent Chinese leaders, see Robert J. Antony, "'Righteous Yang': Pirate, Rebel, and Hero on the Sino-Vietnamese Water Frontier, 1644-1684," *Cross-Currents: East History and Culture Review* 3:2 (2014), pp. 319-348.

12 Trinh, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, p.122.



loyalist regime of Zheng Jing 鄭經. After arriving in the eastern Water Frontier, Yang did not become the leader of a sedentary community, but instead continued as a military leader, roaming the Mekong delta region with his warships. According to the ship's crew Yang decided to invade Cambodia, and shortly thereafter Huang killed Yang and allied with Ang Non. The two of them together invaded upriver Cambodia, putting Ang Non's cousin and rival, King Chey Chettha IV to flight. Chey Chettha called on Siam for aid, and the Siamese court sent reinforcements, who eventually forced the Chinese and Ang Non to flee.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, several accounts from trade ships arriving in Nagasaki mention Chen Shangchuan. According to these accounts, Chen's ambitions seem to have leaned towards piracy rather than frontiersmanship. As late as 1699, the crew of a ship originally from Ningbo reports that it was boarded by pirates led by Chen just offshore of a port in Cambodia (meaning one of the ports in the Mekong River delta region). Chen was apparently taking a portion of the cargo of every ship sailing to and from Cambodia in exchange for safe passage.<sup>14</sup>

Though the Chinese refugees who came with Yang did build settlements in the eastern Water Frontier, they did not form autonomous centres comparable to the Mo family's Ha Tien. The Nguyen records, combined with those from Nagasaki indicate that the independent power held by Yang and Chen was based on the mercenary potential of their residual military capabilities, and this necessarily shaped their relationship with the Nguyen court. An important difference between the western and

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13 Ship #107, August 30, 1687, Hayashi Shunsai 林春齋, Hayashi Hoko 林鳳岡, and Ren'ichi Ura 浦廉一 (ed.), *Kai Hentai* 華夷變態 (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1958-1959), vol. 1, p. 783; ship #52, July 26, 1689, in Hayashi, *Kai Hentai*, vol. 2, p. 1126; and ship #74, September 22, 1689, Hayashi, *Kai Hentai*, vol. 2, p. 1154. The statements of these crews repeat most of story from the Nguyen records, but give a more detailed account of how Huang was ambushed. Their accounts are also corroborated by the account of the French traveller Nicholas Gervaise who was in Siam at this time. Nicholas Gervaise, *Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam*, trans. John Villiers (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1989), p. 204.

14 Ship #53, October 25, 1699, in Hayashi, *Kai Hentai*, vol. 3, p. 2079. See also ship #75, August 6, 1690, in Hayashi, *Kai Hentai*, vol. 2, p. 1264.

eastern Water Frontiers was that even in the seventeenth century, the Nguyen court was clearly interested in the eastern Water Frontier's role in the region's commerce. The delta region was still theoretically part of the Cambodian domain, but since the succession crisis between Ang Non and Chey Chettha, it had become politically separated from upriver Cambodia.<sup>15</sup> The court's decision to intervene in Ang Non and Huang Jin's bid to exert power over upriver Cambodia (whether by taking control of the Mekong's riverine traffic or by invasion) suggests that they were committed to maintaining the stability of the Mekong River trade.

In 1698, the Nguyen court took the next logical step to bring stability to the region, and did away with the tributary status of the region. Instead, they began administering it directly as the Gia Dinh Prefecture (Viet. Gia Dinh Phu, Ch. Jiading Fu 嘉定府). Land surveys were conducted and the territory was further subdivided into counties. Military garrisons were established, and the sedentary Chinese in the region were organised into registered communities as well.<sup>16</sup> The autonomous Chinese eastern Water Frontier came to an end almost before it had begun.

In contrast to Yang and his followers, there is no evidence that Mo Jiu, the founder of Ha Tien, was actively involved in resistance against the Qing. He was from a formerly wealthy lineage in Leizhou, and may have left because of the poverty visited on his family caused by the Kangxi-era Qing coastal removal policies.<sup>17</sup> The two key sources for the lives of Mo Jiu and Mo Tianci, the *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* and the *Ha Tien Tran Diep Tran Mo Thi Gia Pha* ("The Genealogy of the Mo Family, Governors of the Town of Ha Tien") by Vu The Dinh (Ch. Wu Shiying 武世營), do not give any details about the circumstances under which Mo Jiu left Leizhou in 1671, other than he could

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15 See the reports of ships #4 and 5, August 8, 1681, in Hayashi, *Kai Hentai*, vol. 1, p. 327.

16 Trinh, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, p. 123. See Sakurai, "Eighteenth-Century Chinese Pioneers," p. 41. See also Fujiwara, "Vietnamese Dynasties' Policies", pp. 55-59.

17 This is a suggestion put forth by Li Qingxin based on the evidence for the Mo lineage's apparent decline in the seventeenth century. Li Qingxin, "Mo Jiu", pp. 183-184.

not tolerate the rule of Manchus.<sup>18</sup> But the impression given by the description of his subsequent life in Southeast Asia is that he travelled alone or with a small group rather than as part of a Ming loyalist army. This guess is supported by his decision to travel to Phnom Penh (written as Ch. “Nanrong” 南榮 in the texts) in upriver Cambodia rather than to the Nguyen domain or Siam, which was also apparently employing Chinese mercenary groups.<sup>19</sup>

Cambodia apparently offered opportunities for talented Chinese migrants as well. According to Vu, the Cambodian government used merchants to manage public affairs, and the implications is that Mo Jiu became one of these merchant-officials. Vu's account claims that Mo gained the affection of the local people and the trust of the king in this role, but he eventually decided that depending on the favour of the court was dangerous, and that he would be better off with an independent power base. To this end, Mo bribed a concubine and a minister who helped him convince the king to give him the governorship of the Man Kham region (Ch. Mangkan 忙坎) south of the Cambodian heartland on the coast. It was here he established the town of Ha Tien in 1700.<sup>20</sup>

Several things should be noted about the founding of Ha Tien. First, although the *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* and Vu's history of the family both spend only a few sentences on Mo's early life, they agree he had already been in Cambodia for over twenty years before he was granted the governorship of the region. Second, during that time he

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18 Vu The Dinh 武世營, *Ha Tien tran Hiep Tran Mạc Thị Gia Pha* 河僊鎮葉鎮鄭氏家譜, in Dai, Kelai 戴可來 (ed.), *Lingnan Zhi Guai Deng Shiliao San Zhong* 嶺南摭怪等史料三種, (Zhengzhou 鄭州: Zhongzhou Guji Chuban She 中州古籍出版社, 1991), p. 231; and Trinh, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, p. 151. The *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* claims that the year Mac left was 1680, but I have opted to follow Vu's *Ha Tien tran Hiep Tran Mạc Thị Gia Pha* in this and most other instances where a factual discrepancy exists between the two texts, because Vu was an official in Mo Tianci's government, and according to his own account, quite close to the family. See Vu, *Ha Tien*, p. 248.

19 See the report of ship #5, June 25, 1683, in Hayashi, *Kai Hentai*, vol. 1, p. 366, which told the Nagasaki authorities the Siamese court had sent messengers to Yang's group in an effort to recruit them.

20 Vu, *Ha Tien*, p. 231.

apparently became an influential and wealthy man with access to the Cambodian court in Udong. Finally, Ha Tien was not founded as a temporary base or stronghold for military or piratical ventures as My Tho and Bien Hoa likely were. City walls and barracks were built later, but initially Mo seems to have planned it as a port town with the primary objective of attracting foreign merchants. The *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* notes that among Mo's first acts were the construction of a gambling house and the creation of a system for collecting port taxes.<sup>21</sup>

The primary similarity between Ha Tien and the settlements in the Eastern Water frontier established by Yang Yandi and Chen Shangchuan was that they were all founded by Chinese men who were unwilling to submit to the Qing dynasty. Besides this, the similarities are very few. Yang and Chen led military forces and they seem to have established themselves in the Mekong River delta area to take advantage of the weakness of the Cambodian ruler and to take control the riverine trade route connecting upriver Cambodia to the sea. Their actions probably hastened Nguyen expansion into the area not by settling or developing it, but by demonstrating to the Nguyen rulers that without more direct rule, the area would become plagued by disruptive bands of interlopers. Ha Tien on the other hand was founded by a man who had lived more than half of his life in Cambodia by 1700 and who was well-connected to the power networks of his adoptive home. Therefore the establishment of Ha Tien seems to have been part of a strategy for the long term security and prosperity of Mo's family rather than an opportunist adventure like those of Yang and Chen.

## 2. Ha Tien's Development as a Regional Centre

Mo Jiu's strategy seems to have worked, because over the course of his family's

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21 Trinh, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, p. 151; and Xu, *Da Nan Shilu*, p. 5.

rule of Ha Tien, its territory, population, and economic influence within the region all expanded. The Mo family's administration consolidated its gains by developing an effective administration and military system. At the same time Mo Jiu and then to an even greater extent Mo Tianci, who succeeded his father in 1736, pursued a diplomatic strategy with the dual goals of maintaining Ha Tien's security while asserting its independence to as great an extent as possible. Until the late 1760s, they were largely successful, and Ha Tien went from being a small port town to a territorial power. This process of expansion and consolidation closely resembles the seventeenth and eighteenth-century expansion of the southern Vietnamese Nguyen domain, and is in sharp contrast with the decline and contraction of both the Chinese refugee bases in the eastern Water Frontier, and also to its original suzerain, Cambodia.

To begin, it is useful to consider the important advantage Ha Tien's geography gave it. Li Tana has argued that the rise of the independent Nguyen domain in the early seventeenth owed its rapid development to overseas trade,<sup>22</sup> and this was the case for Ha Tien a century later as well. Mo Jiu's twenty-odd years of experience in Cambodia would have taught him that despite the kingdom's frequent political strife, it was an important supplier of ivory, sappanwood, and hides, among other things, and for this reason its economy was well-integrated into the maritime trading networks of East Asia.<sup>23</sup> Most of the trade was traditionally carried between the upriver Cambodian heartland around Udong and Phnom Penh and the sea by the Mekong and Bassac rivers, but Ha Tien offered an alternative route. Ha Tien sat at the mouth of the Giang Thanh River (Ch. Jian Jiang 堅江, called the Banteay Meas river in Cambodia), and according to Alexander Hamilton who was trading in the area in 1720,

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22 Li, Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998), p. 60.

23 See Alfons van Der Kraan, *Murder and Mayhem in Seventeenth-Century Cambodia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009), p. 9; and David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), p. 101.

the river was deep but narrow, and in the rainy seasons the lowlands between it and the Bassac River flooded. This allowed small ships to navigate from the coast to the Bassac, and then up to the Cambodian heartland.

Hamilton goes on to explain why Ha Tien was an advantageous port foreign merchants wishing to trade with Cambodia. He writes, “for the City [the upriver Cambodian cities] lying near 100 Leagues up the River [the Bassac], and most Part of the Way a continual Stream running downward, made the Navigation to the City so long and troublesom, that few cared to trade to it, for which Reasons foreign Commerce chose to come to Ponteamass [Ha Tien].”<sup>24</sup> To Hamilton’s criticism of the traditional route to upriver Cambodia along the Bassac might also be added the aforementioned complaints of the merchants sailing between Cambodia and Nagasaki about the presence of pirates, such as Chen Shangchuan, stalking the mouths of the Bassac and Mekong rivers in the eastern Water Frontier, a danger that was usually absent in the waters around Ha Tien.<sup>25</sup> Further praise of Ha Tien’s location has been found the Dutch Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie archives by Barbara Andaya, who notes that the Dutch believed ocean currents carried ships naturally to Ha Tien making it an ideal rendezvous point for merchants sailing from China or Japan and those coming from the Malay archipelago.<sup>26</sup> Ha Tien therefore provided a relatively safe and convenient alternative to the Mekong River delta region, both as an access point to the Cambodian heartland and a rendezvous point connecting East and Southeast Asia.

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24 Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies, Being the Observations and Remarks of Capt. Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: John Molman, 1727), p. 196. See also the *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*’s description of Ha Tien’s port and the Giang Thanh River. Though it does not specify the trade routes, it mentions Ha Tien was the site of contact between maritime and riverine trading ships, Trinh, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, p. 111; and Vu, *Ha Tien*, p. 226. Sakurai’s article takes note of this as well. Sakurai, “Eighteenth-Century Chinese Pioneers,” p. 43.

25 One exception was a pirate called “Wu Wang Decou 武王德勝” who captured a Ha Tien ship off the Ca Mau peninsula in 1747. See Trinh, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, pp. 152-153.

26 Barbara Watson Andaya, *To Live as Brothers: Southeast Sumatra in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1993), p. 123.

The ambitions of the Mo family seem to have extended beyond the establishment of a successful *entrepôt* though. Like the Nguyen court, they sought to increase the territory under their control, and also like the Nguyen in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, most of their growth came at the expense of Cambodia.<sup>27</sup> The *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* lists two occasions when Ha Tien acquired Cambodian territory, though it is not entirely clear how it should be interpreted. The *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* mentions Ha Tien gaining Cambodian territory in a passage that states that when Ha Tien was originally founded, silver was discovered in the area and this attracted Vietnamese wanderers who established seven villages in the area, six of which the gazetteer goes on to list by name (the seventh is presumably Ha Tien itself).<sup>28</sup> Sakurai in an article jointly written with Takako Kitagawa uses both Vietnamese and Cambodian language sources to identify the villages as present day Ca Mau (Ch. Gemao 哥毛),<sup>29</sup> Rach Gia (Ch. 瀝架), Srei Ambel (Ch. Longqi 隴棋), and Phuc Quoc Island (Ch. Fuguo 富國) in modern Vietnam, and Kampot (Ch. Qinbo 芹渤) and Kampong Som (Ch. Pengtan 溚貪) on the coast of modern Cambodia.<sup>30</sup> However, Sakurai and Kitagawa suggest that this is probably a mistake, because two of the six villages, Kampot and Kampong Som, are mentioned again in a list of five districts given to Mo Tianci by a Cambodian king who was put on his throne by Ha Tien's troops in 1757.<sup>31</sup> They suggest that the compilers of the *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*

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27 See Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, chap. 1, for a summary of the Nguyen domain's expansion. See also Danny Wong Tze Ken, *The Nguyen and Champa during 17th and 18th Century: A Study of Nguyen Foreign Relations* (Paris-San Jose: International Office of Champa, 2007).

28 Trinh, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, p. 151.

29 Because the original names of these districts controlled by Ha Tien seem to have varied, I have chosen to use the modern names of the locations identified by Sakurai and Kitagawa and have given Chinese characters used by Vu or the *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* and their pinyin transcriptions at the first instance of each name.

30 Yumio Sakurai and Takako Kitagawa, "Ha Tien or Banteay Meas in the Time of the Fall of Ayutthaya," in Kennon Breazeale (ed.), *From Japan to Arabia: Ayutthaya's Maritime Relations with Asia* (Bangkok: The Foundation for the Promotion of Social Sciences and Humanities Textbooks Project, 1999), p. 158.

31 Trinh, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, p. 153.

mistakenly give the 1757 extent of Ha Tien's territory as the initial territory acquired by Mo Jiu.

I am inclined to agree with this interpretation because if the *Gia Dinh Thong Chi's* account is correct, it would mean that Mo Jiu was immediately handed control of a very large swath of territory stretching over three hundred kilometres along the Gulf of Siam, and Vu's account of the family's history makes it clear that this probably would not have been possible until after about 1720. Another possibility is that because the seven districts all probably lay beyond Udong's effective control in 1700, they were officially granted in name to Mo Jiu as an empty gesture. Mo Tianci therefore may have used his intervention in the Cambodian succession dispute of the 1750s as an opportunity to re-formalise his control over the territories his father had been granted, and to appropriate three new areas farther inland along the Giang Thanh River closer to the Cambodian heartland (present day Tuk Meas (Ch. 靈瓊)), Banteay Meas (Ch. Chaimo 柴末), and Tnaot Chong Srang (Ch. Zhensen 真森).

Regardless of how much territory Mo Jiu was originally given control over, the *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* and Vu's *Ha Tien Tran Diep Tran Mo Thi Gia Pha* both agree that after 1757, this large swath of territory really was under Mo Tianci's control. Vu explains that Mo established four regional government offices (Ch. *lizhi zhi* 吏治之; the *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* calls them "circuits," *dao* 道) in Kampot, Ca Mau, Rach Gia, and a fourth centre whose location is not clear (the text lists it as Ch. Zhenyi 鎮彝).<sup>32</sup> This means that Ha Tien governed all the ports from the eastern edge of the Bay of Kompong Som to the Ca Mau peninsula, and the territory north along the Giang Thanh River approaching the Bassac River about fifty kilometres north of Ha Tien. According to Sakurai and Kitagawa, this expansion effectively brought the territories of the Nguyen domain in the Mekong River delta and those of Ha Tien into contact, with the Bassac River forming the boundary between them.<sup>33</sup> Therefore by the 1750s we can

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32 Vu, *Ha Tien*, pp. 232-233; Trinh, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, p. 153; and Xu, *Da Nan Shilu*, p. 9.

33 Sakurai and Kitagawa, "Ha Tien or Banteay Meas," p. 171.



see that Ha Tien had developed into a territorial power with its own peripheral regions. This paralleled the Nguyen court's expansion into the Water Frontier and resulted in its division between the two power centres.

Our sources connect the development of Ha Tien as a military power with its early acceptance of a tributary relationship with the Nguyen domain, but it seems more likely that Ha Tien was actually responding to external threats. Vu's account of the Mo family's history states that a Siamese army attacked Cambodia at some unspecified time apparently before 1714, and sacked Ha Tien in the process, which was then only a port city.<sup>34</sup> Alexander Hamilton states that this actually occurred in 1717,<sup>35</sup> and he is probably correct because the reports of ships sailing from Siam and Cambodia to Japan in the Nagasaki customs records agree that Siam launched an invasion this year.<sup>36</sup> According to Vu, this invasion prompted Mo Jiu to decide that being a Cambodian governor did not provide sufficient security, so he approached the Nguyen court in 1714 and petitioned successfully to have Ha Tien made a tributary state (Ch. shu guo 屬國) of the Nguyen domain.<sup>37</sup> Neither the *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* nor the *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* mentions a Siamese invasion in connection to Ha Tien becoming a tributary state of the Nguyen, and both give the date of Ha Tien's submission as 1708. All three sources agree that immediately upon becoming a tributary state of the Nguyen domain, Ha Tien established a garrison and a standing army. Vu states that city walls were also built, and civil and military offices were established that began to recruit talented individuals. The relationship between Ha Tien's establishment of a garrison and its status as a tributary state of the Nguyen

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34 Vu, *Ha Tien*, p. 231.

35 Hamilton, *A New Account*, vol. 2, p. 196.

36 Ship #2, September 20, 1717, in Hayashi, *Kai Hentai*, vol. 2, p. 2737; and (unnumbered) ship, August 26, 1717, in Hayashi, *Kai Hentai*, vol. 3, 2730. See also Brian A. Zottoli, "Reconceptualizing Southern Vietnamese History from the 15th to 18th Centuries: Competition along the Coasts from Guangdong to Cambodia" (PhD diss. University of Michigan, 2011), pp. 333-337, for a critical overview of this Cambodian-Siamese-Nguyen war in the 1710s.

37 Vu, *Ha Tien*, p. 232.

domain needs to be taken with a grain of salt though because all three sources that make this connection were produced by Nguyen government officials in the early nineteenth century. From the perspective of the Nguyen dynasty, the establishment of civil and military offices and an army would appropriately follow from Ha Tien's enfeoffment as a tributary state of their domain because it could then have received official permission from its Nguyen suzerain. But the possibility that the primary cause of the expansion of Ha Tien's civil and military capabilities may have been the Siamese invasion seems more likely.

Although it is not clear exactly when the military system was established, it does seem to have begun under Mo Jiu. Another section of the *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* devoted to geographic features agrees that Ha Tien was attacked by a Siamese army sometime after 1715 as a result of unrest in Cambodia. According to its account, after Mo Jiu returned to Ha Tien, he began to build fortifications on the nearby islands and in the towns along the river.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, according to the *Dai Nam Thuc Luc*, in 1738 only three years after Mo Jiu's death and Mo Tianci succession, a Cambodian leader (he may have been a royal pretender but his identity is not clear in the text<sup>39</sup>) attacked Ha Tien because he held a grudge against the Mo family for appropriating so much of Cambodia's land. Ha Tien's military force was apparently sufficiently developed to beat the aggressor off without difficulty, and, as the *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* states smugly, Cambodia never dared to invade Ha Tien again.<sup>40</sup>

The development of Ha Tien's civil government and military capabilities intensified during Mo Tianci's reign. The *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* again links the statecraft initiatives of Mo Tianci to the Nguyen court's bestowal of titles upon him when he succeeded his father, and suggests that they generously granted him the right

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38 Trinh, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, p. 110.

39 See Sakurai and Kitagawa, "Ha Tien or Banteay Meas," pp. 160-161, for a discussion of this incident and their argument that the Cambodian was probably a "chieftain."

40 Xu, *Da Nan Shilu*, pp. 6-7.

to mint his own coins, raise troops, build fortresses, and establish new government offices. Mo's father had already built fortresses and raised troops, so the permissions given by the Nguyen court to do these things were probably no more than retroactive symbolism. The *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* goes on to state that besides raising new troops and building more fortresses, Mo established Chinese-style civil and military *yamen* offices and subdivided his territories into smaller administrative districts, which can be reasonably seen as a prelude to the establishment of regional government offices after the territorial acquisitions of the 1750s.

In order to facilitate this expansion of government, Mo also took steps to recruit scholars. The *Gia Dinh Thong Chi* offers a long list of the men who came to serve him, the bulk of whom came from Fujian and Guangdong.<sup>41</sup> This fact is significant because it hints at another aspect of Mo's state building project; Mo sought to link his domain to a pre-Qing Chinese cultural ideal, and thus to represent it as a bastion of traditional Chinese culture. Claudine Ang's recent study of Mo Tianci's "Ten Poems of Ha Tien" (Ch. Hexian shi yong 河僊十咏), composed around the time he succeeded his father, describes how Mo used the poems to build connections to a network of scholars in the two Vietnamese states and southern China.<sup>42</sup> These connections gave Ha Tien a civilisational identity that separated it from its neighbours, including and especially the Nguyen domain. Mo therefore took advantage of his ancestral heritage to establish a distinct and distinguished identity for Ha Tien that drew upon the legacy of pre-Qing China in a way that the Nguyen domain could not match despite the development of its own Chinese style bureaucracy.<sup>43</sup>

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41 Trinh, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, p. 152. This agrees with the French traveler Pierre Poivre's observation that in Ha Tien "with regard to internal police, he [Mo Tianci] gave the preference to the Chinese." Pierre Poivre, *Travels of a philosopher: or, Observations on the manners and arts of various nations in Africa and Asia* (Glasgow: Robert Urie, 1770), p. 95. See also Vu, *Ha Tien*, p. 233; and Xu, *Da Nan Shilu*, p. 6.

42 Claudine Ang, *Poetic Transformations: Eighteenth-Century Cultural Projects on the Mekong* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019).

43 On the expansion of the Chinese-style bureaucracy in the Nguyen domain, see Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, pp. 46-47.

### 3. Ha Tien's Diplomacy

Another aspect of the Mo family's consolidation of Ha Tien's power and influence that needs to be considered here are their diplomatic initiatives. Here again, the Mos took their lead from the Nguyen court and followed its same basic steps in shaping their state's identity and enhancing its status. The Nguyen court was theoretically subordinate to the Le emperors who had ruled as figureheads under the control of the Trinh family in Hanoi since the late sixteenth century, but the Nguyen had ceased submitting tribute in 1600. In 1702, the Nguyen domain approached the Qing court about becoming a tributary state separate from the Le dynasty.<sup>44</sup> Had the Qing court agreed, it would have given the Nguyen court formal proof of its equality to and independence from the northern Vietnamese, which it had already achieved in practice.

In 1708 (according to the *Gia Dinh Thong Chi and the Dai Nam Thuc Luc*) or 1714 (according to Vu), Ha Tien approached the Nguyen court, requesting that it be accepted as a tributary for the same basic reason the Nguyen had attempted to become a tributary of the Qing. According to Vu, Mo Jiu was advised by one of his councillors that it would be better to have the Nguyen court as Ha Tien suzerain than Cambodia, as this would increase their security.<sup>45</sup> Becoming an Nguyen tributary also made Ha Tien Cambodia's diplomatic equal and protected it from the Nguyen attempts to manipulate internal politics in Cambodia. Indeed, in the 1750s Mo Tianci himself took advantage of his status as an Nguyen tributary to intervene in a Cambodian succession dispute and put a prince of his choosing on the throne in Udong. This

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44 K. W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 327.

45 Vu, *Ha Tien*, p. 232.

prince in return asked to become Mo Tianci's adoptive son, and gave Ha Tien the five new districts discussed above.<sup>46</sup> Besides this, Ha Tien's submission to the Nguyen court also insulated it from potential conflicts with its new patron. The formal annexation of the Gia Dinh area in the Mekong River delta in 1698 showed that the Nguyen were concerned about maintaining stability and security in the south. Probably the greatest motivation was maintaining overseas and coastal trade, which the Nguyen were partially dependent upon for their revenue.<sup>47</sup> Ha Tien's submission communicated to its larger neighbour that it would cooperate and not become a threat to Nguyen interests, either by becoming a pirate haven or by attempting to exert dominance over Cambodia without Nguyen approval. In exchange, the Nguyen court was willing to allow the peaceful division of the Water Frontiers between itself and the new power, and supported Ha Tien's limited interference in Cambodian politics.

Mo Tianci acted as a dutiful tributary ruler towards the Nguyen domain for his entire reign, but at the same time he found ways to keep a symbolic diplomatic distance from his suzerain. One obvious means of doing this was to maintain an independent diplomatic relationship with the Siamese court, the other great power in the region. According to Chen Chingho, Mo may even have received a noble Siamese title for Ayutthaya.<sup>48</sup> The other more strategy that Mo used was to maintain a symbolic link to the Qing regime, the rulers of his family's homeland. Despite cultivating a culturally pre-Qing Chinese character for his state through his poetry project and recruitment of Ming loyalist officials, Mo apparently saw no contradiction in also maintaining informal relations with the Qing government through his merchants. Even more tellingly, Xing Hang has recently pointed out that in the Mo family's chronicle dates were recorded using both the Qing dynasty and the Vietnamese Le dynasty reign era years side by side, suggesting a connection to both

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46 Vu, *Ha Tien*, p. 233; and Trinh, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, p. 153.

47 Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, p. 71; Taylor, pp. 327-328.

48 Chen, "Mac Thien Tu and Phrayataksin," p. 80.

states but an absolute affiliation with neither.<sup>49</sup>

The best example of Mo's diplomatic ambitions came near the end of his reign. According to the *Veritable Records of the Qing*, when the usurper Taksin (Ch. Zheng Zhao 鄭昭, r. 1767-1782) declared himself the new ruler of Siam after the Burmese sack of Ayutthaya in 1767, Mo took advantage of the situation to make an overture to the Qing government in Beijing, just as the Nguyen had tried to do at the beginning of the century. Mo, knowing that the Qing government would be interested in the Burmese invasion of Siam because of its imminent conflict with Burma, sent an envoy to Guangzhou who presented a map and a report on the situation in Siam to Li Shiyao 李侍堯, the Liang Guang Governor-General.<sup>50</sup> Li sent an envoy to Ha Tien to investigate in 1770,<sup>51</sup> and this seems to have emboldened Mo. In 1771, Li reported that another envoy had arrived from Ha Tien with sunflowers as a gift for the empress dowager's birthday and a message from Mo saying that although his name was not on the list of recognized tributaries, he still wished to show his loyalty and respect to the Qing dynasty. This attempt at ingratiating himself with Beijing was apparently unsuccessful, as Li reports that he sent back a caustic reply accusing Mo of impropriety.<sup>52</sup> However, the episode shows that Mo was probably hoping to use Ha Tien's strategic location near Siam to gain Beijing's attention and recognition. Had he succeeded in becoming a tributary of the Qing empire, Ha Tien would have outranked even the Nguyen domain in the ritual diplomatic order of East Asia, and its claim to being a real power in the region would have been incontestable. Unfortunately for Mo, in 1771 when the envoy to Guangzhou was dispatched, Ha Tien's days as independent polity were already numbered.

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49 Xing Hang, "Soaring dragon and dynastic transition: dates and legitimacy among the post-Ming Chinese diaspora," in Kenneth M. Swope (ed.), *The Ming World* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 298-299.

50 *Gaozong Chun Huangdi Shilu* 高宗純皇帝實錄, vol. 10 (Beijing 北京: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, 1986), pp. 1136-1137.

51 *Gaozong*, vol. 11, pp. 587-588.

52 *Gaozong*, vol. 11, p. 887.

## 4. Explaining the Fall of Ha Tien from Within

In Victor Lieberman's view, the period of dynastic collapse that swept through mainland Southeast Asia from 1752 until the 1780s was caused by over-rapid commercial and demographic growth. In the case of the Nguyen domain, expansion southwards had created frontier areas far removed from the court in Hue, and tax increases used to pay for the Nguyen's growing military expenditure combined with price inflation caused by the expansion of trade created unrest. Similar forces were at work in Burma and Siam, and by the 1780s, the rulers of all three places along with the Trinh court in Hanoi had been swept from power and replaced by new and stronger governments who were able to take the process of consolidation even further.<sup>53</sup>

Could Ha Tien have survived this wave of dynastic collapse? Yumio Sakurai's reconstruction places its fall as the final step in a Vietnamese enclosure of the Chinese Water Frontier that began with the annexation of the Chinese settlements in the Mekong River delta in the late-seventeenth century. For her, the Chinese of both the eastern and western Water Frontiers were the vanguard of Vietnamese expansion, essentially paving the way for the Tay Son and then Nguyen dynastic states that emerged out of period of late-eighteenth century chaos to achieve their territorial limits.<sup>54</sup> But as I have tried to show in this essay, Ha Tien had no relationship with the Chinese settlements in the eastern Water Frontier, and rather than being enclosed or encroached on, it expanded and became stronger politically, economically, and militarily, just as the Nguyen domain did. Viewed from the perspective of Southeast Asian history before the collapse, the fall of Ha Tien appears to be a reversal of a historical process, rather than its natural culmination. In this final section, I will

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53 Victor Lieberman, "Mainland-Archipelagic Parallels and Contrasts, c. 1750-1850," in Anthony Reid (ed.), *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies: Responses to Modernity in the Diverse States of Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750-1900* (Houndmills: MacMillan Press, 1997).

54 Sakurai, "Eighteenth-Century Chinese Pioneers," p. 36.

briefly revisit the events leading up to Ha Tien's fall and Mo Tianci's forced suicide, and make the argument that important turning points that led to Ha Tien's fall can be found in the decisions Mo made and the course he chose for his realm. Though the context of the period of dynastic collapse created the circumstances in which Mo made these decisions, it alone is not sufficient to explain why Ha Tien's role as an independent power came to an end and should not be the privileged explanation.

In retrospect, Mo Tianci's problems can be seen to have begun with his reaction to Taksin's usurpation of the Siamese throne in 1767. It was after all Taksin's army that captured Ha Tien in the fall of 1771 and forced Mo Tianci to flee to Rach Gia, one of his eastern regional government centres.<sup>55</sup> But Taksin was not initially hostile towards Ha Tien. He even apparently referred to himself as the Mo's "god child" (*yizi* 誼子) in a letter to the elder ruler.<sup>56</sup> The hostility between the two men seems to have originated with Mo's actions rather than Taksin's. After the fall of Ayutthaya, two princes of the former Siamese dynasty fled to Ha Tien. Taksin, obviously wishing to eliminate the possibility of restorationist movement led by them, sent Mo gifts and a request that the princes be handed over in exchange for the cession of some territory to Ha Tien. Instead of agreeing, Mo conceived a scheme to kidnap Taksin by tricking him into boarding a Ha Tien rice ship sent to Bangkok. This plot failed because Taksin was forewarned by his spies, but Mo did not stop there. According to Vu, in the fall of 1769 Mo dispatched an army of fifty thousand men led by his nephew and accompanied by one of the Siamese princes to capture Chantabun on the coast of the Gulf of Siam northwest of Ha Tien. Despite the Ha Tien army's initial success taking the city, Taksin's men counterattacked and forced a withdrawal of the invaders.<sup>57</sup>

In retrospect, Mo's decision to antagonise Taksin by not returning the Ayutthayan princes and then by attacking Chantabun seems bizarre. Siam, despite

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55 Vu, *Ha Tien*, p. 236; and Trinh, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, p. 155.

56 Vu, *Ha Tien*, p. 234. See Chen, "Mac Thien Tu and Phrayataksin," p. 79.

57 Vu, *Ha Tien*, p. 235; and Chen, "Mac Thien Tu and Phrayataksin," pp. 81-83.



having been just devastated by a Burmese invasion, was a far larger state than Ha Tien, and its ruler could raise considerably more powerful armies. But in 1769 Mo may still not have appreciated Taksin's success at taking control of the country and its resources; the usurper was after all unrelated to the former royal family and only one of several contenders for power within Siam.<sup>58</sup> With the princes of the fallen royal house in his grasp, Mo likely saw an opportunity to become a kingmaker. Had he succeeded in restoring one of the princes to the Siamese throne, he would have been able to extend the influence and perhaps territory of his state. As well, as Chen Chingho shows, Mo also apparently had the nominal support of both the Nguyen and Qing courts in his anti-Taksin stance.<sup>59</sup> Had the plot to kidnap Taksin succeeded, or the invasion force sent to Chantabun been more successful, Mo might have been able to enthrone one of the princes, and then Ha Tien would have been in a position to exert influence over Siam and continue its expansion.

Conversely though, had Mo not decided to make himself Taksin's enemy, there is good reason to believe that Taksin would not have invaded Ha Tien in 1771, and Mo would not have been forced to flee. In 1773, the Nguyen court decided to exercise their authority over Mo, who then was still in exile, and ordered him to send envoys to Siam to conduct peace talks with Taksin while secretly gathering intelligence on the state of the country. During the peace talks, Taksin unexpectedly declared that now that Mo had known hardship, he pitied him, and would return Ha Tien. Good as his word, Taksin withdrew his forces and allowed Mo's son Mo Zihuang 鄭子潢 to reoccupy the devastated city.<sup>60</sup> The city never seems to have recovered from the Siamese attack, but the implication of Taksin's willingness to hand back Ha Tien to

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58 Lorraine Gesick, "The Rise and Fall of King Taksin: A Drama of Buddhist Kingship," in Lorraine Gesick and Clifford Geertz (ed.), *Centers, Symbols, and Hierarchies: Essays on the Classical States of Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1983), pp. 92-93.

59 Chen, "Mac Thien Tu and Phrayataksin," p. 84. See also Erika Masuda, "The fall of Ayutthaya and Siam's disrupted order of tribute to China (1767-1782)," *Taiwan Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 4:2 (2007), pp. 75-128.

60 Vu, *Ha Tien*, p. 237; Trinh, *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*, pp. 157-158.

his former enemy is that he had not intended to add Ha Tien to his domain or to destroy the Mo family. Therefore, had Mo not harboured the Siamese princes and the ambition to play king-maker, Ha Tien may very well have survived dynastic collapse and reconsolidation in Siam.

But even the occupation of Ha Tien did not guarantee the end of its independence as a state in Southeast Asia. After the Siamese army withdrew in 1773, Mo Tianci began to re-establish his government in Rach Gia while his son reoccupied their former capital. Mo apparently decided that his best option at this time was to move politically closer to his ally and patron, the Nguyen court. This was relatively easy because the Nguyen court had moved geographically closer to Rach Gia as well. The Tay Son rebellion had begun in the Nguyen domain in 1771, and in 1773 the rebels had captured Qui Nhon, one of Nguyen's major ports. In 1775, the northern Vietnamese Trinh armies took advantage of the situation and sacked Hue, the Nguyen capital, forcing the Nguyen court to flee southwards to Gia Dinh. Mo and several of his sons made the short journey to the new court to receive grand-sounding titles, and then returned to Rach Gia.<sup>61</sup>

In 1777, the Tay Son forces took Gia Dinh, and the Nguyen lord was killed along with most of his family, but his abdicated father Nguyen Phuc Thuan (Ch. Ruan Fuchun 阮福淳) fled to Rach Gia, and for the second time Mo gave refuge to the member of a royal family whose authority had already collapsed. While Mo's forces mounted a counterattack on the Tay Son positions in the eastern Water Frontier, Nguyen Phuc Thuan was sent to Ca Mau, another of Ha Tien's regional government centres. He was supposed to rendezvous with a ship that Mo was sending, and then sail to Guangzhou, but the Tay Son forces moved too quickly. They attacked Ca Mau by sea and captured Nguyen.<sup>62</sup>

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61 Vu, *Ha Tien*, p. 237.

62 Vu, *Ha Tien*, pp. 237-239. See also Sakurai and Kitagawa, "Ha Tien or Banteay Meas," pp. 203-204.

With fall of Ca Mau and the capture of the former Nguyen lord, Mo lost both a large chunk of his territory and his only ally in the region. His situation was dire, but Vu (who was likely a first-hand witness of these events) records that Mo was given one final opportunity to reverse his fortunes. The Tay Son leaders sent fifty soldiers to Rach Gia with a letter asking for Mo's surrender. The terms that the Tay Son offered are not recorded, but the only alternative was flight and abandonment of the state that Mo and his father had spent most of the eighteenth century building. Perhaps surprisingly, this was the course Mo decided on. Fleeing westward along the coast, he was eventually intercepted by Taksin's men. He had little choice but to accept Taksin's "invitation," and so spent the last years of his life as a guest-prisoner in Thonburi until his host decided to force his suicide.<sup>63</sup>

Once again Mo's actions during the Tay Son Rebellion are difficult to explain. Claudine Ang shows in her examination of Mo's literary friendship with Nguyen Cu Trinh (Ch. Ruan Juzhen 阮居貞), the Nguyen domain's governor in the Mekong delta from 1754 to 1765, that despite Mo's acceptance of Nguyen suzerainty, he had a fundamentally different vision of Ha Tien's identity. It was for him a bastion of traditional pre-Qing Chinese civilisation, and not a cornerstone of the Nguyen expansion into the Water Frontier.<sup>64</sup> However, perhaps in part because of the centrality of the tributary system in the Chinese conception of geopolitics, Mo never seems to have conceived of Ha Tien as a state without an overlord, and so once his bid to get direct recognition from the Qing dynasty failed, his loyalty to the Nguyen never seems to have wavered. The other probable reason for Mo's support for the Nguyen regime until the end was that he did not expect the Tay Son to allow him to retain control of his state even if he attempted to switch sides. Because of the weakened condition of his forces after the Siamese invasion of 1771 he was not in a

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63 Vu, *Ha Tien*, p. 239. See Chen, "Mac Thien Tu and Phrayataksin," pp. 94-99, for a summary of Mo's exile in Siam.

64 Ang, *Poetic Transformations*, p. 221.

good negotiating position, and perhaps bet that Ha Tien's best chance for continued independence lay with the possibility of a Nguyen restoration.

Whether or not Mo could have saved Ha Tien by surrendering in 1777, we know that he had already had better opportunities to do so prior to the Tay Son invasion. He could have chosen to distance himself from the Nguyen court once Hue had fallen rather than to continue to publicly support them by travelling to Gia Dinh in 1775. He could also have chosen not to give refuge to Nguyen Phuc Thuan in 1777. Or, better yet, he could have offered to hand Nguyen over to the Tay Son armies in exchange for peace. He chose to do none of these things, but what is important here is that these were all his choices. Like Mo's earlier conflict with Taksin, he deserves some if not most of the credit for the outcome of his conflict with the Tay Son rebels and the end of his state's independence.

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# 邊疆或王國：重訪十八世紀的水上疆域河仙

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## 摘要

本文將重新檢視河仙地區（位於今越南南境）在十八世紀的歷史發展。過去學界對於河仙的研究，泰半都將其發展置於東南亞國家疆域整併的論述當中；換言之，河仙註定被十九世紀的後黎朝阮王朝兼併，成為其王國的邊境。然而，本文指出，河仙也如同當時鄰近的暹羅和阮主，經歷了領土擴張和軍政力量的增長，於十八世紀中葉，成長為該區域的權力中心。這也使得河仙和當時其他華人移民在今日越南南部所建立的聚落，有了根本上的差異。在 1760 年代，河仙成為該區域重要的外交和軍事力量，不僅能捍衛自己的獨立地位，同時也足於和鄰近大國一爭長短。

在 1770 年代，河仙的鄭氏政權在阮主和暹羅政權垮台後不久，也隨之瓦解。原因並非直接根源於鄰國政權瓦解後所造成的政治動蕩，或是受到後來在兩地新建立強大政權的影響。相反地，本文將河仙鄭氏政權的瓦解，歸因於其統治者鄭天賜誤判當時政治情勢而成。

關鍵詞：河仙，鄭天賜，水上疆域，阮主，邊疆

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