

# STATE-BUILDING AT CHINA-VIETNAM BORDER

*From a Line on Paper to a Line in Physical Reality:  
Joint State-Building at the Chinese-Vietnamese Border, 1954-1957\**

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## Abstract

This article studies the collaboration between the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists in the socialist transformation of their shared borderlands after the First Indochina War, which both complicates and clarifies the volatile bilateral relationship between the two emerging Communist states as they solidified their power in the 1950s. Departing from traditional narratives of Sino-Vietnamese relations that focus on wars and conflicts, this article examines how the timely convergence of Cold War and state expansion transformed the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands from 1954 to 1957. Using both Chinese and Vietnamese archival sources, it contends that the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists pursued two interrelated goals in carrying out the political projects at the territorial limits of their countries. First, they wanted to build an inward-looking economy and society at the respective borders by consolidating the national administration of territory. Second, they wanted to impose a contrived Cold War comradeship between the PRC and the DRV over and in place of the organic interdependence of people within the borderlands that had already existed for centuries in the area. The Sino-Vietnamese border, therefore, encountered joint state-building by the two Communist governments, which made the cross-border movement of people and goods more visible, manipulable, and, more importantly, taxable to the state.

## Introduction: border-making projects and the Cold War

The Sino-Vietnamese border endured ‘one of the most intense and volatile bilateral relations in Asia’ during the Cold War, when the Sino-Vietnamese relations developed from ‘revolutionary collaboration, national alliance, armed hostility’ to ‘normalization’.<sup>1</sup> Existing historiography on the Sino-Vietnamese relations during the Cold War almost exclusively focuses on higher-level diplomacy between Beijing and Hanoi during the Indochina Wars.<sup>2</sup> The South China Sea disputes

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<sup>1</sup> Brantly Womack, ‘International Relationships at the Border of China and Vietnam: An Introduction’, *Asian Survey*, vol. 40, no. 6 (2000), p. 982.

<sup>2</sup> See, in particular, Ang Cheng Guan, *Vietnamese Communists' Relations with China and the Second Indochina Conflicts, 1956-1962* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1998); Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Sophie Quinn-Judge and Odd Arne Westad, *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam, and Cambodia, 1972-79* (London: Routledge, 2006); Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2013).

further reinforce the tendency of scholars to focus on the sources of recent political animosity and territorial contention between China and Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> An understudied yet important topic is how the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists conceived and launched the political projects of border-making as they assumed power in their respective country at the beginning. This article fills this historiographical gap by concentrating more on the collaboration between the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists in the socialist transformation of their shared borderlands after the First Indochina War. It reveals that, on the one hand, not all interactions between Beijing and Hanoi centred on war or preparation for war; on the other hand, the two Communist states encountered security challenges along their boundaries that were, in fact, not always disputed.<sup>4</sup>

This article makes three historiographical interventions. First, it extends the temporal scope of scholarship on the history of the Sino-Vietnamese border, especially concerning how Chinese and Vietnamese states established themselves there during the modern era. In her study of the relations between Ming China and Vietnam, Kathlene Baldanza argues that negotiation, instead of aggression and resistance, was the central theme to the formation of ‘the cultural, historical, and political borders of the two countries’.<sup>5</sup> Vũ Đường Luân’s examination of border disputes between the Nguyễn and Qing courts reveals that the quest for autonomy by local communities at the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands ‘led to the intervention by and expansion of these two states, as well as negotiations and territorial division between them’.<sup>6</sup> Certain local groups also served as powerbrokers of the state. As Bradley Camp Davis illustrates, from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth, the imperial states of China, Vietnam, and the French protectorate all recruited bandits to extend power into the China-Vietnam borderlands.<sup>7</sup> The Tai and other ethnic groups in the Black River Basin enjoyed controlled autonomy under the colonial rule yet the traditional leaders such as chief heads gradually lost their power with the rise of modern Vietnamese state during the anti-colonial war.<sup>8</sup> However, this scholarship has mainly focused on the period before the second half of the twentieth century. This article shows that during the Communist era, the two neighbouring Communist states collaborated in their political projects of border-making, which made it increasingly difficult for the local community to maintain autonomy.

Second, this article seeks to contribute to the productive historiography on institutional processes that helped states expand their power into borderlands in different parts of the world and the challenges that centralizing governments confront there. Recent scholarship on borderlands favours a cross-border perspective in order to study ‘the region on *both* sides of a state border as

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, William J. Duiker, *China and Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict* (Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1986); Kosal Path, ‘The Sino-Vietnamese Dispute over Territorial Claims, 1974-78: Vietnamese nationalism and its consequence’, *International Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2011), pp. 189-220.

<sup>4</sup> For a theoretical discussion on how the modernizing state copes with security threats posed by non-state actors at the border, see George Gavriliş, *The Dynamics of Interstate Boundaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Kathlene Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia* (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Vũ Đường Luân, ‘Contested Sovereignty: Local Politics and State Power in Territorial Conflicts on the Vietnam-China Border, 1650s-1880s’, *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* vol. 5, no. 2 (2016), p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Bradley Camp Davis, *Imperial Bandits: Outlaws and Rebels in the China-Vietnam Borderlands* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Christian Lentz, ‘Making the Northwest Vietnamese’, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* vol. 6, no. 2 (2011), pp. 68-105; Philippe Le Failler, *La rivière Noire. L’intégration d’une marche frontière au Vietnam* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2014).

the unit of analysis'.<sup>9</sup> Peter Sahlins stresses in his study of the Pyrenean frontier of France and Spain that 'states did not simply impose the boundary or the nation on local society'. Instead, by 'defining their own social and territorial boundaries, village communities, peasants and nobles, made use of the national state and its boundaries', therefore 'bringing the nation into the village'.<sup>10</sup> In North America, the study of borderlands intersects well with Native American history and environmental history.<sup>11</sup> Cooperation between neighbouring countries in boundary-making was important in the formation of American borders. In her study of Western U.S.-Mexico border, Rachel St. John analyses a U.S.-Mexican 'shared binational experience' to subdue Apaches and land pirates in the borderlands and to promote capitalist growth in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> A similar binational project also took place at the Sino-Vietnamese border in the 1950s but was driven by a different ideology and a strong sense of regime insecurity. This article thus enters the conversation among historians focusing on different geographical areas regarding various motives of state-building at the borderlands.

Third, by crafting a narrative of the twentieth century border-making projects in the dyadic world of the Cold War, this article contributes to a 'pericentric view',<sup>13</sup> which goes beyond the study of strategic calculations of the great powers. Cold War historians have often framed the rise and fall of the troubled partnership between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in terms of the evolving American-Sino-Soviet strategic triangle. The two Communist countries, united under the shared perception of American threat in the 1950s, drifted apart as the Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated in the 1960s, and they eventually became adversaries as a result of the American rapprochement with China.<sup>14</sup> Diplomatic historians, nevertheless, have paid scant attention to the way in which Sino-Vietnamese relations were also driven by significant efforts to tackle the legacy of empires and colonialism. Building upon recent scholarship on state-society relations in Asian borderlands during the Cold War,<sup>15</sup> this article stresses that ideological conflicts between communism and capitalism shaped the political projects of the Communists to cut cross-border ties, which was often deemed capitalist.

This article contends that the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists pursued two interrelated goals in carrying out the political projects at the territorial limits of their countries. First, they wanted to build an inward-looking economy and society at the respective borders by consolidating the national administration of territory. Second, they wanted to impose a contrived Cold War

<sup>9</sup> Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, 'Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands', *Journal of World History* vol. 8, no.2 (Fall 1997), p. 216.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1989), p. 276.

<sup>11</sup> Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, empires, and republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Karl S. Hele ed., *Lines Drawn Upon the Waters: The First Nations Experience in the Great Lakes' Borderlands* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 63-4.

<sup>13</sup> Tony Smith, 'New Bottles for New Wine: A Pericentric Framework for the Study of the Cold War', *Diplomatic History* vol. 24, no. 4 (Fall 2000), p. 567-91.

<sup>14</sup> See for example, Kuisong Yang, 'Changes in Mao Zedong's Attitude toward the Indochina War, 1949-1973', *Cold War International History Project Working Paper No. 34* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, February 2002); Nicholas Khoo, *Collateral Damage: Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Sulmaan Wasif Khan, *China's Cold War and the People of the Tibetan Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Sinae Hyun, 'Indigenizing the Cold War: Nation-Building by the Border Patrol Police of Thailand, 1945-1980', Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2014.

comradeship between the PRC and the DRV over and in place of the organic interdependence of people within the borderlands that had already existed for centuries in the area. The Sino-Vietnamese border, therefore, encountered joint state-building by the two Communist governments, which made the cross-border movement of people and goods more visible, manipulable, and, more importantly, taxable to the state.

The first step toward meeting these goals, with the end of the First Indochina War, was the establishment of Communist institutions, characterised by the nationalization of trade, the collectivization of agriculture, and restriction on migration emerging on both sides of the border. As a result, border residents found it increasingly difficult to circumvent the state by exploiting different political situations in the two countries as they had done in the past. Even so, the two Communist states confronted a twofold challenge at their borderlands. First, the state extended its reach to the border not in a uniform fashion but through its discrete parts, which generated the problem of coordination within the bureaucracy, particularly between the centre and local administrations. Second, the more culturally diverse and fluid on-the-ground realities of borderlands fitted neither the nationalist nor the internationalist agenda of the two states.

The Sino-Vietnamese border was a geographically diverse area that consisted of shared access to the Gulf of Tonkin and a land border ranging from lower valleys to mountainous highlands. This article only focuses on the hilly lowland border along Guangxi and Guangdong of China and along Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, and Hải Ninh of Vietnam.<sup>16</sup> Whereas the upland geography of Yunnan-northwestern Vietnam was conducive to political autonomy against the central authority, the lowland border had encountered more-ambitious state-building projects. Since the end of the Sino-French War (1883-1885), both the French colonial government of Indochina and successive Chinese central regimes and military strongmen (following the fall of the Qing dynasty) made determined efforts to exercise control in this borderland area. Wars and conflicts during the first half the twentieth century, however, rolled back many of these attempts. In short, the eastern part of the Sino-Vietnamese border witnessed complex state-society interactions, which allows a more complex examination of the continuities and discontinuities in state-building and local resistance.

This article focuses on the initial years after the First Indochina War, from the Geneva Conference in the summer of 1954 to the end of 1957. In the mid-1950s, the international relations of East Asia and the domestic politics of the PRC and the DRV underwent a period of relative stability.<sup>17</sup> With the end of the Korean War in July 1953, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) shifted away from a radically revolutionary perception of international affairs and adopted a more modest direction in foreign policy.<sup>18</sup> To break diplomatic isolation and create a favourable international environment for domestic consolidation, Premier Zhou Enlai opened dialogues with France and Great Britain at the Geneva Conference, introduced the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence with India and Burma, and called for cooperation between Asian and African countries at the 1955 Bandung Conference. Meanwhile, China's First Five-Year Plan (1953-1957) set ambitious economic objectives, including promoting socialist industrialization through Soviet-

<sup>16</sup> These border provinces underwent several administrative changes: From 1955 to 1965, the coastal portion of present-day Guangxi was under the administration of Guangdong. From 1956 to 1975, Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn were part of the Northern Vietnam Autonomous Region (*Khu tự trị Việt Bắc*). In October 1963, Hải Ninh was merged with Hồng Quảng to form the current Quảng Ninh province.

<sup>17</sup> An exception was the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954-1955, when the PRC shelled offshore islands between the mainland and Taiwan.

<sup>18</sup> Chen Jian, 'China and the Bandung Conference: Changing Perceptions, and Representations', in See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya (eds), *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2008), pp. 132-34.

assisted projects, developing agricultural cooperatives, and establishing state capitalism in commerce.<sup>19</sup> The DRV, emerging victorious from the First Indochina War, likewise faced the pressing issue of regime consolidation. The Vietnamese Workers Party (VWP) took a pragmatic ‘North-first’ policy to preclude American intervention and to heal the wounds of war.<sup>20</sup> In late 1954 and early 1955, the DRV leaders formulated the Three-Year Plan for Economic Recovery (1955-1957), with land reform as the core project.<sup>21</sup> The shared priorities on economic growth, political centralization, and regional stability geared Beijing and Hanoi toward more-concerted efforts to increase their institutional presence at the border.

This article begins with an examination of the development of border police and the institutionalization of border authorities. This initiated a process that transformed the Sino-Vietnamese frontiers from less monitored spaces to areas subject to particular regimes of regulation, discipline, control, and surveillance. The article then traces how the end of the First Indochina War changed the Communist perception of the cross-border trade networks and shows how the two governments collaborated in marginalizing private commerce at the border markets. More importantly, Chinese and Vietnamese officials decided to turn their respective border societies inward by severing the transnational social ties, which will be studied in the third part. The two Communist states, however, had to find a balance between the construction of socialism and political realism on the ground. A 1956 meeting of representatives of border provinces, examined at the end of the article, reveals a series of challenges to the political projects of Communist border-making.

### **Watch out for the enemy inside: the development of border police**

One of the first projects of the modernizing central states was to establish a system of disciplined border guards to selectively block flows of people, ideas, and goods across the border. The people of the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands had long been partners in realms such as trade, agriculture, and marriage. In particular, the activities of bandits, smugglers, and political opponents at the border concerned imperial and colonial officials. In 1896, the Qing court and the French colonial government decided to establish *postes militaires doubles* (*duxun* in Chinese) at important border-crossings to police the international boundary settled after the Sino-French War. The Chinese-Vietnamese border, however, remained poorly enforced before the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> During the First Indochina War, the PRC and the DRV had developed preliminary border garrison systems at their respective borders. The two sides cooperated in crushing remnant Chinese Nationalist troops and French colonial forces, while being rather flexible on managing the cross-border economic and social connections. After the restoration of peace in Indochina, the two

<sup>19</sup> ‘Zhonghua renmin gongheguo fazhan guomin jingji de diyige wunian jihua (1953-1957) [The first five year plan to develop the national economy]’, in Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi [CCP Central Literature Research Center] (ed.), *Jianguo yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian, di 6 ce* [Important Documents since the foundation of the PRC, vol. 6] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1992), pp. 405-571.

<sup>20</sup> Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, pp. 13-4.

<sup>21</sup> Hùng Doãn and Huân Minh Đoàn, ‘Đảng lãnh đạo xây dựng chủ nghĩa xã hội ở miền bắc (1954-1975) [Building socialism in the North under the party leadership (1954-1975)]’, in Yên Văn Lê (ed.), *Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam: 80 năm xây dựng và phát triển* [Vietnamese Communist Party: 80 Years of Construction and Development] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia, 2010), pp. 640-43.

<sup>22</sup> See Que Wu, *Guangxi bianfang yange shi* [History of evolution of border defence of Guangxi] (Publisher unidentified, 1938); Johann Grémont, ‘Pirates et contrebandiers le long de la frontière sino-vietnamienne: une frontière à l'épreuve (1895-1940) [Bandits and Smugglers Along the China-Vietnam Borderlands: A Frontier at its Limits?]' Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Paris-Diderot, 2017.

Communist states adopted the Soviet model of treating border controls as integral parts of the political institutions that reinforced the domestic political stability. Borders epitomized an all-encompassing Communist party-state by performing ‘both economic and internal-security functions’. Highly restrictive regulations on cross-border movements ‘complemented the Soviet Union’s strong territorial defences, its strict internal surveillance regime, and its state-planned economy’.<sup>23</sup>

The end of the First Indochina War coincided with a nationwide effort by the Chinese Communist state to institutionalize and formalize its border police system. The sixth national meeting of public security in 1954 stipulated that border police forces should ‘integrate the missions of armed patrol, administrative management, and secret surveillance’. Frontier defence, the meeting decided, was ‘not only military defence but also political defence; not only open struggle but also secret struggle; not only the mission of the border police but also the mission of the party, state, military, and people in the border region’.<sup>24</sup> This broad conceptualization of frontier defence, which encompassed both the internal political stability of China’s frontier regions (*bianjiang*) and the protection of borders (*bianjing*) from external aggression, reflects China’s ethnic geography as an ‘empire state’ and its concerns over unrest at minority-populated frontiers.<sup>25</sup> Communist China inherited the ‘geo-body’<sup>26</sup> of the expansionist Qing Empire, which had resorted to various empire-building techniques. On its west frontier, the Manchu rulers secured their conquest of the eastern part of Central Eurasia by defeating the Zunghars and competing with the Russian Empire.<sup>27</sup> On its southern frontier, the Qing court used more-scientific cartography for a more precise delineation of territory and created ethnographic writings with direct observation to administer the people.<sup>28</sup> In the Tai-populated southwest Yunnan, although Han migration and military officials were key to the integration of the area to the Qing empire, the strength of the Qing state on the ground was restrained, as it had to compete with the Burmese and Siamese states for authorities and resources.<sup>29</sup> As the Chinese Communist came to power, its southern border assumed strategic importance due to perceived hostility from the outside and challenges to the regime in the newly occupied border provinces.

After the complete French retreat from northern Vietnam, the China-Vietnam border became one between two politically trusted contiguous countries. The Chinese border police, therefore, downgraded its military function of surveillance and reallocated resources to guarding against potential reactionaries within the country. In late 1954, counties along Guangxi’s border began to

<sup>23</sup> Andrea Chandler, *Institutions of Isolation: Border Controls in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States, 1917-1993* (Montreal, Québec: McGill-Queen’s Press, 1998), p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Fangcheng Xianwei [CCP Committee of Fangcheng County (hereafter FCC)], ‘Zhonggong fangcheng xianweihui jueyi: chengli bianfang gongzuo weiyuanhui ji youguan bianfang gongzuo wenti [Resolution of the CCP Committee of Fangcheng County: on the issue of establishing border work committee and related issues of border defence]’, 15 December 1954, Fangchengqu Danganguan [Fangcheng District Archives, Fangchenggang City, Guangxi (hereafter FCD)], 1-2-25-10, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor Fravel, ‘Securing Borders: China’s Doctrine and Force Structure for Frontier Defence’, *The Journal of Strategic Studies* vol. 30, no. 4-5 (2007), pp. 709-10.

<sup>26</sup> Tongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University Hawaii Press, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> C. Patterson Giersch, *Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China’s Yunnan Frontier* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006).

establish 'border work committees' consisting of personnel from the military, the border police and inspection stations, public security, transportation, customs, bank, and trade offices 'to unify thought and actions in defending and constructing the land and maritime border'.<sup>30</sup> Such arrangement reflected problems that could arise when different branches of the government and the military had their own representatives at the border who received orders from their respective higher authority without much consultation from each other. Again reflecting a perceived need for coordination, a provincial directive noted that the military task of the border police focused on 'checking smuggling and illegal immigration, arresting infiltrating and fugitive spies and bandits, and defending against airdrops and air raids', all of which, however, entailed 'coordination between state agencies' and 'reliance on a mass line'.<sup>31</sup>

Cold War concerns also entered into border defence calculations, focusing mainly on potential threats from the United States and the Washington-backed Republic of China on Taiwan. Citing the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the coming into force of the Mutual Defence Treaty between the United States and the Republic of China as signs of America's encirclement of Red China, a Guangxi provincial administration directive in March 1955 required the border counties to guard against American-supported 'conspiracy against our border area' and 'counterrevolutionaries who fled from the inland to the frontier'. It urged all border county administrations to establish 'border work committees' at the earliest possible date, and it demarcated a 'border defence zone' that encompassed all the border towns.<sup>32</sup>

Reflecting shifting priorities, the border inspection station of the Friendship Pass, a historical gateway and border marker that connected Pingxiang County of Guangxi with the Vietnamese town of Đồn Đăng in Lạng Sơn,<sup>33</sup> removed the branch that was in charge of wartime military surveillance in July 1955.<sup>34</sup> The border police forces at the coastal county Qinzhou were required to conduct 'a thorough investigation of fled or detained counterrevolutionaries, heads of feudal secret societies, families of the counterrevolutionaries, landlords, former Nationalists, and people inclined to be taken advantage of by the enemies, such as habitual criminals and vagabonds'.<sup>35</sup> By crushing possible conspiracies between its internal and external enemies, the Chinese Communist state sought to transform its southwestern border from a historical asylum for politically ostracized individuals into a socialist stronghold against perceived aggression of the capitalist camp.

Besides detecting and suppressing potentially subversive activities, controlling the cross-border activities of the local populations gained in importance on the agenda of the border police forces.

<sup>30</sup> FCC, 'Zhonggong fangcheng xianweihui jueyi', pp. 1-2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Guangxi Shengwei [CCP Committee of Guangxi Province (hereafter GXSW)], 'Zhonggong Guangxi shengwei guanyu jiaqiang bianfang duidi douzheng de zhishi [Instruction of the Guangxi Provincial Committee of CCP on strengthening border defences and struggling against the enemy]', 30 March 1955, FCD, 1-2-28-1, pp. 111-12.

<sup>33</sup> Successive Chinese governments have assigned new names to the pass as an emblem of the changing policies toward the southern neighbor. Preparing for a military campaign against Vietnam in 1407, the Ming court chose the term *Zhenyiguan* (Barbarian Suppressing Pass). Forced to recognize Vietnamese autonomy after the failed attempt of direct rule, Beijing replaced the rather condescending phrase with *Zhennanguan* (The Pass that Guards the South) in 1428. The pass is currently on the Chinese side of the border as a result of the border demarcation treaty between China and France in 1887. The Chinese Communists renamed the fort *Munanguan* (The Pass that Reconciles the South) in 1953. The pass received its present name in 1965. The pass is known in Vietnam as *Ái Nam Quan* or *Nam Quan* (The South Gate).

<sup>34</sup> Fusheng Zeng, *Youyiguan bianfang jianchazhan zhanzhi [Gazetteer of the border check station of the Friendship Pass]* (Nanning: Youyiguan bianfang jianchazhan zhanzhi bianweihui, 1993), p. 166.

<sup>35</sup> Qinzhou Diweihui [CCP Committee of Qinzhou Municipal Area], 'Jiaqiang haibianfang douzheng zhishi [Instruction on strengthening border defences on land and sea]', 9 May 1955, FCD, 1-2-32-5, p. 24.

During the First Indochina War, the border authority was required ‘to show consideration to the economic lives of the two peoples’,<sup>36</sup> which resulted in a rather flexible state intervention into the cross-border networks. Furthermore, a lack of experience in border inspections and knowledge of local culture and geography left the border police with little expertise in enforcing the borderline. Even so, there was a tendency toward growing institutionalization of border regulation. In December 1954, Fangcheng County decided to place more-stringent restrictions on border people who visited families and friends, attended seasonal fairs, obtained firewood, or transported buffalos<sup>37</sup> across the border. It prohibited the border people from crossing the borderline along unpatrolled trails or passes not officially opened for travel. For those facing economic difficulties, only people living within 20 kilometres from the borderline were permitted to exit the country at designated places with a temporary visa. Meanwhile, traders from Vietnam with documents issued by Vietnamese authorities would still be allowed to enter China.<sup>38</sup> As revealed in the next section, with the nationwide collectivization of the economy, cross-border economic connections were soon deemed feudalist, opportunist, and unpredictable.

The VWP took similar steps in institutionalizing its border police, yet it was more lenient on spontaneous cross-border connections with Communist China than with other neighbouring countries. In October 1955, the Ministry of Public Security of the DRV convened a border police meeting where it admitted that ‘the organization of the Vietnamese border garrison [was] weak, and the control of the local party committees on border defence [was] not tight, which [left] many loopholes for enemies to take advantage of’. The meeting stipulated that the mission of border police was ‘to incorporate the three aspects of administrative management, secret surveillance, and armed patrols under the leadership of the Party Central, with reliance on the people, and in close collaboration with other departments’.<sup>39</sup> The wording of this statement showed a clear impact of the Chinese military doctrine of border defence that treated the inspection of cross-border activities and the transformation of border societies as inseparable.

Such concerns can be seen in a number of cases and actions. In July 1956, the Vietnamese border police were required to investigate the geography, population, and society of the borderland and the coast; more specifically, they were required ‘to strike hard on the conspiracy between the imperialists and the bandits at sea’. On the land border, the DRV government prescribed that the area around 20 kilometres from the borderline with China fell under the administration of the border police, whereas the border defence zone with Laos was expanded to 50 kilometres due to the absence of diplomatic relations between the DRV and the Royal Lao Government. At the Vietnam-China border, the focal point of the border regulation was to carry out regular inspections at border ports such as Móng Cái, Đồng Đăng, Tà Lùng, and Lào Cai. At the communities bordering Laos, by contrast, the border police were to closely monitor the activities of dwellers

<sup>36</sup> ‘Zhonggong zhongyang jiu guiding ZhongYue bianjing jiancha banfa zhidian Lin Biao deng [CCP Central Committee’s telegram to Lin Biao on rules of inspection at the China-Vietnam border]’, in Dangdai zhongguo yanjiu suo [Institute of Contemporary China of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences] (ed.), *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo shi biannian, vol. 1949* [Chronicles of the PRC History: 1949] (Beijing: Dangdai zhongguo chubanshe, 2004), p. 829.

<sup>37</sup> For the importance of buffalo in the border economy, see Sarah Turner, Christine Bonnin, and Jean Michaud, ‘Livestock Transactions: Buffalo Traversing the Borderlands’, in Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud, *Frontier Livelihoods: Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2015), pp. 63-83.

<sup>38</sup> FCC, ‘Zhonggong fangcheng xianweihui jueyi’, pp. 2-3.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Chi thị của Ban Bí thư số 34/CT-TW, ngày 7 tháng 7 năm 1956 về việc tăng cường công tác công an biên phòng (gồm biên giới, bờ biển và giới tuyến) [Secretariat's Directive No. 34 / CT-TW, 7 July 1956 on the strengthening of the work of border police (including land border and the coast)]’, in Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam [Communist Party of Vietnam] (ed.), *Văn kiện đảng toàn tập-Tập 17 (1956)* [Complete documents of the party no. 17: 1956] (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia, 2002), pp. 278-79.

who sought to enter Laos to visit families or purchase necessities. The local officials were expected to conduct a thorough investigation at the border communes, make lists and create profiles of people engaged in the cross-border activities, and only permit politically reliable people to travel to Laos.<sup>40</sup>

The Chinese-Vietnamese border acquired even greater importance to Beijing and Hanoi after the railway systems of the two countries connected near the Friendship Pass in 1955.<sup>41</sup> In November 1951, the PRC extended its Hunan-Guangxi railroad to the Guangxi-Vietnam border to transport military aid to the Viet Minh. The section within Guangxi was among the first railways constructed by the revolutionary regime, indicating the high priority of supporting the DRV on China's political agenda. In the mid-1950s, connecting the Vietnamese transportation system with the socialist bloc was vital to the economic recovery of the DRV<sup>42</sup> because the country was located at the periphery of the socialist camp and was geographically separated from the Soviet Union by China. In December 1954, the DRV decided to repair the railroad between Hanoi and Đồng Đăng and link the line with the main Chinese rail net near the Friendship Pass.

Under the *Agreement of the PRC Assisting the DRV in Repairing Railways*, the Chinese Ministry of Railway provided locomotives, vehicles, and other equipment to the DRV and sent technicians and construction teams to restore 166.9 kilometres of the Hanoi-Friendship Pass railroad.<sup>43</sup> The Vietnamese railroads originally constructed by the French in this area used a 1,000 mm (3ft 3 3/8 in) 'narrow' gauge due to the mountainous terrain along the route, whereas the standard gauge of the Chinese railroad was 1,435 mm (4 ft 8 1/2 in). To solve the problem of different gauges, the two countries agreed to have the Vietnamese narrow-gauge rail extend into Pingxiang, the first rail station within China, where the Chinese would construct a reloading yard to transfer materials between the two tracks.<sup>44</sup> The whole project was completed in February 1955, and the line was officially opened on 1 August 1955. This turned the Guangxi-Vietnam frontier into a bustling land transportation hub between the two Communist countries.<sup>45</sup>

Along with the growing military and economic significance of remote border towns such as Pingxiang and Đồng Đăng, the two Communist states tightened social controls of the area along the railway. Because socialism was a modernization project, Communist countries were eager to embrace advanced transportation technologies and to make domestic mobility an instrument of social change. Nonetheless, local administrations were also 'highly ambivalent in their attitudes toward the opportunities these technologies and mobility offered to their subjects'.<sup>46</sup> After the

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 279-80.

<sup>41</sup> The first cross-border rail line between China was through Hekou and Lào Cai built by the French. See David W. Del Testa, 'Workers, Culture, and the Railroads in French Colonial Indochina, 1905-1936', *French colonial history* vol. 2, no. 1 (2002), pp. 181-98; Jean-François Rousseau, 'An Imperial Railway Failure: The Indochina-Yunnan Railway, 1898-1941', *Journal of Transport History* vol. 35, no. 1 (June 2014), pp. 1-17.

<sup>42</sup> Phủ Thủ tướng [Prime Minister's Office (hereafter PTT)], 'Ý kiến về đường sắt Im. VA 1435 [Opinions on railway Im. VA 1435]', circa 1956, Trung tâm Lưu trữ Quốc gia III [Vietnamese National Archives Center III, Hanoi (hereafter TLQ III)], PTT 3, no. 7607, p.8.

<sup>43</sup> Dangdai Zhongguo congshu bianjibu [Editorial board of the series on contemporary China], *Dangdai Zhongguo de tiedao shiye* [Railway Industry in Contemporary China] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1990), pp. 355-56.

<sup>44</sup> Tiedaobu [Ministry of Railway of the PRC], *ZhongYue guojing tielu xieding* [The PRC-DRV Border Railway Agreement] (Beijing: Renmin tiedao chubanshe, 1956), p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> The Đồng Đăng-Pingxiang line was interrupted in December 1978 as the Sino-Vietnamese war loomed large and did not resume until February 1996.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Keck-Szajbel and Dariusz Stola, 'Crossing the Borders of Friendship: Mobility across Communist Borders', *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* vol. 29, no. 1 (2015), p. 92.

opening of the Sino-Vietnamese Railway, the border authority at the Friendship Pass took charge of the customs inspections at Pingxiang station. It thoroughly investigated the social conditions around the locality and created detailed records of ‘suspected enemies’. Among those arrested were ordinary people who confessed plans to flee to Saigon by hopping on a passing train and spies who collected intelligence in the station disguised as rail workers.<sup>47</sup> The Chinese state’s close surveillance of the communities along the railroad echoed similar trends on the other side of the boundary line. In June 1955, the VWP decided that agrarian reform in the minority regions would not commence as early as in the Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese)-populated provinces. However, areas along the Sino-Vietnamese railroad were made an exception to this lenient policy because some of the tribes had collaborated with the French during the First Indochina War.<sup>48</sup>

The institutionalization of Chinese and Vietnamese border police systems broadly reflected public security campaigns in the mid-1950s to consolidate border defence in the two adjacent countries. The leaderships of the PRC and the DRV held a disturbing vision of frontiers due to an international environment they viewed as hostile and a determination to eliminate domestic counterrevolutionaries. Although the two Communist countries were then Cold War partners that did not pose a direct political or military threat toward each other, they needed to address the historical legacy of state weakness at the borderlands. Borders, as George Gavrilis argues, are not simply ‘lines of separation between states’ but ‘institutions that directly contribute to state formation and state authority’.<sup>49</sup> The Chinese and Vietnamese attempts to buttress national borders through the police systems are as much about preventing internal counterrevolutionaries from escaping the country as about keeping the external enemy out of their territories. Furthermore, the border garrisons, among other border-making institutions, helped the two Communist states to exploit the borderlands to their own advantage by hampering long-existent cross-border economic and social ties.

### **A farewell to Business: the marginalization of spontaneous cross-border trade**

The cross-border trade in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands operated by the overseas Chinese traders (*Huaqiao* in Chinese, *Hoa kiều* in Vietnamese) assumed strategic importance to the central states in the twentieth century. After the fall of Guangzhou and other coastal ports to the Japanese in 1938, the rail lines, highways, and rivers crossing the Sino-Vietnamese border became China’s lifeline to transport foreign military aid, food supplies, and commercial goods.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, during the initial years of the First Indochina War, overseas Chinese traders and ‘their profoundly transnational commercial networks running throughout all of Southeast Asia’ played a unique role in sustaining Viet Minh’s struggle against the French by enabling the Vietnamese to procure large amounts of arms, chemicals, medicines and cotton materials.<sup>51</sup> As the PRC became the first country to recognize the DRV in January 1950, the two nations began to establish trade relations at the border. In July 1952, Beijing and Hanoi decided to open several border crossings between

<sup>47</sup> Zeng, *Youyiguan bianfang jianchazhan zhanzhi*, pp. 52, 140, 166.

<sup>48</sup> Balazs Szalontai, ‘Political and Economic Crisis in North Vietnam, 1955-56’, *Cold War History* vol. 5, no. 4 (2005), pp. 397-8.

<sup>49</sup> Gavrilis, *The Dynamics of Interstate Boundaries*, p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> Weidong Liu, ‘Kangzhan qianqi guomin zhengfu dui Yinzhi tongdao de jingying [Management of transportation routes with Indochina by the government of Republic of China during the early years of Anti-Japanese War]’, *Jindaishi yanjiu* [Modern Chinese History Studies] no. 5 (1998), pp. 124-28.

<sup>51</sup> Christopher E. Goscha, ‘The Borders of Vietnam’s Early Wartime Trade with Southern China: A Contemporary Perspective’, *Asian Survey* vol. 40, no. 6 (2000), p. 989.

China and the ‘liberated zone’ of Vietnam for ‘small-scale border trade’.<sup>52</sup> The two states would levy taxes and stabilize prices at the border markets with the participation of state-run companies. Carrying border trade licenses issued by the local administrations, the borderland residents could sell and purchase daily necessities at these markets, and the overseas Chinese traders continued to profit from the cross-border trade.<sup>53</sup>

After the Geneva Agreements put an end to the war between French Union forces and the Viet Minh in Summer 1954, the activities of the itinerant merchants became increasingly problematic to the Communist states. The ceasefire in Indochina led to a sudden outpouring of Vietnamese products into the Chinese border markets. ‘As the DRV emerged as an integral market thanks to the restored peace and resumed transportation’, according to a report by the state-run West Guangxi Trade Company, merchants (especially overseas Chinese traders) from Hanoi and other major cities were eager to expand their sale northward to the borderlands to sell off goods overstocked during the war. Responding to this situation, peddlers and store owners from other parts of China, such as Guangdong and Shanghai, travelled to the border to purchase Vietnamese herbs, spices, and dried fish.<sup>54</sup> The rising number of private merchants at the border markets drove up the price of Vietnamese goods and obstructed the state-run enterprises’ plan to purchase the majority of Vietnamese products at a fixed low price (a standard practice of the socialist economy to extract revenues from the agricultural sector to fund the development of heavy industry). Meanwhile, the sales of Chinese light industrial products and salt plummeted after July 1954, reducing the profits of the Chinese state-run companies and weakening the dominance of the public sector in the border economy.<sup>55</sup>

Blaming private business for destabilizing border markets, the Chinese state decided to place restrictions on itinerant traders from outside the border area. In late 1954, the Chinese government tried to quarantine the border markets from the rest of the country by not issuing trade licenses to people who lived more than 20 kilometres away from the borderline on the Chinese side.<sup>56</sup> This measure of cracking down on private business not only led to significant growth in market share by local state-run companies but also the interruption of transnational exchanges between Southern China and Indochina. This was a marked example of the state’s scheme to define its borders and restructure the relations between the borderlands and the inland.

As the state-run companies secured a monopoly at the Chinese border markets through a socialist war on commerce, the tension between the local administrations and the border dwellers heightened. Once the Chinese central state’s decision to preclude outside merchants trickled down the bureaucratic hierarchy, the policy translated into ‘a widespread hostility among the cadres

<sup>52</sup> Guangxi Zhuangzu Zizhiqu difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui [Editorial board of gazetteers of Guangxi], *Guangxi tongzhi: waijingmao zhi* [Gazetteer of Guangxi: Foreign Trade] (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1997), p. 442.

<sup>53</sup> Ủy ban kháng chiến hành chính tỉnh Lạng Sơn [Administrative and Resistance Committee of Lang Son Province], ‘Buổi họp kiểm điểm công tác chuẩn bị mở quan [Review of the meeting to prepare for the opening of border crossings]’, 26 August 1952, TLQ III, Ủy ban Hành chính Khu tự trị Việt Bắc, 1948-1976 [Administrative Committee of the Northern Vietnam Autonomous Region, 1948-1976 (hereafter UHKVB)], no. 5444, pp. 2-11.

<sup>54</sup> Guixi maoyi gongsi [West Guangxi Trade Company (hereafter GMG)], ‘1954 nian Zhong-Yue bianjing xiao’e maoyi gongzuo zongjie [Summary of small-scale border trade at the Sino-Vietnamese border in 1954]’, 10 March 1955, Guangxi Zhuangzu Zhizhiqu Danganguan [Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Archives (hereafter GZZD)], X1-8-364, p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> GMG, ‘1954nian bianjing xiao’e maoyi qingkuang [Situation of small-scale border trade in 1954]’, 10 December 1954, GZZD, X1-8-364, pp. 82-3.

<sup>56</sup> GMG, ‘1954 nian Zhong-Yue bianjing xiao’e maoyi gongzuo zongjie’, p. 5.

against all private shopkeepers'.<sup>57</sup> The Guangxi provincial administration, for instance, stipulated that 'the socialist transformation of the private commerce should be carried out at the border area earlier than that in the inland'.<sup>58</sup> Many local traders in the border towns fell into poverty after late 1954. They were deprived of the right to trade at the border markets and yet 'were not arranged properly' to find new methods of living.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, as a result of the exclusion of private commerce, local farmers had no choice but to sell their goods to the state-run companies. Even the report of the Ministry of Commerce admitted that the procurement price arbitrarily determined by the state-run companies 'had incurred a negative impact among the masses'. The local people complained that 'the [state-run] trade companies [forced] prices down more aggressively than the private merchants [had done] during the Nationalist era'.<sup>60</sup>

Restrictions on private merchants imposed by the Chinese government, however, did not suffice to guarantee profits for its state-run companies, due to the volatile demand from Vietnam. In April 1955, Chinese state trade agents at Dongxing, a historical trading hub connecting to Vietnam's Móng Cái through a bridge on the Beilun River (*Ka Long River* in Vietnamese), complained about the unpredictability of the cross-border trade already under their supervision. With Vietnam still a 'free market', they reported, 'our trade is poorly planned. We can hardly draft credible plan because it is hard to obtain reliable information on what exactly the Vietnamese side needs'.<sup>61</sup>

The awkward situation encountered by the Chinese state-run companies was a striking example of the resilient cross-border commercial networks against the manipulation of the state when the social economic conditions in the two neighbouring countries differed significantly. The CCP had consolidated its authority and credibility by a series of political campaigns, especially a nationwide suppression of 'reactionaries and reactionary activities' during the Korean War.<sup>62</sup> By contrast, the primary concern of the VWP leaders in the mid-1950s was to avoid alienating the mass who had supported the Viet Minh in its struggle for independence. Hanoi, therefore, adopted a more moderate economic policy. To put the economy on a stable footing after the cease fire, the VWP decided to leave trade and handicraft business in private hands.<sup>63</sup> It was not until the DRV also carried out more-determined measures to exclude private traders from the border markets in 1957 that the state-run companies of the two Communist countries more seriously undermined the centuries-long transnational trade networks between Southern China and Indochina.

Besides competition with the itinerant traders, the Chinese trade companies were trapped in a

<sup>57</sup> Zhongyang Shangyebu Guangxisheng minzu maoyi diaochazu [Investigation team of ethnic trade in Guangxi dispatched by Ministry of Commerce (hereafter ZSGMD)], 'Guangxisheng Ningmingxian Pingxiang shichang kou'an xiao'e maoyi diaocha baogao [Investigation report of border small-scale trade in Pingxiang, Ningming County, Guangxi]', 21 May 1955, GZZD, X41-1-232, p. 103.

<sup>58</sup> ZSGMD, 'Guangxisheng Longjinxian Shuikou kou'an xiao'e maoyi diaocha qingkuang baogao [Investigation report of border small-scale trade in Shuikou, Longjin County, Guangxi]', 25 May 1955, GZZD, X41-1-232, p. 110. The socialist transformation (*shehui zhuyi gaizao*) of handicraft and private commerce started in the second half of 1954 in China, taking the shape of public-private joint management (*gong si heyingshi*), which de facto eliminated the private sector. See Zhengqing Chen, 'Socialist Transformation and the Demise of Private Entrepreneurs Wu Yunchu's Tragedy', *European Journal of East Asian Studies* vol. 13, no. 2 (2014), pp. 240-61.

<sup>59</sup> ZSGMD, 'Guangxisheng Ningmingxian Pingxiang shichang kou'an xiao'e maoyi diaocha baogao', p. 103.

<sup>60</sup> ZSGMD, 'Guangxisheng Longjinxian Shuikou kou'an xiao'e maoyi diaocha qingkuang baogao', p. 110.

<sup>61</sup> Fangcheng Dongxing kou'an [Dongxing port of Fangcheng (hereafter DFK)], 'Guangxisheng Fangchengxian Dongxing kou'an gongzuo weiyuanhui baogao [Report of Dongxing Border Work Committee, Fangcheng County, Guangxi Province]', 9 March 1955, GZZD, X1-12-267, p.7.

<sup>62</sup> Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, p. 88.

<sup>63</sup> William J. Duiker, *Vietnam: Revolution in Transition* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1995, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition), p. 135; Szalontai, 'Political and Economic Crisis in North Vietnam, 1955-56', p. 400.

dilemma of being simultaneously instructed to accumulate wealth for the state, support local livelihood, and pursue the diplomatic goal of buttressing the DRV. When the CCP and the Viet Minh opened small-scale trade at the border market during the First Indochina War, they sought to achieve two objectives. On one hand, they hoped to maintain the livelihood of the borderland people. On the other hand, they needed to expand markets for Vietnamese products in China to support Viet Minh's military struggle. Beijing required its state-run companies to buy the vast majority of the goods brought by the Vietnamese to the border markets, regardless of whether China needed them or whether the products were of satisfactory quality. The influx of Vietnamese goods after the end of the war left them severely overstocked with firewood, cane, and bamboo, which were without a ready market in China.<sup>64</sup>

Reconciling competing border policies was also complicated when the post-war famine in the DRV made the border crossings crucial for Vietnamese supplies of rice, oil, and daily necessities. This reversed Guangxi's historical role as a rice importer from Indochina to a rice exporter. Out of internationalist concerns, the Chinese state-run companies adopted different policies toward the Chinese and Vietnamese buyers at the border markets. Whereas Chinese citizens had to follow a strict monthly quota for rice and cooking oil and to use coupons to obtain cotton clothes, the Vietnamese could buy 15 kilogrammes of rice and 250 grammes of oil per person and any quantity of cotton clothes they wished.

However, when the local officials realized that a sizeable number of buyers from Vietnam were itinerant merchants who resold the rice on Vietnamese markets, where food prices had been driven high by the famine, it imposed a five-kilogramme limit on the rice each person from Vietnam could purchase. The Ministry of Commerce, however, overruled this local decision, criticizing the reduced quota as 'inappropriate'. Worried that failure to help the DRV feed its starving populations would compromise the socialist partnership, the ministry suggested that 'the provincial government should strengthen support for the border markets regarding grain supply and processing'.<sup>65</sup> This situation highlighted the significant challenge of implementing a centrally framed international strategy of a large country in a local context. The perceived importance of foreign affairs policies sometimes declined as they passed down the bureaucratic hierarchy, especially when carrying out foreign policies diverted limited resources from other tasks that were locally deemed just as important, if not more—including ensuring the fiscal survival of local state institutions.

In July 1955, Beijing and Hanoi revised the protocol on small-scale border trade and signed a new treaty to establish direct trade relations between local state-run companies. The two agreements marked the coordinated efforts by the two socialist countries to marginalize small-scale border trade and to nationalize the border economy. Earlier that year, Hanoi decided to monopolize the purchase of the major cash crops, such as coffee beans and tea, following the Chinese model, which helped narrow the price gap between the two countries.<sup>66</sup> With local Chinese and Vietnamese companies directly trading with each other based on seasonal plans, the border markets declined in importance. The objective of the revised protocol, according to the Chinese State Council, was 'to respond to the DRV's transition into a period of peaceful construction after the ceasefire in Indochina and market change in the small-scale border trade in 1954, to prevent private businessmen from engaging in speculation and profiteering at the border

<sup>64</sup> DFK, '1 yuefen gongzuo zonghe bagao [Comprehensive report for work in January]', 18 February 1955, GZZD, X1-12-267, p. 2.

<sup>65</sup> ZSGMD, 'Guangxisheng Longjinxian Shuikou kou'an xiao'e maoyi diaocha qingkuang baogao', pp. 111-12.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

markets, and to supply the means of production and subsistence to the border dwellers on the two sides'.<sup>67</sup> The protocol was explicit that only border residents living within the 20-kilometre radius could attend the border markets, with a daily limit of commodities valued at ten Yuan Renminbi (RMB) or equivalent Vietnamese currency (VND).<sup>68</sup> To discourage a private cross-border economy, the DRV abolished an existing tax exemption policy for people who brought commodities under a value of five Yuan RMB or equivalent VND.<sup>69</sup>

After the revised small-scale border trade protocol and the deals among local state-run companies took effect, both the variety of goods and the number of participants at the border markets dropped significantly. The socialist war on private commerce, however, was not an easy victory, given that even the local state representatives had reservations against the policy of excluding private traders altogether from the border markets. They admitted that private entrepreneurs had competed with state-run companies to purchase Vietnamese products by offering higher prices or placing orders in advance, and some of them may have even undertaken subversive political activities. However, excluding them altogether from the border markets did more harm than good because the state-run companies that focused on monopolizing the trade of major commodities fell short in meeting the daily demand of the border residents, especially regarding medicines, herbs, and buffalos.<sup>70</sup>

By the time the two Communist leaderships reached the two trade agreements, they already had the nationalization of all cross-border trade in mind. Viewing both small-scale border trade and local state-run trade as makeshift and transitional arrangements, the two parties set an ambitious goal to gradually incorporate all cross-border transactions into the track of 'formal, intergovernmental trade'.<sup>71</sup> In the spring of 1956, Beijing and Hanoi decided to close all border markets by the end of June 1957, while making allowance for local dwellers to cross the border carrying small numbers of gifts and personal items.<sup>72</sup> Even though the plan was not eventually carried out, the two Communist countries' ambition to fix border people on either side of the borderline by monopolizing the supply of goods was manifested in this aggressive long-term solution to the cross-border trade.

Although the cross-border trade networks increasingly became a target of joint inspection and regulation by the two socialist states, the itinerant merchants turned out to be highly resilient in the face of the suppression of private commerce, especially in the DRV. Unlike in China, where businessmen had lost management rights over their enterprises through state-imposed public-

<sup>67</sup> Guowuyuan [State Council of China (hereafter GWW)], 'Guanyu zhixing 1955 nian Zhong-Yue bianjing xiao'e maoyi yidingshu de zhishi [Instruction on implementing the protocol of Chinese-Vietnamese small-scale border trade in 1955]', 17 August 1955, GZZD, X1-12-294, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> 'Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhengfu Yuenan minzhu gongheguo zhengfu guanyu liangguo bianjing xiao'e maoyi de yidingshu [Protocol of small-scale border trade between the PRC and the DRV]', 7 July 1955, GZZD, X1-12-294, pp. 7-8.

<sup>69</sup> GWW, 'Guanyu zhixing 1955 nian Zhong-Yue bianjing xiao'e maoyi yidingshu de zhishi', p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Pingxiang Zhenwei [CCP Committee of Pingxiang Township], 'Guanyu ZhongYue bianjing xiao'e maoyi qingkuang baogao [Report of Chinese-Vietnamese small-scale border trade]', 20 September 1955, Guangxi GZZD, X1-12-293, p. 17.

<sup>71</sup> Zhonghua renmin gongheguo Shangyebu, Duiwai Maoyibu, Caizhengbu [Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Foreign Trade, and Ministry of Finance], 'Wei zhixing "Zhong-Yue guanyu liangguo bianjing difang guoying maoyi gongsi jinxing huowu jiaohuan de yidingshu" de zhishi [Instructions on implementing "the agreement on exchanges of commodities between local state-run companies at the border"]', 5 September 1955, GZZD, X1-12-294, p. 25.

<sup>72</sup> Duiwai Maoyibu [Ministry of Foreign Trade], 'Zhengxun Zhong-Yue bianjing tingzhi xiao'e maoyi wenti [Consultation about stopping Chinese-Vietnamese small scale border trade]', 13 April 1956, Guangdongsheng Dangangan [Guangdong Provincial Archives], 235-1-394-051~052, p. 51.

private joint ownership, the DRV did not hastily push for a state monopoly of commerce due to concerns of alienating the urban population. It was thus more challenging for the Vietnamese officials to block itinerant retailers from using border markets.

In April 1957, the Vietnamese Prime Minister's Office ordered the local governments along its border to take tougher measures to exclude 'greedy merchants' who 'take advantage of the shortage of commodities in the domestic markets'. Hanoi blamed stores opened by these traders at the border area for making the border markets 'disorderly and complicated'.<sup>73</sup> More importantly, these non-native private shopkeepers had managed to monopolize the Vietnamese border markets and engage in the smuggling of contraband by bribing businessmen, ordinary people, and cadres in order to evade state-imposed trade restrictions. The DRV government, therefore, stipulated in August 1957 that retailers taking commodities to border from Hanoi, Haiphong, and other non-border areas had to sell their goods to local Vietnamese state-run companies instead of directly trading with the Chinese. Moreover, only agricultural products from the border provinces could be exported to the border markets on the Chinese side, and imported Chinese goods were not to be sold to merchants outside the border area.<sup>74</sup> Due to the aggressive joint state efforts to interfere with and profit from the spontaneous cross-border networks, the border markets shrank greatly after the summer of 1957, with fewer people applying for trade licenses and more crossing the border illegally through the less-patrolled trails. Chinese border authorities at Aikou, an officially opened border market, noted that while they used to welcome approximately 500 traders from Vietnam per day, there were almost no foreign visitors in August 1957.<sup>75</sup>

Given the pivotal role of *Huaqiao-Hoa kiều* traders in the commercial networks between Southern China and Southeast Asia and their strong regional connections over the land, across the maritime border, and within Vietnam, their experience under the aggressive state suppression of private commerce in the China-Vietnam border area merits special attention.<sup>76</sup> Even during the period of close socialist comradeship between Beijing and Hanoi, the *Huaqiao* merchants still enjoyed favourable treatment at the Chinese border markets because of their ethnic connections with Southern China and language skills. In June 1955, Vietnamese state representatives complained to the Chinese officials about the different treatment of the Vietnamese and *Huaqiao* merchants at the Chinese border markets: The Chinese state-run companies refused to purchase herbs brought by the Vietnamese because of their low quality, while accepting the same batch of products the *Huaqiao* traders sold the next day. 'It has become a widespread experience among the Vietnamese', added the Vietnamese officials, 'that it is better to ask the *Huaqiao* to sell products on behalf of the Vietnamese'. An inspection group dispatched by the Guangxi provincial government later admitted that many Vietnamese peddlers believed that they were discriminated against at the Chinese border markets; therefore, they chose to hide their nationality and pretend

<sup>73</sup> PTT, 'Số 5294 TN v/v biện pháp quản lý buôn bán qua biên giới và chống lậu ở biên giới Việt-Trung [No. 5294 TN on rules to regulate cross-border trade and struggle at the Vietnam-China border]', 7 August 1957, TLQ III, PTT 3, no. 7642, p. 29.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, pp. 29-30.

<sup>75</sup> Pingxiang shizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui [Editing committee of gazetteer of Pingxiang city], *Pingxiang shizhi* [Gazetteer of Pingxiang City], (Guangzhou: Zhongshan daxue chubanshe, 1993), p. 377.

<sup>76</sup> For an overview of the status of *Hoa kiều* in North Vietnam, see Xiaorong Han, 'Spoiled Guests or Dedicated Patriots? The Chinese in North Vietnam, 1954-1978', *International Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 6, no. 1 (2009), pp. 1-36. Access to Vietnamese primary sources on the situation of ethnic Chinese in North Vietnam during the Cold War is still very restricted. During my research at the Vietnamese National Archives Center III in Hanoi, I have seen materials on *Hoa kiều* in the border provinces created by UHKVB. My request to read these documents, unfortunately, was rejected.

to be *Huaqiao* when dealing with the Chinese companies. The different treatment of *Huaqiao* and Vietnamese traders at the border markets incurred serious political consequences, which, as noted by the inspection group, ‘was a far cry from the principle of fostering the solidarity between the two peoples at the border—an internationalist spirit that drove us to open the small-scale border trade at the very beginning’.<sup>77</sup> Realizing that the Sino-Vietnamese lips and teeth relationship promoted by the political centres did not translate into a persuasive sense of unity with the Vietnamese among the grass-roots Chinese cadres, the Guangxi provincial government had to emphasize the strategic significance of the small-scale border trade. The provincial customs authorities required the Chinese officials at the border to ‘get rid of the remnants of great-nation chauvinism or narrow nationalism, and uplift internationalism’. Favouring *Huaqiao* while discriminating against the Vietnamese people, they noted, would result in a serious political loss.<sup>78</sup> The experience of *Huaqiao* at the border markets suggested a striking continuity in the cross-border economic exchanges, in which personal and ethnic connections gave rise to favouritism, despite an engineered friendship between the two political centres that required impartiality.

The marginalization of the small-scale border trade after the First Indochina War was the result of both the domestic campaigns of socialist transformation in China and Vietnam, which sought to construct a centrally planned command economy, and the cooperation between the two Communist regimes at the border markets that aimed at taking hold of economic exchanges. In his comparison of pre-modern and colonial states, James Scott argues that the decisive advantage of the modern state apparatus was as much in paperwork as in arms. Effective tax extraction is the end product of cadastral surveys, settlement reports, censuses, identity cards, and ‘a growing body of regulations and procedures’.<sup>79</sup> The Communist state, which had long mobilized from the bottom-up with finely woven officials, was exceptionally efficient in capturing and recording the status of each inhabitant, each piece of land, and each activity relevant to the state’s interest.<sup>80</sup> The logic behind the two Communist countries’ regulation of border trade was first to make it visible to and taxable by the state by stipulating the locations of economic exchanges. They then followed a policy of excluding private merchants and establishing a monopoly of state-run companies at border markets in the hope that the inhabitants would eventually turn their back on the border and be integrated into a nationalized economy supervised by the political centres. However, ordinary people could turn their back on the state apparatus by exploring alternative spaces for cross-border exchanges. This underlined the dilemma of consolidating an all-encompassing state without alienating the people encountered by the Communist states when they extended their reach to the borderlands.

### **Turning the border society inward: severing cross-boundary social ties**

<sup>77</sup> Guangxisheng Waishi Weiyuanhui [Foreign Affairs Office of Guangxi (hereafter GXWW)], ‘Munanguan kou’an maoyi gouxiao jinkou yinqi Yuenan shangfan buman you [Import policy of trade company at Munanguan causing discontent among Vietnamese peddlers]’, 16 June 1955, GZZD, X1-12-293, pp. 41-2.

<sup>78</sup> Nanning Haiguan [Nanning Customs], ‘Zhuanfa “guanyu Munanguan Aikou kou’an maoyi gouxiaozu shougou jinkou shulang yinqi Yuenan shangfan buman de tongbao” xizuzhi xuexi you [Forward “The notice about trade company at Aikou, Munan Guan, importing Shouliang Yam Rhizome and leading to discontent among the Vietnamese peddlers” and organize studies]’, 1 July 1955, GZZD, X1-12-296, p. 9.

<sup>79</sup> James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 94.

<sup>80</sup> For differences between the strategies of the Communist Party and the ruling government at local level, see Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, updated and expanded edition, 2010); Alexander B. Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).

The hunt for potential subversive individuals by the border police and the war on private cross-border commerce by the state-run companies were not sufficient to create a Communist border. The two Communist states collaborated in making the border a point of contrast by turning the respective frontier societies inward. This joint state-building and border-making process required government intervention in people's daily lives and greater control over local economies beyond restructuring commerce. For example, by reducing cross-border farming, the socialist states could more efficiently extract tax revenues and integrate the border societies into the centrally planned economy. The state would also reach into more-intimate aspects of the interactions between the border people, such as marriage.

If the two Communist countries' policies to nationalize cross-border trade represented a determination to make border crossings points of differences, their decision to eliminate cross-border farming highlighted a more ambitious goal of enforcing the borderline. The issue of cross-border farming initially emerged between Beijing and Hanoi as a tax problem. After the end of the First Indochina War, the Vietnamese local government asked Chinese farmers who owned or harvested from land in Vietnam to pay 'overdue agricultural taxes' for the period 1951 to 1954.<sup>81</sup> From surveys of cross-border croplands, the two governments quickly realized the existence of contested sovereignty and disputed territory along the border. This is a vivid example of how the extraction of surplus from a marginal society by the modernizing state led to territorial claims that could overlap with claims made by other countries engaged in similar state-building projects.

Continuous wars and conflicts in the China-Vietnam border region since the late 1940s had undermined the strength of central states in the area and had given the local population significant leeway against political authorities. Before 1948, people from Guangxi and then west Guangdong who had land in Vietnam paid agricultural tax in the form of rice to the French Annam state. As the population increased in southern China, landlords acquired land in Vietnam by purchase, while agriculturalists did so through the practice of swidden.<sup>82</sup> After the outbreak of the First Indochina War, some of them returned to Guangxi while keeping their land in Vietnam.<sup>83</sup> Rent or transfer of land as dowry or betrothal gifts also caused cross-border farming.<sup>84</sup> In 1949 and 1950, neither the colonial state nor the Viet Minh was able to levy tax from its northern border, and the Vietnamese Communist regime only started to collect tax in the area after 1951.<sup>85</sup> Most of the land owners from China, however, were able to escape Vietnamese agricultural taxes during the war.

The different pace of state-building in China and Vietnam also allowed perceptive borderland residents to exploit the disparity of state strength on the two sides. They defended themselves before the local Chinese officials by asserting that 'they had attempted to carry rice to Vietnam as tax payment but were either blocked at the customs for a lack of legal documents to export crops

<sup>81</sup> 'Guanyu Zhong-Yue bianjing guojing gengdi nongyeshui qingli yu jinhou fudan banfa de chubu yijian [Preliminary solution on clearing agricultural tax of cross-border farming at the Sino-Vietnamese border and future tax policy]', undated, GZZD, X1-12-290, p. 25.

<sup>82</sup> Guangxisheng Caizhengting [Bureau of Finance of Guangxi Province (hereafter GXCZT)], 'Guanyu Zhong-Yue lianguo guojing tudi ji nongyeshui fudan wenti de qingkuang he yijian [Situation and suggestions about agricultural tax of the cross-border land between China and Vietnam]', 17 January 1955, GZZD, X1-12-290, p. 11.

<sup>83</sup> FCC, 'Guanyu Zhongguo jumin zai Yuenan gengzhong tudi zhi nongyeshui zhengshou wenti [About Chinese residents paying agricultural tax for their land in Vietnam]', 14 March 1954, GZZD, X1-12-290, p. 30.

<sup>84</sup> Yixing Zheng and Guoping Wang, *Xinan diqu haiwai yiminshi yanjiu: yi Guangxi, Yunnan weili* [Study of overseas migration from the Southwestern Area: the case of Guangxi and Yunnan] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshen, 2013), p. 161.

<sup>85</sup> FCC, 'Guanyu Zhongguo jumin zai Yuenan gengzhong tudi zhi nongyeshui zhengshou wenti', p. 30.

or were declined by the Vietnamese officials due to uncertainty of tax rates'. While a few border residents admitted that they took a gamble in assuming that the Vietnamese government was too weak, others emphasized that the Vietnamese government usually collected tax in February and March, when they had almost consumed all the rice they harvested in the previous year.<sup>86</sup> With the Sino-Vietnamese socialist partnership in mind, the local officials labelled these state-evasion strategies as 'great-nation chauvinism'.<sup>87</sup> In the end, the Guangxi provincial government estimated that Chinese residents from ninety-four border towns owed the Vietnamese government approximately 750,000 to 1,000,000 kilogrammes of rice from 1951 to 1954. Meanwhile, most border people from northern Vietnam who farmed in China had paid agricultural tax to the Chinese government.<sup>88</sup>

After the end of the First Indochina War, the tax implications of the consolidation of the Vietnamese Communist state soon reached the Sino-Vietnamese border. As instructed by Hanoi, the Vietnamese provincial administrations started to communicate with Chinese border counties in late 1954 about the overdue tax. They required that border people from China who had land in Vietnam pay agricultural taxes from 1951 to 1953 based on Vietnamese tax laws. As for the taxes from 1954 on, they proposed adding up the individual harvests in China and Vietnam, calculating the per capita output of rice in the household and then levying tax according to the Chinese tax rate. People from Vietnam who had land in China would pay agricultural tax in the same way.<sup>89</sup>

Although the Vietnamese government's request was an overt response to the need to increase revenue in the face of postwar food shortage, it was also linked to other, more-hidden issues. For example, the Vietnamese clearly desired to present the image of a functioning, legitimate, socialist Vietnamese state to its northern neighbour. Meanwhile, while available Vietnamese sources cannot confirm whether the Vietnamese government intentionally used agricultural tax to signal its territorial claims over disputed areas along the border, this issue certainly made the Chinese government more aware of the problem of contested sovereignty. The Office of Foreign Affairs of Guangxi, for instance, noted that some of the land claimed by the Vietnamese government fell under the administration of China's Fangcheng County, according to a civilian map, while belonging to Vietnam on a military map. It insisted that 'this issue [was] pertinent to national territorial sovereignty thus should be reported to the [CCP] Central Committee'.<sup>90</sup>

The Chinese local government took various international and domestic factors into consideration when seeking a solution with the Vietnamese. As Hanoi's most important ally, China had to respect and support Vietnam's rights to extract resources from Vietnamese territory. Therefore, Fangcheng County ignored a grassroots organisation's suggestion to ask the

<sup>86</sup> Jingxi Xianwei [CCP Committee of Jingxi County], 'Youguan woguo zai Yuenan tudi jiaona gongliang ji ZhongzaiYue tudi jiaohuan wenti [About agricultural tax of Chinese land in Vietnam and land exchange with Vietnam]', 8 December 1955, GZZD, X1-12-290, pp. 39-41.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>88</sup> GXCZT, 'Guanyu ZhongYue bianjing guojing tudi nongyeshui linian jiqian qingli yijian de qingshi baogao [Report seeking instruction about clearing overdue agricultural tax of cross-border land at the Sino-Vietnamese Border]', 28 March 1955, GZZD, X1-12-290, pp. 65-66.

<sup>89</sup> GXCZT, 'Guanyu ZhongYue liangguo guojing tudi ji nongyeshui fudan wenti de qingkuang he yijian', pp. 11-12.

<sup>90</sup> GXWW, 'ZhongYue shuangfang jumin guojing gengdi de nongyeshui zhengshou banfa [Methods to levy tax from cross-border cultivated land owned by Chinese and Vietnamese residents]', 10 August 1955, GZZD, X1-12-290, pp. 4-5.

Vietnamese to reduce taxes for impecunious peasants and ethnic minorities.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, a nationalist sentiment of defining and defending sovereignty shaped the Sino-Vietnamese relations even during the heyday of their Communist brotherhood. None of the provincial institutions involved in the discussion agreed with the Vietnamese proposal of calculating total rice output from both sides of the borderline as the basis for tax extraction in the future. Instead, provincial financial and foreign affairs offices came up with a program aimed at both keeping China's agricultural statistics confidential from the Vietnamese and reducing cross-border land ownership. They proposed that each government would levy taxes from lower-income people according to the local tax rate and the average output of the town where the land was located. Since the majority of people engaged in cross-border farming were classified as 'poor peasants', whose harvest fell below the average, this tax scheme could discourage them from farming across the international boundary. As to landlords, the government would treat each foreign holder of the land on its territory as one household and impose progressive taxation, which would significantly increase their tax burden.<sup>92</sup> The Chinese local government was also concerned that the Vietnamese request of all overdue taxes paid in full at one time would lead to social instability. The Guangxi provincial officials thus proposed to Beijing that the Chinese government paid taxes from 1951 to 1954 in full to Vietnam on behalf of the lower-income people. It further suggested that Beijing also make payments for those categorized as rich peasants, landlords, and businessmen but that the amounts would be deducted from their salaries.<sup>93</sup> This proposal shows that the local state agents were protective of the border community, where the population identified as 'ethnic minorities' often overlapped with the economically disadvantaged group.

The tax lever aimed at reducing the size of cross-border land ownership soon took effect. In late 1955, Jingxi County reported to the Guangxi provincial government that some border people sought to give up cross-border farming by swapping land. In December, the provincial administration not only gave the green light to land swaps on 'a voluntary and mutually beneficial basis' but also decided to simplify the legal procedures in order to encourage future exchanges.<sup>94</sup> In January 1956, the International Department of Central Committee of CCP issued general guidelines that stated, 'to facilitate border management and reduce disputes between border residents, [the local Chinese officials] should actively create favourable conditions to gradually reduce and eventually eliminate cross-border cultivated land'.<sup>95</sup> Following these instructions, the local officials put forward plans to reduce cross-border farming and forestry by combining economic compensation and political campaigns. Fangcheng County, for instance, decided to offer monetary compensation equal to the total agricultural output of one to three years to people who had to give up their harvest in Vietnam. Moreover, party cadres sought to indoctrinate a national awareness among the borderlanders through the settlement of cross-border farming. People

<sup>91</sup> Dongzhong kou'an gongzuo weiyuanhui [Border work committee of Dongzhong port], 'Guanyu Zhongguo jumin zai Yuenan gengzhong tudi zhi nongyeshui zhengshou wenti [About agricultural tax of land in Vietnam farmed by Chinese residents]', 10 March 1955, GZZD, X1-12-290, pp. 29-31.

<sup>92</sup> GXWW, 'Fu "guanyu ZhongYue bianjing guojing tudi nongyeshui fudan wenti de yijian" [Reply to "Opinions on agricultural tax on cross-border land on Sino-Vietnamese border"]', 17 January 1955, GZZD, X1-12-290, p. 14.

<sup>93</sup> GXCZT, 'Guanyu Zhong-Yue bianjing guojing tudi nongyeshui linian jiqian qingli yijian de qingshi baogao', p. 66.

<sup>94</sup> Shengwei Lianluobu [Liaison Department of CCP Committee of Guangxi], 'Fu Jingxixian bianjing gongzuobu Jingbian (55) zi di27hao baogao [Reply on Report (55-27) by the department of border affairs of Jingxi County]', 16 December 1955, GZZD, X1-12-290, p. 36.

<sup>95</sup> FCC, 'Fangchengxian guojing gengdi, shanlin de chuli fangan (cao'an) [Draft solution of cross-border land and forest in Fangcheng County]', 11 October 1956, FCD, 1-2-50-10, p. 16.

affected by the policy were required to ‘lift the internationalist spirit, respect the territorial integrity of the DRV, and understand that it was entirely reasonable to return crop fields and forests to the Vietnamese’. Moreover, party cadres educated the border population ‘to make use of the abundant sources of our home country to develop socialism and improve living standard instead of relying on foreign countries’.<sup>96</sup>

Because the two Communist states were assertive in claiming resources from their territory and turning the border society inward, the traditional strategy of borderlanders to stay autonomous, such as running away or moving between and around states,<sup>97</sup> became less and less promising. Stateless space disappeared not only on the map but also in terms of administrative oversight. The effects of the policy to discourage cross-border farming, however, should not be overestimated. As shown in the next section of this article, it was not until a comprehensive land survey along the border in 1957 that the central governments even realized the sheer number of households involved in the cross-border farming and forestry.

Besides economic connections, cross-border marriage and family ties arising with it formed a solid cultural foundation of the borderlands society that even the aggressive political projects of boundary-making could not shake. State intervention and regulation of cross-border marriage was a vivid example of the ramification of state-building at the marginal society, which historically had been spaces of juridical exception.

Marriage became a practice of concern to the state in China in the early twentieth century. Extended families, arranged marriages, and polygamy were among the traditional social institutions that came under attack for thwarting China’s aspiration to transform itself into a modern nation. The *Civil Code of the Republic of China* marked a significant break from the role of the state in regulating marital practices in the past. It justified the state’s intervention into people’s intimate relations in the name of fostering citizens’ loyalty to the modern nation. Nevertheless, the reach of the state was too limited to shake the gender inequity and patriarchal structure, especially in the rural area.<sup>98</sup> While the New Marriage Law of 1950 was among the first legislation promulgated by the revolutionary regime, it was not until the mid-1950s that the provisions of the law, such as the establishment of civil registries, were widely publicized and strictly enforced.<sup>99</sup>

It was against this background of nationwide marriage reform in China that potential conflicts of marriage laws became a concern for the local Chinese administrations at the border, long before the *Marriage and Family Law of the DRV* was established in 1959. In June 1954, Beijing issued a general guideline of how local administrations should deal with marriage between the Chinese and Vietnamese citizens in the border area. Cross-border marriage requests ‘should be permitted as long as it is not against the Marriage Law of our country or laws of the Vietnamese state’.<sup>100</sup> Based

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-19.

<sup>97</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, MA: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 1; Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, p. 24.

<sup>98</sup> Ke Li and Sara L. Friedman, ‘Wedding Marriage to the Nation-State in Modern China: Legal Consequences for Divorce, Property, and Women’s Rights’, in Kristen Celello and Hanan Kholoussy (eds), *Domestic Tensions, National Anxieties: Global Perspectives on Marriage, Crisis, and Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 148-51.

<sup>99</sup> Linda Wong, ‘Family Reform through Divorce Law in the PRC’, *Pacific Basin Law Journal* vol. 1, no. 2 (1982), pp. 275-6.

<sup>100</sup> ‘Zhengwuyuan jiu Guangxisheng Zhong-Yue bianjie diqu Zhong-Yue liangguo renmin yaoqiu tonghun yishi pifu zhongnan xingzheng weiyuanhui [State Council’s reply to the Mid-West Administrative Committee about cross-border marriage request at the China-Vietnam border area]’, 12 June 1954, in Dangdai zhongguo yanjiu suo [Institute of Contemporary China of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences] (ed.), *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo shi biannian, vol. 1954* [Chronicles of the PRC History: 1954] (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 2009), p. 409.

on this central decree, the Guangxi provincial government established an administrative procedure for cross-border marriage and divorce in June 1955.<sup>101</sup>

In practice, however, adherence to the revolutionary concept of class struggle affected the Communist state's attitude toward individual cases of cross-border marriage. Lin Deqing, for instance, was a landlord's daughter in Longjin County who fled to Vietnam during the land reform launched by the Chinese Communists in the 'newly liberated area' in 1950. She married a Vietnamese in 1952, yet was arrested by the local Chinese 'land reform work group' and placed under custody in her hometown. In October 1955, Lin's husband asked for her release through the Vietnamese police, which seemed less concerned with Lin's class background. The authorities of Longjin County believed that Lin should be allowed to migrate to Vietnam as long as she 'did not conspire with any spy agents or bandits'. The Foreign Affairs Office of Guangxi nevertheless overruled the moderate position of the border county and banned her emigration, citing her background as a diehard landlord who 'felt discontent with the government and the people'.<sup>102</sup> The revolutionary regime, in this case, was determined to divide a cross-border household when the marriage became a source of national insecurity. The class background determined the permeability of the boundary line for ordinary residents.

What concerned local officials most was not whether to endorse individual cross-border marriage requests but how to resolve cross-border conjugal disputes, which required not only considerable time but also local knowledge beyond their understanding. The provincial government, for instance, prescribed that if a Chinese citizen filed a request to divorce a Vietnamese who did not live in China, the Chinese local administration should consult the opinions of the Vietnamese person and the Vietnamese government through the Vietnamese consulate in Nanning, the provincial capital of Guangxi.<sup>103</sup> This instruction was deemed 'too generalistic' and 'difficult to implement' for the lower-level authority. The local state agents were often trapped in a difficult choice between interference and stepping back when asked to resolve family disputes, especially those involving settlements of property and children.<sup>104</sup>

A typical kind of cross-border marriage dispute was bigamy of Vietnamese women involving Vietnamese and Chinese men. It was not uncommon in the rural area for a married woman to escape from her household, either due to spousal violence or economic difficulty, and remarry. When the dispute happened between families on the two sides of the border, however, a complex international problem arose in the eyes of the local administration. Resolving cross-border marital conflicts became burdensome to the officials because the ordinary people often resorted to state authorities of their home country when they believed this would help them bargain for a better deal. In one such case, Pan Shimao, a peasant living at the Guangxi border, married a Vietnamese woman introduced by a Vietnamese matchmaker. It soon turned out that his 'wife' already had a husband in Vietnam, and she left Pan for her Vietnamese hometown after the wedding. Pan, therefore, rushed to Vietnam without any legal travel documents and asked the matchmaker to

<sup>101</sup> GXWW, 'Guanyu wosheng ZhongYue bianjing jiehun, lihun yinci er chansheng de chuguo shouxu wenti de jidian chubu yijian [Preliminary opinions on cross-border marriage and divorce and the ensuing issue of people going abroad]', 16 June 1955, GZZD, X1-12-263, pp. 4-5.

<sup>102</sup> GXWW, 'Fu guanyu dizhu jiating chushen funv chujia Yuenan kefou zhunxu chujing wenti zhi chuli [Reply on whether to permit a woman from a landlord family married to Vietnamese to migrate to Vietnam]', 14 October 1955, GZZD, X1-12-263, pp. 23-4.

<sup>103</sup> GXWW, 'Guanyu wosheng Zhong-Yue bianjing jiehun, lihun yincier chansheng de chuguo shouxu wenti de jidian chubu yijian [Preliminary opinions on cross-border marriage and divorce and the ensuing issue of people going abroad]', 16 June 1955, GZZD, X1-12-263, pp. 4-5.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

return the commission and the bride price he had paid. Being rejected outright and bluntly, he angrily took away the matchmaker's buffalo and wrangled with his wife's family. After the Vietnamese border authorities communicated with the Chinese side, the county government of Pan's residence sharply criticized him for being 'chauvinist' and 'ignoring border regulations', even if it was the Vietnamese woman's fault for not divorcing first before marrying Pan. In the end, the Chinese and Vietnamese local administrators managed to persuade Pan Shimao to return the buffalo and the bride to return the betrothal gift she received from Pan.<sup>105</sup>

Given the deep-rooted ethnic connections across the border and the considerable number of unresolved marriage disputes, the provincial court of Guangxi issued a guide to the local border authorities endorsing settlements through 'persuasion' or 'conciliation' within the community. This position was in stark contrast to the provincial government's initial policy that stipulated settlement through diplomatic channels. As early as during the Yen'an period in the early 1940s, the Chinese Communist cadres had used 'persuasion' or 'conciliation' to resolve family differences. The Communists, after all, considered law to be valuable than other techniques of social reform, such as political education, mediation, and persuasion.<sup>106</sup> Besides ideological preferences, the provincial decision to avoid a diplomatic or legislative settlement of cross-border marital disputes was based on practical concerns. The provincial court of Guangxi admitted that:

It is better to observe local customs through work (*gongzuo*) when resolving marital conflicts at the China-Vietnam border. More specifically, the district and town governments should try their best to persuade the two litigants to mediate through the border authorities of the two countries who can represent the opinions of the two sides, or to let the two litigants directly resolve the disputes by consultation. Doing so can solve the problem more promptly than employing formal legal methods, which often takes a long time because it not only involves diplomatic relations between the two countries, but also the applicability of laws.<sup>107</sup>

The on-ground-reality at the border rolled back the provincial government's decision, which highlights the problem with treating all cross-border connections as international issues. While the sovereign ambition of a modern nation gave the state a justification to interfere with the most-intimate aspects of the lives at borderlands, it imposed significant administrative burdens on the local agents. Largely due to the non-interventionist attitude of the local administration, problems inherent in transnational marriage, such as nationality, legal residence, and conflicts over marriage laws, remained shelved until a meeting between the border provinces in November 1956.

### **Tensions between borderline administration and borderland realities: the meeting between border provinces in 1956 and its aftermath**

The five-province border conference between the representatives from China's Guangxi and Guangdong and Vietnam's Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, and Hải Ninh, hosted from 6 to 9 November 1956 in Nanning, highlighted that state-building and border-making at the China-Vietnam

<sup>105</sup> Shengfayuan [Provincial Court of Guangxi (GXFY)], 'Guanyu Ningmingxian Pan Shi-mao yu Yuefang funv Huang Du-jiao hunyin jiu fen wenti de cailiao [Materials on marriage disputes between Pan Shimao of Ningming County and Vietnamese woman Hoàng Đô Giáo]', 11 April 1955, GZZD, X1-12-263, p. 30; GXWW, 'Guanyu ZhongYue bianjing liangjumin de hunyin jiu fen wenti [About the marriage disputes between a Chinese and a Vietnamese citizen in the border area]', 4 August 1955, GZZD, X1-12-263, pp. 31-2.

<sup>106</sup> Wong, 'Family Reform through Divorce Law in the PRC', pp. 266, 275.

<sup>107</sup> GXFY, 'Dui Jingxixian Nalin kou'an gongzuo weiyuanhui qingshi baogao de yijian [Opinion on the reports of Nalin border work committee]', 1 August 1955, GZZD, X1-12-263, p. 37.

borderlands was an internationally coordinated project. The creation of all-encompassing states by two Communist regimes necessitated joint efforts by Beijing and Hanoi to squeeze a soft, poorly defended border space between them into a hard one with a more clearly defined borderline, the crossing of which came with higher political risk and economic costs. The fact that the meeting was between provinces of the eastern part of the China-Vietnam border might indicate that the two countries were more eager to work out a solution for border issues in the lowlands, where the states enjoyed stronger institutional strength than in the highlands. The Chinese and Vietnamese representatives admitted that for the immediate future, they needed to respect the centuries-long customs and cross-border connections for the sake of maintaining social stability and promoting production. Meanwhile, they also set a long-term objective of turning the borderland population away from the borderline.

Except for the rather sensitive issue of border demarcation, the provincial government was the appropriate level of political authority to negotiate a settlement for specific aspects of monitoring and reducing the mobility of people and goods across the border, such as land and forest ownership, buffalo trade, debts between border residents, nationality, marriages, and management of border defence zones. A division of responsibility between the central and provincial governments was manifested in the meeting agenda. The two sides shelved the issue of resolving potential border disputes but reached a consensus that ‘some of the boundary markers [had] been moved, which could incur disputes if the two parties [did] not resolve the problem’. Endorsed by the Party Central of the CCP and the VWP, the border provinces would scrutinize the issue, discuss a settlement, and report to party leaders.<sup>108</sup> Beijing and Hanoi, meanwhile, would not be bogged down with a great number of decisions on issues that required local knowledge and meticulous attention.

The first action taken by the representatives at the border province meeting was to normalize a series of established practices to reduce the border residents’ motives to cross the borderline and to undermine the deep-rooted transnational social networks. The two states’ attitudes to the cross-border farming and forestry best signalled their determination to intrude into everyday life in borderlands. ‘To strengthen border management and avoid border disputes’, they planned, ‘the two sides [would] actively, firmly, and gradually decrease and withdraw altogether from land farmed by residents across the border.’ Besides encouraging voluntary land-swaps between holders of land and forests, the border provinces scheduled a thorough land investigation on each side followed by a formal exchange of land and forests starting in March or April 1957. Whereas cross-border farming on existing crop fields was temporarily permitted for peasants ‘facing real economic difficulties’, swiddening or transactions of land across the border were prohibited.<sup>109</sup>

For cross-border ties less likely to cause contested territorial claims, the border provinces decided to respect ‘historical customs’. They agreed, for instance, not to restrict fishing or the passing boats from either country on the boundary river.<sup>110</sup> As for cross-border debts, the border provinces permitted the county authorities to mediate disputes based on the laws of the creditor’s home country. They also made arrangements for the repayment of government bonds and debts borrowed by guerrillas and local troops from people on the other side of the border during the

<sup>108</sup> UHKVB, ‘Trích biên bản ghi những vấn đề biên giới được trao đổi trong cuộc toạ đàm giữa đại biểu các tỉnh Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, Hải Ninh-Việt Nam và Quảng Tây, Quảng Đông-Trung Quốc họp từ ngày 6 đến 9 tháng 11 năm 1956 [Memorandum on the border issues discussed at the round table meeting between representatives of Cao Bang, Lang Son, Hai Ninh-Vietnam and Guangxi, Guangdong-China, 6-9 November 1956]’, UHKVB, no. 5523, TLQ III, p. 1.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-4.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

Chinese Civil War and the First Indochina War.<sup>111</sup>

Policies regarding cross-border marriage and nationalities reflected the two Communist countries' uneasiness with the transnational fraternity fostered by ethnic bonds. In 1955, the PRC, which did not recognize dual citizenship, agreed in talks with the DRV that 'all subjects of Chinese origin living in the DRV should be encouraged to assimilate on a voluntary and gradual basis into Vietnamese society'.<sup>112</sup> Beijing's attitude to the *Việt Kiều* (overseas Vietnamese) in China, however, remained unclear. At the 1956 border province meeting, the Chinese representatives conveyed the opinions of the CCP leadership to the Vietnamese counterparts: The Kinh people who migrated to China after the PRC was founded were considered *Việt Kiều*. Those who moved to China before October 1949 and then made a career or had a legitimate occupation and settled down in China would also be 'persuaded to keep their Vietnamese citizenship'. Only those insisting on obtaining Chinese nationality and Vietnamese women who married Chinese men might be allowed to change their citizenship.<sup>113</sup> Beijing's policy of non-assimilation perhaps indicates its concerns over the ethnic mosaic at the margin of its territory and the possibility of Vietnamese demanding favourable treatment once becoming an ethnic minority with a significant population.

For cross-border marriages, the two countries agreed to adopt a 'not banning but not encouraging' policy as long as the marriage was not regarded illegal in the country where it was registered.<sup>114</sup> More-flexible systems, however, were employed in the highlands. The two sides admitted that it was difficult to determine the citizenship of those considered 'ethnic minorities' who constantly moved back and forth across the borderline; therefore, these people could choose their nationality based on their residence at the time of registration. Moreover, local state representatives were instructed to 'respect the long-established social, cultural, and family connections between the Mèo, Mán, and Lô Lô people' dispersed along the border and to refrain from interfering in some of their marriage traditions, such as dowry.<sup>115</sup>

Finally, the border provinces drafted a legal procedure for border crossing by border dwellers who lived within a 20-kilometre radius of the border. Considering the local population's need to travel across the boundary for production, subsistence, and schooling, the two countries decided to open more unpatrolled trails managed by cadres of the border towns instead of border garrisons. Border dwellers who sought to cross the border for other 'legitimate reasons', such as paying homage to tombs, reuniting with relatives, or seeing a doctor, could apply for a temporary travel document valid for three to six months. In principle, they should take the officially opened border crossings, although exceptions could be granted to people residing in remote towns.<sup>116</sup>

In 1957, the police authorities of Guangxi decided to impose stricter restrictions on the migration of border residents based on the agreement, requiring that any requests to move into or out of the

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>112</sup> Duiker, *China and Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict*, p. 40.

<sup>113</sup> UHKVB, 'Trích biên bản ghi những vấn đề biên giới được trao đổi trong cuộc toạ đàm giữa đại biểu các tỉnh Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, Hải Ninh-Việt Nam và Quảng Tây, Quảng Đông-Trung Quốc họp từ ngày 6 đến 9 tháng 11 năm 1956', p. 6.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. Beijing dispatched ethnic classification work teams to its southern border provinces to study and classify the "ethnic minorities" from 1952 to 1953. The DRV began their ethnic classification project in the 1960s. See Thomas S. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China* (Berkeley, California: University of Press, 2012), in particular pp. 92-119; Masako Ito, *Politics of Ethnic Classification in Vietnam* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2013), in particular pp. 33-37.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

country should be inspected by county-level public security institutions and endorsed by the Vietnamese side. ‘Key members of reactionary secret societies, bandits, bullies, spies, former Nationalists still committed to counterrevolutionary positions, and criminals’, however, ‘should not be permitted to migrate out or in’.<sup>117</sup> Through this selective blocking of cross-border flows of people and goods, the two regimes aimed to translate their nationwide revolutionary victories into increased authority of their states at the border. It was, nonetheless, in the interests of the two governments to maintain the ‘permeability of borders’,<sup>118</sup> given that neither of them was able to supply all the necessary resources to secure the basic livelihood of the borderlanders.

Despite a carefully planned land-swapping project, the two countries encountered enormous difficulty in promptly eliminating the cross-border agriculture. During the scheduled land survey conducted by Guangxi and Guangdong in the frontier counties, provincial officials finally realized the sheer scale of cross-border farming. According to a Guangxi report to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, ‘more than 800 households in the province, including a considerable number of Zhuang, Yao, Miao (Mè), Lo Lo (Lô Lô), and Kinh ethnic minorities, farmed on the other side of the borderline’. More importantly, except in a few commercially oriented towns, people involved in cross-border agriculture depended on a good harvest in Vietnam for their very existence.<sup>119</sup> In late 1956, Hanoi retreated from its original position of demanding payment of overdue tax of cross-border farming largely due to the bureaucratic costs of figuring out the exact amount of the tax. The two sides agreed to levy agricultural taxes on cross-border farming from 1957 based on the law of the country where the land was located, while exempting the overdue amount before 1956.<sup>120</sup> In March 1957, Beijing further reversed its policy of discouraging cross-border agriculture by instructing the Guangdong provincial government that all cross-border crop fields, except those that had already been swapped or returned, should be left in their status quo. The local officials no longer needed to persuade people to give up cross-border farming. Moreover, the Chinese State Council ordered the border provinces to be more flexible on activities such as grazing cattle and obtaining firewood across the border so long as doing so did not jeopardize the interests of Vietnam. Meanwhile, the border counties were granted more authority to solve cross-border issues through consultation with the local Vietnamese officials.<sup>121</sup>

The changing attitude of Beijing and Hanoi toward the cross-border agriculture and its tax implications symbolized the gap between policy making and implementation at the political periphery. While the local administrations were more capable of discovering and recording the cross-border movements of people and goods than before, be they considered legal or illegal, they were not always committed to containing these activities. The native populations still enjoyed

<sup>117</sup> Guangxi Zhuangzu Zizhiqu difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui [Editorial board of gazetteers of Guangxi], *Guangxi tongzhi: gong'an zhi* [Gazetteer of Guangxi: public security] (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 2002), p. 693.

<sup>118</sup> Willem van Schendel and Eric de Maaker, ‘Asian Borderlands: Introducing their Permeability, Strategic Uses, and Meanings’, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* vol. 29, no. 1 (2014), p. 6.

<sup>119</sup> ‘Zhonggong Guangxi shengwei guanyu Guangxi Zhong-Yue bianjing shewai wenti ji chuli yijian [CCP Guangxi Provincial Committee on coping with foreign affairs at the Chinese-Vietnamese border]’, Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives, 105-00440-02 (1), pp. 36-7.

<sup>120</sup> Guangdong shengwei, ‘Guangdongsheng dui Guangdong he Haining liangsheng bianjing diqu yixie juti wenti de chuli yijian [Suggestion on how to solve the concrete problems between Guangdong and Hải Ninh by the CCP Committee of Guangdong]’, circa late 1956, FCD, 1-2-90-2, p. 21.

<sup>121</sup> ‘Guowuyuan jiu Guangdongsheng yu Yuenan guojing tudi wenti pishi Guangdongsheng renmin weiyuanhui [Instruction from State Council to Guang dong on cross-border farming between Guang dong and Vietnam]’, 28 March 1957, in Dangdai zhongguo yanjiu suo [Institute of Contemporary China of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences] (ed.), *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo shi biannian, vol. 1957* [Chronicles of the PRC History: 1957] (Beijing: Dangdai zhongguo chubanshe, 2011), p. 199.

considerable leeway against the state by, for example, crossing the border spontaneously for the sake of their livelihood. After Hanoi placed more restrictions on the small-scale border trade in July 1957, the Chinese border police at Friendship Pass detected approximately 100 Vietnamese citizens each day who entered China through small mountain trails without travel documents and traded with the Chinese without any trade permits, whereas the number was only around ten before August.<sup>122</sup> With the increasing radicalization of Chinese politics following the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957, the reported cases of Chinese sneaking into Vietnam within the patrolling area of the Friendship Pass Border Authority more than doubled, from 132 in 1957 to 291 in the following year.<sup>123</sup> Most people caught for illegally crossing the border were required to attend an education session on the government policy and were then released, which was hardly enough to deter further unlawful border crossing.

In short, the Communist states carefully designed an internationally coordinated project to extend their reach into the borderlands, yet were pushed back by the realities on the ground. This illustrates the gap between the demanding tasks assumed by the border administrations and their limited strength. Diplomatic historians and political scientists, for example, argue that during the Cold War, China often attempted to use the settlement of border issues with neighbours (especially by making a compromise with them) to bargain for broader foreign policy objectives or to address internal threats to regime security.<sup>124</sup> In the border region, it turned out that the state had to pursue multiple objectives, including but not limited to foreign policy goals. It not only produced authoritarian institutions but also had to offer promises of prosperity to the people.

Guidelines for border inspection drafted by the Guangxi Military Region Command in October 1956 best highlighted the heavy burden laid on local cadres. It stipulated that the border garrison and police should ‘enforce the border check rules and regulations while taking into consideration the long existent customs between inhabitants of the two sides, the political awareness of the people, and reality in Vietnam. They needed to crush the enemy efficiently and to win the sincere support of the people at the same time. In all, they must strengthen the Sino-Vietnamese comradeship and consolidate border defence by striking a balance and making steady progress’.<sup>125</sup> This requirement revealed the fundamental obstacle encountered by grassroots state institutions at the border. Being part of the street-level bureaucracy dispatched to a remote, unfamiliar society that had historically resisted intrusion by the central state, border authorities nevertheless were expected to accomplish a five-fold, internally contradictory mission.

### **Conclusion: toward a non-linear history of state-building at the frontier**

The cases examined in this article reveal the profound impact of the Communist state-building that simultaneously took place in the PRC and the DRV on the sometimes troubled socialist partnership between Beijing and Hanoi. In traditional narratives of Chinese-Vietnamese relations, the years immediately after the end of the Geneva Conference of 1954 witnessed the consolidation of the lips and teeth relationship between the two countries. Perceiving threat from the American-sponsored SEATO, the leadership in Beijing ‘viewed the DRV as the keystone of their national

<sup>122</sup> Pingxiang shizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Pingxiang shizhi*, p. 377.

<sup>123</sup> Zeng, *Youyiguan bianfang jianchazhan zhanzhi*, p. 161.

<sup>124</sup> See, in particular, M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflicts in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008); Zhihua Shen and Julia Lovell, ‘Undesired Outcomes: China's Approach to Border Disputes during the Early Cold War’, *Cold War History* vol. 15, no. 1 (2015), pp. 89-111.

<sup>125</sup> Zeng, *Youyiguan bianfang jianchazhan zhanzhi*, p. 132.

security perimeter in Southeast Asia'.<sup>126</sup> Meanwhile, diplomatic support and economic assistance from China were essential to the DRV's endeavours to reconstruct and develop its economy, although the backfiring of land reform in Vietnam led the VWP leaders to question the Maoist revolutionary model.<sup>127</sup> The border issues that eventually became the pretext for China's punitive invasion of the Vietnamese border provinces during the Third Indochina War initially appeared to be a matter of relatively little significance. This article, however, highlights that what happened on the Chinese-Vietnamese borderlands in the mid-1950s epitomized a profound transformation in the characteristics of Chinese-Vietnamese relations. While the inter-party ties between the CCP and the VWP remained the core of the relationship, the two socialist countries began to interact as modern states in making border boundaries and strengthening border institutions. The period from 1954 to 1957 witnessed their mutual endeavours to adjust their roles from revolutionaries to ruling elites by, in the words of James Scott, 'seeing like a state' in the border region.<sup>128</sup> They launched large-scale authoritarian plans that did violence to the complex interdependencies in the frontiers that were not and could not be fully understood by the state institutions, which were alien to the indigenous societies.

That the PRC and the DRV had a similar political system and trajectory of state-building apparently worked to the advantage of the two centralizing states' political projects at the border. On the one hand, the Cold War geopoliticized the border region and led the two Communist countries to cooperate in guarding against any potential subversions. On the other hand, addressing the ambiguity at the border was essential to constructing a socialist country that was more 'centralized, bureaucratic and mass-incorporating' with 'enhanced great-power potential in the international arena'.<sup>129</sup> Located between two newly established Communist regimes, the Sino-Vietnamese border was subject to parallel state schemes to increase institutional presence and strength, which often took the shape of coordinated efforts by the two Communist states to remould the murky 'soft' boundary into a clearly defined 'hard' one. While border-making also occurred in other border provinces of the two countries, and in all post-colonial states more broadly, what distinguished the China-Vietnam border was a distinct international dimension of state-building, namely, the significant impact of the Cold War partnership. This joint state-building project at the frontier made it increasingly difficult for the local residents to escape or evade the state, due to collaborative measures introduced by the two Communist regimes to make the inhabitants' daily lives visible, trackable, and exploitable by the state.<sup>130</sup>

However, there was no linear process toward a stronger state at the border. Instead, the state had to strike a balance between the construction of socialism and political realism on the ground. This dilemma was often caused by cultural nationalism, the presence of disputed areas, the prevalence of local hierarchies, and the absence of central government authority. Moreover, the limits to the reach and complexity of the state at the border were in no small part due to the different priorities

<sup>126</sup> Duiker, *China and Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict*, p. 36.

<sup>127</sup> See, for example, Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*, pp. 65-91; Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2006), pp. 164-73.

<sup>128</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

<sup>129</sup> Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 41.

<sup>130</sup> According to James Scott, the dwellers of Southeast Asian highland were 'barbarians by design' and developed an agriculture and a society of escape by moving between and around the state. See Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, p. 8. However, the establishment of socialist institutions in both China and Vietnam significantly squeezed the space between the around the state, a case in point was the family register system (*Hukou* in Chinese and *hộ khẩu* in Vietnamese).

and gaps of available resources between the political centre and the local state. This problem was especially severe in China, where the Southwestern border was a remote corner of the country.<sup>131</sup> The structural and geographical location of the local state at the border meant that it sometimes was more prone to the challenge of being ‘asked to be all things to all people’ than officials in the inland.<sup>132</sup> The local state had to deal with foreign affairs on a daily basis, yet did not always have the organizational complexity, cultural expertise, or fiscal capability to carry out a coherent foreign policy. It was not an uncommon belief among local officials that pursuing foreign policy diverted resources from state projects that could more directly contribute to the socialist transformation. Furthermore, the conflation of the Communist Party with the administrative state led to the ‘essential indivisibility of ideology, civil administration and national defence’<sup>133</sup> and to conflicts among the goals of the three spheres.

During the early Cold War era, the PRC and the DRV shared not only common borders but also a common ideology, political system, and trajectory of state-building. The Chinese and Vietnamese Communist states, however, were rolled back after 1958 because the Great Leap Forward in China and the agricultural cooperatization in Vietnam threatened the livelihood of the borderlanders and alienated the population from the local officials. Chinese and Vietnamese Communists viewed the border-making endeavours of each other mostly in a positive light in the 1950s because the process was deemed conducive to turning their own border society inward toward the political centre and to fostering a stronger socialist solidarity. With the rise of nationalism in both countries in the 1970s, potential conflicts of national interests between the two countries at the frontiers emerged. Disputes between the Chinese and Vietnamese border citizens over crop fields, water, and other resources, mostly resulting from the declining state strength vis-à-vis the indigenous society since the late 1950s, eventually became one of the most effective mobilization tools for Beijing and Hanoi in their decade-long confrontation at the border after 1979.

<sup>131</sup> Existing literature on central-local relations in foreign affairs almost exclusively focuses on the post-Maoist era. Mingjiang Li, for instance, argues that reform and development and the ensuring decentralization of power brought an increased role for local governments in cross-border interactions in the forms of attracting foreign investment and cooperation with regional organizations. See Mingjiang Li, ‘Central-local interactions in foreign affairs’, in John A. Donaldson (ed.), *Assessing the Balance of Power in Central-Local Relations in China* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 209-28. Discussion of central-local relations in post-reform Vietnam has largely focused on domestic issues. See Thaveeporn Vasavakul, ‘Rethinking the Philosophy of Central-Local Relations in Post-Central-Planning Vietnam’, in Mark Turner (ed.), *Central-Local Relations in Asia-Pacific: Convergence or Divergence?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp. 166-95.

<sup>132</sup> Elizabeth Remick, *Building Local States: China during the Republican and Post-Mao Eras* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 5-6.

<sup>133</sup> William W. Whitson, *The Chinese High Command: A History of Communist Military Politics, 1927-71* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1973), p. 519.