

REVIEW ARTICLE

A Maritime Vietnam From Earliest Times To The Nineteenth Century

By Li Tana, Cambridge, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2024,
354 pp., \$34.99 (paperback), ISBN-10: 1009237640 ISBN-13: 978-1009237642

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(Received 20 December 2024; revised 27 December 2024; accepted 31 December 2024)

Research on Vietnam from the maritime approach was first proposed around the end of the 20th century - the beginning of the 21st century with articles by Momoki Shiro (1998), Christopher E. Goscha (2000, 2005), Charles James Wheeler (2003). However, this approach was pushed into a theoretical concept, a bold declaration, forums, projects, and major research works must be associated with the name of Li Tana. If in 2006, Li Tana, together with John Kremers Whitmore and Charles Wheeler, officially published “*A View from the Sea*”, if her activities from 2006-2011 led to the publication of *The Tongking Gulf Through History* (edited by Li Tana, Nola Cooke and James A. Anderson, 2011), then *A Maritime Vietnam From Earliest Times to the Nineteenth Century* (2024) is a systematic summary of almost all the achievements of more than 40 years of research on Vietnam by the scholar. The great work has led to a comprehensive, complete and convincing overview of maritime Vietnam. Li Tana not only brings new perceptions about Vietnam, but from the maritime approach, the author also effectively and correctly supplements the general history of Vietnam in the Pre-Modern period.

Based on a wealth of primary historical sources, diverse in language, rich in type, collected in many places around the world and throughout decades of academic career, Li Tana’s book, in addition to two powerful parts of Introduction and Conclusion, includes well-organized 10 chapters, spanning the history of Vietnam from its beginning to before the colonial period, rhythmically covering the entire space of the North - Central - South of the S-shaped strip of land. That is the North in the Pre-historic and Early Historical period as well as during the millennium of Chinese Domination (Chapters 1 and 2), the Central region

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Linyi in the 3rd-8th centuries AD (Chapter 3), Đại Việt during the Lý - Trần periods (Chapter 4), Champa in the 8th-12th centuries (Chapter 5), Đại Việt and partly Champa in the 10th-15th centuries (Chapter 6), Đàng Ngoài/Tonkin and Đàng Trong/Cochinchina in the 17th century (Chapters 7 and 8), the lower Mekong delta in the 18th century (Chapter 9) and Vietnam in the early Nguyễn Dynasty - under the reign of the first King Gia Long (Chapter 10).

More than 300 pages of the book are imbued with the sea element, mainly maritime trade, which has always been present, decisive, and dominant in many issues of Vietnam's economic and political history. From the very beginning, the sea has created the nature and people of prehistoric Vietnam, "affecting Vietnamese history since before it even really began" (p. 19); the Viet people themselves and their historical and cultural space (the homeland of the song *My Village* by Văn Cao - a typical image of rural Vietnam that Li Tana mentioned at the beginning of the book) have the starting point from the sea, were created by the sea, and have been the destination of the East Sea's maritime trade since ancient times. In the context of the continuous and closely connected ocean trade to the Northern and Central coasts of Vietnam for about 2000 years, not rice of a rural socio-economy, but ceramics, silk, and more surprisingly, aromatics were the key commodities that put different parts of Vietnam at the center of international trade. Aromatics (and Buddhism) created the position of "South Seas Emporium" (p. 52) for Jiaozhou during the Chinese Domination period, contributing significantly to the strategy of advancing to the North or retreating, turning into Champa of Linyi - "The Harbour and the Path of All Countries" (pp. 80, 90). Silk impacted the society of Đàng Ngoài in the Early Modern period more deeply than the pioneering analysis of Hoàng Anh Tuấn (2007), in terms of material life, economy, beliefs and culture - ideology. And ceramics have even created connections with the distant, mysterious Islamic Middle East - a hidden mystery in history and also a corner of the globe little known to contemporary Vietnam.

It can be said that, with *A Maritime Vietnam*, the marine world opened to Vietnam until the Early Modern period did not stop at the salty waters of East Asia, Southeast Asia or South Asia (mainly India) as has been known to many and few. "The Winds of Trade from the Middle East" (p. 140), the presence of Muslim and Arab merchants in the economy, society, politics of Champa and even the industry and commerce of Đại Việt was much more than thought. Muslim merchants from the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea of the West Asian world even settled in Champa, Đại Việt and Fujian (China), forming the Cham Hui/Muslim people in Central Vietnam or migrating to Hainan Island (China) during the 10th-12th

centuries, forming the Hui people in Đại Việt in the 13th century and promoting the rise of the network of Min (Fujian) merchants, including the Trần family, a branch of which established the Trần Dynasty of Vietnam.

If in the North, the “Maritime Resurgence” was the resource for the Trần Dynasty in particular and Đại Việt in general to rise, then the spaces in the South were clearly “maritime entities” (Đàng Trong of the Nguyễn Lords) or the world of “water frontiers” opening up to the Gulf of Thailand (the lower Mekong in the 18th century). The sea route of more than 3000km, replacing the lack of large rivers along the territory, could have become the connecting thread (as Charles Wheeler analyzed about the Central region, supplementing the Bennet Bronson theoretical diagram) for political integration and national unification in the early 19th century if the Nguyễn Gia Long Dynasty had not had a biased regional perspective and forced rice transportation. If rice from the North is proof of Gia Long’s mistake, then rice from the lower Mekong Delta has, for the first time in Vietnamese history, become one of the agricultural exports, connecting the South Vietnam with Guangdong (China) in the vibrant “Chinese century” (Ming loyalists) in Asia. Connecting with the world, and always placing Vietnam in the broader context of the region and even the globe, according to Li Tana, is the “interconnectedness” nature of this country throughout its history (p. 310), as well as the author’s working method, without which many issues cannot be explained, such as here: why did Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, who understood and relied on the South to advance to the throne, when he became Gia Long, continued to foster rice trade in the “water frontiers” region but still failed!

Although the 10 chapters of the book are sequential, logical and follow each other in a flexible manner, Li Tana’s smooth and clear storytelling, is sometimes not too rigid in chronological order, such as starting the Introduction with the military power of the 15th century Đại Việt, starting to discuss the Lý Dynasty in the context of the revival of maritime trade in the 11th-14th centuries with the date 1066 under the third King Thánh Tông, when the Lý’s court dress was regulated... This technique is the author’s intention, raising the issue of the impression of Đại Việt’s strength and prosperity, and from there tracing and explaining the resources coming from the sea. Any of Li Tana’s statements presented in the book are supported by evidence, primary historical sources (the author had to give up once, writing “proof awaits” - p. 128) and contemporary comparisons (such as silk production in Đàng Ngoài and the Yangtze Delta in the 17th century, printing culture in China and East Asia during the 16th-18th centuries). Evidence even comes from fragments of the past, forcing historians to delicately piece together (p. 65) or carefully and meticulously read each line of

text (p. 141). Rarely, when there is no historical evidence, the author finds ways to make inferences (evidence across time) in the most convincing way, such as connecting the incense-making profession in Hưng Yên province today with the situation in the Red River Delta during the Jin Dynasty (3rd-5th century) (pp. 73-74), such as discussing the road through Lao Bảo, Cam Lộ market in Quảng Trị province (pp. 101-102). Many field surveys in Vietnam, a thorough understanding of this country for decades, and daily following Vietnamese newspapers have made Li Tana's analysis highly reliable.

Thanks to those, the work *A Maritime Vietnam*, although discussing the sea, fully represents all other geographical, human, economic and political spaces, in which the upstream and highland areas are also emphasized in relation to the downstream and coastal areas. In some cases, the mountainous areas play a decisive role, such as the Yunnan overland route from ancient times and the “Yunnan element” (p. 186) in the Đại Việt ceramic handicraft industry, the Linyi upstream route connecting the Mekong basin with the East Sea, or the occupation of the aromatic forests and highland forest products that played an important role in the survival of not only the ancient Linyi but also the Đàng Trong entity of the Nguyễn Lords nearly a millennium later. The view from the sea not only brings about a whole Vietnam (Phan Huy Lê 2007, 2012) like that, but also gives new and interesting explanations for familiar phenomena in Vietnamese history, such as: The shift of the Champa power center to the Kauthara and Panduranga sub-regions in the 8th century, opening the Huanwang/Hoàn Vương period, not only due to the North-South Cham conflict but also due to the maritime trade wind from the Middle East; The peak of infrastructure construction activities in the Restored Lê Dynasty or the rise of village communal houses (*đình*), the book roads, the trend of research in 18th century literature, or the formation of the intellectual class of Đàng Ngoài villages, then the rise of urban areas in the 17th-18th centuries... all not only due to the development of the domestic commodity economy but can also be explained by the “boom” of 8 tons of silver that international maritime trade imported into the Northern Đại Việt at that time; The two steps of the Nguyễn Lords to the South during the 16th-18th centuries, especially to the lower Mekong in the 17th-18th centuries, were the expansion of coastal power, not just the expansion of land according to the agricultural economic model oriented to the North-South space as Andrew Hardy (2008, 2015) argued; The Tây Sơn uprising, which was considered a “peasant movement” or a mountain power, was first recognized by Li Tana in connection with the coast (similar to the Lam Sơn uprising model in the 15th century). If the early stage with the role of Nguyễn Nhạc, originated from the Thượng đạo (Upper Route) region (An Khê, Gia Lai province), then later and when Nguyễn

Huê emerged, the strategy of fighting against and destroying the Chinese, commanding the pirate power to build a powerful navy was the eternal weapon for 3 decades of the force that seemed to be just “a band of local mountaineers” (p. 282) like Tây Sơn; And even the long coastline and sea transport decided the success or failure of the national unification issue in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, which had previously only been examined in terms of the personal achievements of Quang Trung and the first two Kings of the Nguyễn Dynasty, or from the perspective of the administrative apparatus from Gia Long to Minh Mệnh, from the central to local levels.

Many new perceptions were first known, such as Đại Việt’s proactive production of commercial ceramics to meet the West Asian Muslim market such as Iran/Persia, Central and South Asia in the 14th century. Many discrete phenomena were connected into a long, comprehensive, systematic story, and explained by the view from the sea, such as aromatics with political and military events in North Central Vietnam during the Jin Dynasty, the “Fujian factor”, the Hui people in Đại Việt during the Trần Dynasty, the famous Nam Sách (Hải Dương prefecture) ceramic vase in Tokapi Sarayi (Turkey) and the formation of the white-glazed blue-and-white ceramics in the 14th-15th centuries, then the Westward expansion strategy of the Early Lê Dynasty in the 15th century (similar to the Yuan Dynasty’s opening of the Yunnan route before) to dominate the source of raw materials for “Huiqing” ceramics (cobalt blue, white-glazed blue-and-white, meeting the Muslim market). Similarly, Li Tana’s previous research clusters are now strung together into a system, all logically connected, from Đàng Trong in the 17th-18th centuries, overseas Chinese, the water frontiers in the lower Mekong, the “Tongking Gulf” and Jiaozhi Ocean, the Red River Delta from the geographical - environmental approach, the landscape of the former Linyi region in Quảng Trị, Thừa Thiên - Huế, and the “Ming factor” and the 15th century Đại Việt. The author is also very up-to-date with the achievements of international academia and honors the research of Vietnamese scholars such as on Vietnam’s foreign trade with Thành Thê Vỹ, Đỗ Bang, Nguyễn Văn Kim, Hoàng Anh Tuấn, Đỗ Thị Thùy Lan, Lê Thị Mai, studies on Linyi - Champa, citing Lâm Thị Mỹ Dung, Trần Kỳ Phương, Đỗ Trường Giang, Nguyễn Hữu Mạnh and others.

With all of those above, Li Tana's work *A Maritime Vietnam* has surpassed previous achievements in terms of time and research space (not just stopping at a certain entity of Vietnam (Đại Việt or Đàng Trong), in a certain period, like findings of Momoki Shiro, Charles Wheeler and John Whitmore), covering quite comprehensively many issues through history (not just focusing on one aspect of modern warfare like Christopher Goscha), in terms

a long and overall maritime logic in Vietnamese history, of the multilingual sources and its global perspective, and of the scope of a monograph instead of small-scale articles. And thus, the author has also surpassed herself of more than 30 years before with her studies that were coherent yet separate.

However, also because of summarizing the research achievements of Li Tana's career, it would be complete if the author's work had these three important issues of a maritime Vietnam: 1- The maritime trading empire of Funan in the lower Mekong, 2- Champa in the Vijaya period and after its fall in 1471, and 3- The Mạc Dynasty of Đại Việt. Funan was only mentioned briefly, in comparison with other entities such as Jiaozhou, Linyi, or at the decline point in the mid-5th century (p. 68), and was considered "Khmer ships" (p. 82). Academic knowledge gained from Louis Malleret (1901-1970) to the Research Programme on Southern Region (2011, published in 2017) or most recently Nguyễn Văn Kim (2024) all agree that Óc Eo Culture is not Khmer culture, the ancient Funan was the first empire in Southeast Asian history, prosperous thanks to maritime and inter-world trade transit (Sakurai Yumio 1996).

The keyword "Vijaya" is not in the Index, it is mentioned mainly in the section "The Cham Capital Moves to Vijaya" but is stopped at the 12th century (pp. 158-162) and somewhat in the presentation of Champa's Gò Sảnh pottery, which is now in the late 15th century and quickly mentioned with the fall of Vijaya as the end of the West Asian trade route, but how it collapsed is raised in the sub-section's title "Blue-and-White and the Cham Collapse" (pp. 178-181) without the author's discussion in the section's body (similarly, there are places where the first idea is present, but the second and third ideas are missing - p. 195). Champa from the 13th-14th centuries, according to the analysis from the perspective of global climate change by John K. Whitmore (2019), shifted its economic structure more strongly to the East, linking with the Malay Sea, and thus, a maritime Vietnam also needed to include Champa in the Vijaya period and until before being annexed into the territory of Lord Nguyễn in 1693. After 1471, when the Vijaya Dynasty fell to the attack of Đại Việt, the rest of Champa continued to move south, self-reliant (recognized by the Ming Dynasty of China and Đại Việt), localized and Islamized (instead of Indianized in the previous period), and still oriented overseas, "located on the economic globe under the control of the Malacca kingdom" and "and continuously integrated into the Malay trade network linking the countries on the South China Sea coast". During the 16th century - the first half of the 17th century, the trading ports of Kauthara and Panduranga appeared not only in the Malay chronicles, but also in the voyages of the first Europeans to sail to the East Sea (Pierre-Bernard Lafont 2012).

Similarly, the Mạc Dynasty in the North in the 16th century was also an industrial and commercial institution strongly oriented to the East, Dương Kinh was considered by Trần Quốc Vượng (1996) as “the first sea-front capital of the Viet”. The Fujian origin of the Mạc Dynasty, and before that of the Lý family, also needs to be mentioned besides emphasizing the Trần clan only as in *A Maritime Vietnam*, although the analysis of the Lý Dynasty’s resources in the context of maritime resurgence, the trend towards controlling the mainland before expanding to the coastal areas of the Lý, the rise of the Trần family, and then shaping the counterbalance situation of the Southwest - Northeast of the Red River Delta in the 15th century (with the Hồ Dynasty, Lam Sơn uprising, and the Early Lê) - the “Ngô thesis” of J. Whitmore (2014), although in the book, Li Tana only mentioned this concept once (p. 170) - is reasonable and interesting.

The overemphasis on the maritime element and the connection with maritime trade makes some explanations in the book, although new and interesting, seem to forget the other part of the story. As for the local raw materials of the Hải Dương ceramic centers in the 14th-16th centuries (as studies by Hà Văn Cẩn and Bùi Minh Trí in the early 2000s have shown), the decline of the ceramic handicraft industry in the 16th century must also take into account the end of the “Ming Gap” (date 1567) and the internal political and military upheavals in Đại Việt (the war between the Southern and Northern Dynasties/the Lê - Mạc War). Besides the feasible hypothesis about the connection of the Liu family (of Lưu Kế Tông, and even the 10th century Southern Han Dynasty) with Arab origins, the inference that the contemporary Ngô Dynasty had Cham blood is a bit adventurous (?).

No one can deny the value of primary sources, abundant and some new, published for the first time for Vietnamese scholars, but unfortunately, Li Tana indirectly quoted an ancient document with easy access to the original, which is the travelogue of William Dampier in 1688. The analysis of silk in Đàng Ngoài society is a step further than Hoàng Anh Tuấn (2007), but it seems that the author ignored the other side in historical documents about the silk villages, weaving guilds that were desolate when merchants did not come; as well as ignored ceramics - another important commodity of the 17th-18th century Đàng Ngoài. However, Li Tana’s analysis of the formation of the village Confucian scholar class, replacing the Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An military personnel from around 1650, not only helps to correct my view (2015, 2016) about an exceptional period (the first half of the 17th century) when the Đại Việt monarchy was suddenly not xenophobic, but also fits my hypothesis about the formation of Phố Hiến (Hiển city), associated with the foreign policy of the Lê - Trịnh regime.

As with other English works to date, the author needs to be careful in using the concepts of “Viet people” and “Vietnamese people” (although in some places the author has distinguished). It is necessary to distinguish as well the place name “Cochinchina” in the 17th-18th centuries from the 19th century (p. 285). Some details can be corrected, such as the starting time of the Japanese policy of *Shuinsen* (Red seal ships), the time of the establishment of Quốc Tử Giám, evidence of the presence of Japanese people in Phố Hiến (Đỗ Thị Thùy Lan 2015), the time of the appearance of the *đình* (must be from the Lý Dynasty, not the Trần Dynasty), the upper Đồng Nai and Tiền River areas are the eastern part of the South (not the western part - p. 259). Some Vietnamese names and vocabulary could be more accurate (phù sa, Trúc Lâm, Tháp Đôi, Mường Thanh, Lê Thánh Tông, Toàn tập, author Thiều Thị Thanh Hải), consistent use of “nagara” or “negara”, some technical errors left over from the old research manuscript (footnote 21, page 202), old place names (“Thuận Hải” - p. 234), a book title needs to be italicized (footnote 107, page 283).

Although there is still research gap, the author herself (pp. 76-77, 163) has repeatedly opened up the potential for further study (obviously explored this moment are the three subjects of Funan, Champa during Vijaya and post 1471 periods, and Đại Việt’s Mạc Dynasty), and though there are still some unavoidable minor errors, Li Tana’s *A Maritime Vietnam* has “casted a new light” on the history of the land that is now modern Vietnam, surpassing the frameworks of national administrative borders or existing approaches (agrarian, village and Confucian Vietnam, revolutionary Vietnam...). The view from the sea supplements the history of Vietnam to be more complete, pluralistic, and colorful, like adding more flesh and blood to the existing skeleton (p. 162). The work deserves to be a milestone marking a major turning point in the perception of Vietnamese history in the Pre-Modern period, just like the way Li Tana appeared in the academic world with *Nguyen Cochinchina* (1998) more than a quarter of a century earlier, with all her love, empathy and desire to contribute to the country and Vietnamese historical science.

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