BOOK REVIEW

BRADLEY CAMP DAVIS

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

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016. 288 pages. $29.98 (paper)

Bradley Camp Davis' *Imperial Bandits* reconstructs the cultures of violence of the China-Vietnam borderlands from roughly the 1860s to the early twentieth century. One of Davis's most significant contributions is his clear explication and demystification of several important and often misunderstood historical episodes. By placing the borderlands at the center of his narrative, Davis sheds new light on the Black Flag army, the Cần Vương ("Save the King") Rebellion, the Sino-French War, and the subsequent demarcation of a borderline between China and Vietnam. Davis draws from French, Vietnamese, and Chinese sources as well as oral history, balancing competing narratives by focusing on the local.

The movement of three bandit armies, known by the color of their signal flags—the White Flags, Black Flags, and Yellow Flags—indelibly shaped the history of the China-Vietnam borderlands. The armies raised revenue from opium running and raids on villages. The White Flags began causing trouble for the Nguyễn Empire in the 1860s, raiding villages near the northwest border. Liu Yongfu established the Black Flags in 1865, breaking away from an anti-Qing dynasty movement called the Kingdom of Yanling in southern China. These armies were not, as earlier scholars have supposed, splinter groups of the Taiping Rebellion. With Nguyễn sponsorship, the Black Flags destroyed the White Flags in 1868. The Yellow Flags filled the void, picking up the role and allegiances of the White Flags. Later, the Yellow Flags would form an association with the French.

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Davis develops several themes in his book. He emphasizes that "cultures of violence" were instrumental to imperial rule. Davis repeatedly demonstrates how power holders, whether bandits or state representatives, relied on brute force to achieve their aims, whatever the self-justifying rhetoric they may have used. Bandits, in this case the White, Yellow, and Black Flag armies, are a reminder that imperial power is rarely uncontested. But rather than simply see bandits as an index of the weakness of the state, Davis suggests that "imperial bandits"—reluctantly employed by the imperium to extend its rule—"exist as fundamental aspects of imperial power" (11). The principal example is the Black Flag army, which was given official recognition and support by the Nguyễn dynasty in exchange for helping to defeat the White Flag army. The Black Flags would later aid the Nguyễn by fighting the French, defeating the naval officers Francis Garnier and Henri Rivière and their troops near Hà Nội, the former in 1873 and the latter a decade later. The French in turn viewed the Vietnamese and their "imperial bandits" as impeding the free flow of commerce in the borderlands, along the upper reaches of the Red River and into China. Davis calls this official French view the "consular optic," which "resulted in a picture of disorder, a refracted vision of Nguyễn Vietnam composed to complement the interests of those advocating colonial rule" (81). Davis shows the continuity between the practices of the French colonial state and its Vietnamese predecessor. In particular, both sponsored "imperial bandits" in borderlands spaces, and claimed the imperial right to spread "civilization" at the margins of the state.

Several compelling portraits emerge, of French adventurers, Vietnamese officials, and Chinese rebel leaders. The French arms dealer Jean Dupuis helped precipitate conflict between the Nguyễn-backed Black Flags and the French when he attempted to sail up the Red River to deliver guns to southern China in 1872. Dupuis, unlike many of his associates, died peacefully in old age. The challenges of dealing with bandits caused deep divisions within the Nguyễn government. The Vietnamese official Nguyễn Bá Nghi opposed the cooperation with bandits armies, whom he saw as unreliable. Nguyễn Bá Nghi (and others like him) saw their positions of authority usurped by bandits and were then forced to work with them. The Black Flag leader Liu Yongfu appears again and again, his remarkable path taking him

from anti-Qing rebel, to Vietnamese official, to Qing official in Taiwan, and, briefly, to leader of the short-lived Republic of Taiwan. Importantly, Davis brings out the suffering, violence, and displacement experienced by the mainly Yao, Hmong, and Tai-speaking inhabitants of the borderlands, teasing out of the archives acts of rape, human trafficking, and murder, as well as communal resistance in response to these acts.

Imperial Bandits begins with an introduction on banditry, violence, and oral traditions. Chapter 1 sets the scene: the volatile mix of Chinese merchants, Tai communities, Chinese bandits, and Vietnamese soldiers that populated the borderlands in the second half of the nineteenth century. It explores the origins of the bandit armies and their reliance on mining and opium as economic support. Chapter 2 introduces the French, who are adamant about protecting free commerce in the upper reaches of the Red River. Chapter 3 recasts the Sino-French war not as a "clash of worldviews" but as a violent contest between various powerholders and arrangements of sovereignties (87), a contest further complicated by factionalism within the Nguyễn. In Chapter 4, the French increasingly seek to replace the Chinese as technicians and middlemen in the borderlands, but are surprised when the telegraph lines they install are sometimes used to foment rebellion. The conclusion provides a brief historiography of previous work on the Black Flags. Davis moves effortlessly between world historical and local scales throughout the book, challenging the preconceptions of nationalist historiography in the process.

Imperial Bandits is essential reading for anyone interested in nineteenth-century Vietnamese history or French colonialism in Vietnam. It brings Vietnamese history into conversation with studies of banditry and violence. The world of "ostentatious violence and unpredictable allies" (104) brought to light by Davis fundamentally changes our view of Nguyễn Vietnam.

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