



Imperial Bandits: Outlaws and Rebels in the China-Vietnam Borderlands

BRADLEY CAMP DAVIS

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017.

Bradley Camp Davis provides a meticulously researched account of the complexly interwoven dynamics of imperial and later colonial power, rebellions and outlaws (“bandits”) in the China-Vietnam borderlands of the nineteenth century. Drawing on an impressively multilingual range of Chinese, Vietnamese, and French archival sources paired with oral traditions, the author carefully foregrounds the borderlands history of ever-shifting loyalties, alliances, and conflicts between multiple internal and external power holders and projections embedded in the overall modality of violence—or what Davis calls the “culture of violence.”

It is this “culture of violence” that he repeatedly considers as the central and inherent historical feature of these borderlands. Carried out by various bandits primarily competing for mineral resources and opium, their violent tactics have been consequently utilized for different imperial and colonial power interests. Bandits with their own politico-economic agendas become “imperial bandits,” who “played an essential role in political projects of empire” (p. 9), leading to the central conclusion that “Vietnamese and Chinese imperial rule—and even the establishment of French colonial rule—would have been impossible without imperial bandits” (p. 157). This intricate entanglement of borderland banditry and imperial power desires yields fascinating trajectories of bandit organizations as well as their individual leaders. Originating as a movement challenging Qing authority in southern China, the Black Flags’ subsequent ventures in northern Vietnam played into the hands of the Nguyễn court struggling with the White Flags undermining their projection of imperial sovereignty. Apparently, relying on, and officially sanctioning, the Black Flags to eradicate the White Flag Rebellion did not run contrary to their understanding of sovereignty. Despite divisions within the Nguyễn court on this reliance, the alliance between the Black Flags and Nguyễn Vietnam continued into the Sino-French War, when the former were now also sponsored by Qing China to push back French encroachment in northern Vietnam. The French, on the other hand, increasingly relied on the Yellow Flags, bitter enemies of the Black Flags, to pursue their colonial project. The individual career of Liu Yongfu, leader of the Black Flags, strikingly reflects this

tumultuous history of borderland violence, ambivalently and opportunistically sponsored or banned by different imperial/colonial powerholders. Starting as an anti-Qing rebel, he was continuously awarded higher titles and ranks in the Vietnamese imperial hierarchy before he even obtained positions in Sun Yatsen's newly founded Republic of China in 1911 upon his retirement in his hometown Qinzhou. Posthumously, Liu Yongfu was often framed as an anticolonial revolutionary and proto-nationalist in the national historiographies of Vietnam and China, respectively. While hinting at the historical debate on the issue of Liu Yongfu and his Black Flags, particularly concerning the often rather overlooked aspect of intrinsic violence, Davis aims, more importantly, to put this in dialogue with oral sources of upland communities such as the Yao and Hmong, among others, which recall overly violent bandit atrocities—"to tell a more inclusive, pluralistic, and enlivened story of life in the borderlands at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (p. 18).

Davis chooses to tell this story chronologically in four core chapters, preceded by an introduction and reflected by a conclusion. While the introduction usefully outlines the China-Vietnam borderlands along the central themes and conceptualizations of "imperial bandits" and "cultures of violence," and stresses the importance of oral traditions, the first chapter traces the emergence of the Black and Yellow Flags back to geo-economic calculations revolving around opium and mining, outweighing any potential ethno-national agenda as often claimed later, and follows their different trajectories of gaining power through various arrangements with imperial authorities and local communities, either relying on local (mainly Tai) powerbrokers or acting as imperial powerbrokers, or both. The most significant powerbroker arrangement between Nguyễn Vietnam and the Black Flags was viewed by the French as the largest impediment to their envisioned commercial opening and development of resources of northern Vietnam.

As Chapter 2 illustrates, within French "consular optics," imperial reliance on bandits only demonstrated the incompetence and lacking power of the Hue court with disastrous consequences for upland communities. This articulated observation of chaos, lack of order and imperial authority, served as the main justification for the French colonial project to develop and improve (*mise en valeur*) these borderlands and to protect its upland residents. Ironically, to achieve these goals of restoring their understanding of law and order, the French similarly resorted to "outlaws," thereby fully adapting to the locally inherent borderlands mode of power brokerage and violence (again terrorizing upland communities they claimed to protect), whose continuity became central element of the subsequent Sino-French War, treated at substantial length in Chapter 3.

Therein, the author importantly zooms in the supposedly local scale of larger historical dynamics, foregrounding the underlying "borderlands networks of mobility and violence" (p. 89) crossing through the Sino-Vietnam frontier that were essential to the conflict. The aftermath of the war, with the Black Flags eventually pushed back to China, entailed French efforts to impose a new order of territorial sovereignty, buttressed by new border technologies of fixing and integrating, namely a demarcating borderline negotiated with China and cross-border communication through

the telegraph. However, as Davis argues in Chapter 4, this new imperial borderland infrastructure, aimed at regulation and securitization, eventually facilitated the continuity of long-term modalities of violence-based power arrangements. Bandit operations and local rebellions endured through their flexible adjustment, turning into anticolonial fighters or “surrendered bandits” (*soumissionnaires*) working for the French protectorate.

This very continuity inspires Davis’ concluding reflection of how up to the present, local borderland realities persist amidst internationally normed and standardized border policies. However, instead of being astounded by his observation at the present China-Vietnam border how “locals” could freely cross an international border without any inspection of their travel documents and goods (an anecdote surely quite familiar to borderland scholars, including me), it might have been more fruitful to stick to the book’s overall theme by reflecting on the continuity of endemic violence and cross-border criminality (kidnapping, trafficking of humans and drugs, etc.) with the potential complicity or involvement of state authorities.

Davis’ described continual instances of mutual appropriation of power between local power-brokers and different forms of state administration—creating a condition where “the terms of power are never completely settled” (p. 9)—are a familiar historical feature of upland Southeast Asia (see, for example, Tappe 2015; Pholsena 2017). The author’s study also reminds of Pat Giersch’s (2006, 3–4) conceptualization of the “Chinese frontier” as “middle ground” “of fluid cultural and economic exchange where acculturation and the creation of hybrid political institutions were contingent on local conditions.” As this book joins the ranks of scholarship challenging James Scott’s (2009) overly binary understanding of “Zomia” as a venue of oppressive lowland state apparatus and upland freedom-seekers, it is a bit surprising that Davis does not further engage with it. Related to this, the author could have put more effort to position his work within relevant scholarly works and discussions, to achieve also a higher level of theorization. The reader is indeed provided with some theoretical inputs on the notion of bandits (Hobsbawm), their entanglements with bureaucratic and political power (Barkey, Blok), and violence (Benjamin, Weber), but is subsequently mainly left with the analytical lens of “cultures of violence.” Itself probably apt to describe the historical workings of power in this borderland, this term could have been fleshed out a bit more instead of often serving as a generally concluding catchphrase.

In *Imperial Bandits*, Davis’ versatile navigation through a multitude of sources in crafting a rich and vividly narrated reconstruction of a turbulent period in the Sino-Vietnam borderlands largely compensates these minor concerns, but also opens up other—again, not major—issues. While trying to keep pace with the author, the reader might easily get lost in an abundance of detailed events, individual stories, and spatial references. Particularly regarding the latter, some clear maps, apart from figures depicting nineteenth-century French and Chinese maps, would have been useful.

Methodologically, it still seems that Davis largely adopts “imperial optics” to retrace this

borderlands history of violence. Measured against his repeated emphasis and promise to draw on oral traditions, they appear to be rather thin. The core chapters still constitute a history of events mainly told through official Chinese, Vietnamese, and French archival sources. This is in itself valid, but the very beginning of the book and a special section dedicated to oral traditions (pp. 17–21) promise more to the reader. Moreover, despite referring to stories of several upland communities such as Yao or Hmong, or Tai speakers such as Nùng, Tày and Giáy, we mainly hear Yao voices, interspersed with a few short Tày stories.

That said, this book serves as an excellent contribution to burgeoning scholarship on the history (as well as the present) of Sino-Southeast Asian frontier dynamics. Its fine-grained micro-history provides us with a more nuanced understanding of the larger picture of emerging imperial (“state”) power shaping, and being shaped and constituted by, borderland power realities, revealing its fragmented and violent reality.

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Through Turbulent Terrain: Trade of the Straits Port of Penang

LOH WEI LENG with JEFFERY SEOW

Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2018.

Penang—the Malaysian port city acquired by the British East India Company in 1786—spearheaded the expansion of British influence in the maritime world of Southeast Asia. Thanks to its advantageous location—at the north-western edge of the Malacca straits—Penang became a thriving hub for seaborne trade and facilitated multilateral global trade. Further, in line with the growth in trade, Penang’s economy, society, and governance systems also developed and survived the vicissitudes of the modern world. Throughout the socioeconomic history of modern Penang, we can expect to understand significant global phenomena that occurred during the modern era; these