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DONATELLA GUIDA

BORDERS OF MEMORY, MEMORY OF BORDERS: THE ANNAM BRONZE PILLARS

> Ma Yuan arrived in Jiaozhi[1] and there he erected bronze pillar(s) to mark the frontier of the Han empire (*Guangzhou ji*, commentary to *Hou Hanshu*; see Fan et al. 1965, 24:840).

It is well-known that a clear frontier between two countries is a modern concept.[2] This is a very significant point as, to borrow Malcom Anderson's words, "In certain circumstances the frontier acquired a mythic significance in building nations and political identities, becoming the *Mythomoteur* of the whole society" (1996, 4). Northern Vietnam was one of the closest (in the broadest sense) countries and peaceful neighbour in most Chinese dynasties, and therefore I decided to focus my investigation on this particular

Prof. Donatella Guida – Professor of Chinese History, Department of Asian, African and the Mediterranean studies, University of Naples "L'Orientale"; email: dguida@unior.it; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5378-2187.

[1] The ancient name of Northern Vietnam.

[2] Although the Romans, and before them the Greek *poleis*, used to mark their territory with milestones, a clear definition of frontiers starts in pre-modern times, in European history stemming from the concept of sovereignty in the fifteenth century. There is a vast literature on the concept, elucidating the multifaceted meaning/s of geographical, political and cultural borders. See, e.g., Malcom Anderson (1996, 1–26), Harald Bauder (2011), who analyse a rich array of previous literature. Frontiers are also connected with the idea of expansion and colonization, as well as the identity of a certain people as strongly related to a specific territory. As for the Chinese world, several scholars have focused on the imperial frontier in later periods, especially the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and its complex relation with Russia and Inner Asia. See, for instance, Peter C. Perdue (1998, 2010), Victor Lieberman (2008), and Donald S. Sutton (2003).

border as a case study, analysing the location and significance of the Han General Ma Yuan's bronze pillars. My starting point is a much later source, i.e. the Ming official history, which still mentions these artefacts as an important landmark. But before retracing the history of these bronze columns, it is necessary to define some fundamental concepts.

The idea of border in traditional China, and specifically in Ming times (1368–1644), may involve the notion of what in English is usually referred to as a "tributary system", i.e. a complex net of relations, exchanges, gifts and obligations that intertwined in both ritual and practical ways.[3] The mutual recognition and the establishment of these kind of relations worked for China not only as a means of legitimation towards officials and literati at all levels, but also as a first defence against potential external enemies. Vietnam is in fact referred to as "fence of the Middle kingdom" and "guardian of the southern frontier" (Zhang Tingyu et al. 1974, 321:8309).[4] It is therefore both to enhance his legitimation and to ensure the southern frontier that in the second year of his reign (1369), Emperor Hongwu, following an official letter sent to announce the foundation of the new Ming dynasty, welcomed an Annamese embassy that arrived at the capital Yingtian, present Nanjing. Ming Taizu was very pleased and ordered two officials to leave as ambassadors to confer upon King Chen Rikui (Tran Nhật Khuê) a silver seal and an official decree recognizing his suzerainty. Unfortunately, before the Chinese envoys could reach the border, the king had already died. They could only head back to the court to report the sad news. When they arrived,

> The Emperor, in mourning clothes, received them by the Xihua gate; then the Emperor ordered Academician Wang Lian to go offer sacrifice, and bestowed funerary gifts to the [Annamese] envoys of 52 *liang* of white gold and 50 bolts of silk. Besides, the Emperor sent Lin Tangchen, secretary of the Ministry of Personnel, to enfeoff [the king's son] Rijian as king, conferring a golden seal, and 40 bolts of silks and brocades of knit gold. As Lian was going, the Emperor ordered [him] also to go and make sacrifice in honour of the great and extraordinary success of Ma Yuan of the Han who erected the bronze pillar(s) upon subduing the *Man* and the *Yi*. (Zhang Tingyu et al., 1974, 321: 8310)[5]

In the above passage we recognize some peculiar characteristics of the tribute system: the emperor participates heartily in the mourning by wearing appropriate clothes and

[3] The concept stemmed from John K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng (1941) and was later developed in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, ed. John K. Fairbank (1968); see also Wang Yuan-kang (2013). Armin Selbitschka discusses the limits of the system in his "Early Chinese Diplomacy: 'Realpolitik' versus the So-Called Tributary System" (2015). See also Guida (2022).

[4] China–Vietnam relations are a widely studied research topic. See for instance the seminal works of Brantly Womack (2006, 2012) or Kathlene Baldanza (2016, esp. 50ff). See also Leo K. Shin (2007).

[5] The passage is much longer in *Ming Shi-lu* (2005), available on *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu*, http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/hong-wu/year-3-month-4-day-15.

sending funerary gifts; besides he sends his blessing for the appointment of the successor. The reference to the Han dynasty aims to underline the long-lasting ties between the two countries, even if during the Han era the context was evidently different. In addition, from the last sentence we infer that the pillar(s) was/were erected as a memorial to such a brilliant victory of the Han Chinese, allegedly by Ma Yuan himself, shortly after his successful action against the Trung sisters' rebellion in 43 CE. The fact that the Hongwu Emperor sent his ambassadors to honour the memory of Ma Yuan[6] and his bronze pillar(s) while going to Annam, i.e. the northernmost part of Vietnam (the closest region to Chinese province of Guangxi), seems to indicate that the place where the pillar(s) was/were erected was very close – or better – *within* the neighbouring country, or else that the imperial envoys had to pass by the bronze pillar(s) on their way to Annam. However, we may also imagine that it was a simple reference to a glorious past in order to suggest that the newly founded dynasty had to be directly connected to it. In fact, on many occasions Ming Taizu did associate his position and even his personal past to the Han dynasty, as several founders did, since the Han dynasty was considered to be the ideal model to follow; besides, in this specific case Zhu Yuanzhang was born in the same region of Liu Bang and from a non-aristocratic family, as he liked to remark.

Shortly after, a violation of the Guangxi border at the Siming prefecture by the Annamese people is reported to the emperor (Zhang Tingyu et al. 1974, 321:8311), further confirming the presumed location of the bronze pillars and introducing to the reader their perception as a legitimate border. In fact, while mentioning the violation, the local official explains the situation from the previous Mongol dynasty:

> Since the Yuan dynasty established the route command of Siming, the districts and prefectures of Zuo Jiang under [its] administration have taken Shangsi Prefecture in the East and *the Bronze Pillars in the South as borders*…. After the Yuan Dynasty collapsed, the Jiao[zhi] people attacked and raided Yongping, *passing beyond the Bronze Pillars more than 200 li*, invading and usurping the lands subject to Siming (Zhang Tingyu et al. 1974, 321:8312).

[6] Ma Yuan (14 BC–49) was a prominent general during the Eastern Han dynasty, who greatly contributed to consolidating the new state by defeating Emperor Guangwu's enemies on several occasions. His success against the rebellion in Jiaozhi is his most famous enterprise. He is also said to have built many dikes and canalization systems. For a detailed biography of Ma Yuan see Fan Ye (1965, 14:827–67). Ma Yuan's myth was very strong both in China and in the area, as noted by Schafer (1967, 97–99). Kaltenmark (1948) discusses both the origin and significance of his titles (1–5) and the religious cult that began in Tang times (6–20). Kaltenmark compares the bronze pillars to several other similar artefacts, especially of bronze, arguing that they had a religious value as protection against evil forces from both the soil and the sea (48). See also Sutton (1989). It should be recalled that Ma's daughter became empress in 60.

Many years later, in 1397, the question was still unresolved as the Annamese king tried to keep his point about the rightful border with Ming China, claiming that "on examination, it is seen that the words of the Siming people are not trustworthy. If a mistake in this is recognized, then other things will become clear. As to what is recorded in the histories, since the Han and Tang dynasties, there have been many changes. Can we use their accounts of former occurrences as a guide for today's actions?" (*Ming Shi-lu* 2005). Even if the king pointed out that it is not possible to use texts dating back to centuries earlier to substantiate one's claims, the pillars were still used as a solid geographical reference, no one seemed to doubt about their existence or position.

In order to collect more details about the exact location of these pillars, I checked in the *Hou Hanshu* (History of the Later Han) only to find out that there is no trace of the pillars either in Ma Yuan's biography or in the Jiaozhi section or in Emperor Guangwu's annals.

Where does this information come from, then? Reading Ma Yuan's biography more closely, we find a footnote belonging to the most famous commentary to *Hou Hanshu*, compiled by the Tang prince Li Xian (655–84) (Fan et al. 1965, 24:840), that is actually incorporated in the authoritative edition of the official history, included in both the *Siku Quanshu* and the modern edition of 1965. We thus learn that the earliest mention of these pillars can be found in *Guangzhou ji* (Memories of Guangzhou), of which no author or date of publication is provided. This obscure work, whose full text is no longer extant,[7] is said to report that bronze columns were erected in the Jiaozhi territory by general Ma Yuan to mark the [southern] border of the Han empire. No further details are given on the location of these pillars, and this fact is somewhat strange, given the obsession of Chinese historians for distances and routes.

Moreover, the fact that *Guangzhou ji* seems to be associated to the *chuanqi* literature casts some doubt about its historical value: why would it be considered such a valid source of information so as to deserve a specific comment by Li Xian? Or else, was it perhaps mentioned because it conveyed a popular and symbolic meaning of Chinese grandeur in the eyes of the crown prince of a successor dynasty who lived some six centuries later?

Going back to the supposed function of territory markers, it is worthwhile noting that, in fact, bronze pillars are actually mentioned as a memorial for some remarkable

[7] In the monumental *Siku Quanshu* there is a very short piece (around 600 characters) with this title, by a certain Gu Wei of the Jin dynasty (265–420), belonging to the Ming collection *Shuofu*, which does not include this passage. We can imagine the original text to be much longer. This quotation is very well known and it is cited several times in both historical and literary sources of the following centuries. For instance, oddly enough, it is mentioned in an encyclopaedic work of 1710 entitled *Yuanjian leihan*, juan 352, to illustrate the concept of frontier (*fengjiang*).

victory or event in many occasions,[8] while no other case is recorded for them as border indicators. However, in the above-mentioned episode of Ming times, it seems that they functioned as an effective frontier, not to be freely crossed, except in times of great turmoil, as the fall of a dynasty certainly was.

It should be recalled that during the Han dynasty the border did not correspond to Jiaozhi and the region where the Trung revolt was suppressed, being instead much farther to the south. The hypothesis according to which the author of *Guangzhou ji* was not familiar with the real borders of the Han empire does not seem credible. The echo of Ma Yuan's fame had to be very strong during the centuries after the fall of the Later Han dynasty, as demonstrated also by another historical work written by a contemporary of Prince Li Xian. Li Yanshou (seventh century, dates unknown), author of *Nanshi* (History of the South), in the section devoted to foreign countries describes Linyi (Southern Vietnam) as located 600 *li* from Guangxi, specifying that on the sea route the southern border, where "the general who calms the waves" (an honorific title of Ma Yuan) erected the two bronze pillars, is more than 200 *li* away (Li Yanshou, *Nanshi* 78:1b–2a).[9]

From this source, it seems that the pillars were not to celebrate the victory over the rebellion in Jiaozhi but were meant to mark the effective southern border, thus clearly separating the two locations.

With the second unification of the empire in 589, the Sui dynasty proceeds to recapture Jiaozhi and attacks Linyi (Champa) "going south of Ma Yuan's bronze pillars", as phrased by Sima Guang's monumental work *Zizhi tongjian* (Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance, 1084).[10] The event is celebrated also in the official history of the Sui dynasty, which describes it in many details in Liu Fang's biography (Wei Zheng et al. 1973, 53:1358).[11] As for the object of this research, it claims that "it takes eight days of [overland] journey to reach Linyi's capital city from Ma Yuan's bronze pillars."[12] It seems that the Sui dynasty attacked Linyi (Champa, Southern Vietnam) for it was said to be a very rich country and in this case their starting point is again the pillars: if we consider the pillars to stand in Guangxi or Jiaozhi, eight days seems too short to cover such a great distance. Being 1 *li* by definition 1/10 of the distance that a man can walk in one double

[8] See for instance the famous battle of Xizhou in 939, described in Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, juan 282, when a bronze pillar of 5,000 *jin* was cast. It was 1 or 2 *zhang* high, with 6 *chi* deep in the ground.

[9] These numbers don't seem to be very accurate, since overland the distance is over 800 km, while 600 *li* is around 300 km. The bronze pillars are also mentioned in the twin work *Beishi* (History of the North), by the same author.

[10] Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, juan 180.

[11] Liu Fang (?–605) was a prominent general of the Northern Zhou who helped Yang Jian to establish the Sui dynasty.

[12] *Annan zhilüe*, *juan* 4, contains the same information.

hour on a plain terrain, given the difficulties of the territory, even considering 12 hours, in a single day a soldier would be able to walk for approximately 40 *li*, which makes 320 *li* in eight days, i.e. about half the distance (600 *li*) indicated by *The History of the South* previously quoted. Should we take this remark as a confirmation that Ma Yuan's pillars were not in Jiaozhi but rather near the actual border of Han (now Sui) empire?

Now, if we look into the *Old History of the Tang* (936–946), specifically in the geographical treatise, we find the following passage:

> During the Later Han dynasty [the general] Ma Yuan was sent to attack the southern barbarians of Linyi. From Jiaozhi he proceeded along the coast, opening up a route in order to avoid the sea. From Dangchang County to Jiuzhen prefecture, and then from Jiuzhen to this country overland down to the Rinan prefecture and going more than 400 *li* further he arrived at Linyi. More than 2,000 *li* further south was the country of Xituyi; two bronze pillars were cast to mark the southern frontier of Xianglin County, which borders the country of Xituyi, as a memorial of Han flourishing virtue. Several dozens of soldiers who weren't able to go back to China were left below the pillars. In the Sui dynasty there were more than 300 families, whom local people called "Ma's people". On the sea route from Annan Prefecture Linyi is more than 3,000 *li* away, [therefore] the bronze pillars are 5,000 *li* from Jiaozhi (Liu Xu et al. 1975, 41:1755).

First of all, unfortunately, no mention is made in *Hou Hanshu* about this mission to Linyi: perhaps it is meant that Ma Yuan arrived as far south as Linyi's northern border. There seems to be some confusion about Xianglin that borders Linyi, and the country of Xituyi, much farther to the south. Secondly, we notice that the distances are much larger than the previous text indicates, actually larger than in reality, as we can easily verify on a map. Thirdly, we notice that according to this story, it seems that for his second expedition and victory Ma Yuan placed two more pillars to mark a new border, farther south, or else, the actual border of the Han empire seemed to the compilers of the official history the proper place to erect this highly symbolic landmark, just like the previous source. The so-called "Ma's people" highlights this specific point: it is a local Chinese community that strengthens the relation between the two countries and keeps culture alive in the shade of the pillars, and maybe somewhat serves to justify the Sui attack on Linyi.

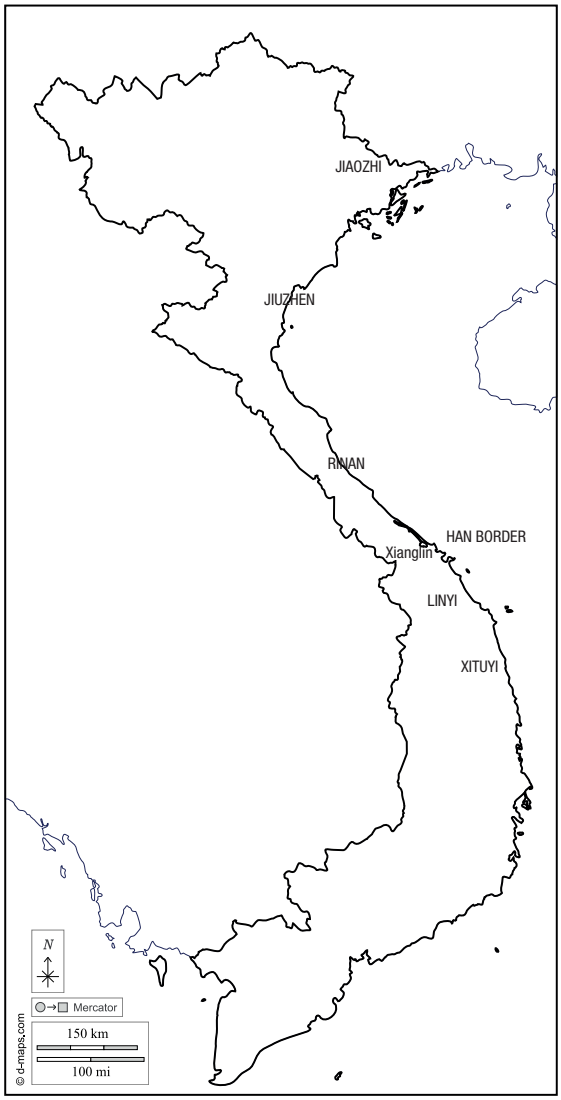

Figure 1. Vietnam in Han times (adapted from https://d-maps.com)

According to the *New History of the Tang* (1060), there were five pillars that stood between a mountain cliff and the seaside, and their shape was like a mountain (Ouyang Xiu et al. 1975, 222xia: 6297).We can understand the true meaning of this last detail through another Song source, *Lingwai daida*, by Zhou Qufei (1178). It says during the Tang dynasty a certain Ma Zong erected in the same place two more bronze pillars to remember Ma Yuan (this may confirm that the true Han pillars had long disappeared) and

more interestingly another victorious general, He Lüxian, installed five pillars, adding that "Annam people, every time they passed by, they threw stones until the pillars became similar to a tumulus or a hill, for they said that Ma Yuan had sworn that if the columns emerged (*chu*) from the ground, the whole country would be destroyed" (Zhou Qufei, juan 10). Actually, in ancient times, tumuli (*feng*) were used to mark a border (*Zhouli zhushu*, juan 10), therefore the fact that the pillars had to be completely hidden and look like a small hill might be a confirmation of their significance as border markers.[13]

Let us now turn to local sources to see if it is possible to clarify the following points: (a) their exact location(s) and (b) the reason these pillars were cast and erected.

The Vietnamese scholar Le Tac, who lived in Mongol times, writes around 1330 *Annan Zhilüe* (Concise records of Annam) (Vietnamese reading *An Nam chí lược*),[14] in which the pillars are mentioned as border markers of Han territory. Ma Yuan's oath, said to be carved in the Gusen cave of Qinzhou, is slightly different. It reads, "If the bronze pillars are broken, Jiaozhi will be destroyed." He mentions also a poem by Tu Fu depicting celestial raindrops that fell on the northern side of the bronze pillars to wash Ma's army. There were bronze pillars also at the border with Champa, somehow confirming a kind of multiplication of these artefacts (Le Tac, juan 1).

I could not find any information about this cave, it had to be somewhere in the mountain ridge that today is called Shiwan shan, of which we will hear more later.

Let us now concentrate on the inscription: in this case it sounds even more threatening. There might be two main interpretations for locals' throwing stones: out of hatred or out of fear, in order to protect or hide the pillars thus preventing their destruction. The sentence is sufficiently short and obscure to arouse fear and the suspicion that heavenly wrath would fall upon the country in the event of the destruction of this Chinese symbol, a sentiment that is further emphasized by the quote from the famous poet Tu Fu's verses which allude to rain sent by Heaven to wash the victorious Chinese army on its way back. Was it rather a curse? Or else did it simply allude to the magical feature discussed before? A recent study by Li Junsheng (2023) maintains that during the Song Dynasty, Vietnam failed to restore its old borders and recognized its independence, which led to the emergence of the "oath" theory, that has been handed down from local historians ever since. Ma Yuan's hostile image was created – Li believes – in order to meet the needs of national and ethnic consciousness construction; therefore the differences in details

[13] The origin of the word *feng*, which goes back to the clod of earth given by the king of Zhou to his feudal lords, explains even visually (two earths on the left and a hand on the right) how the very concept of border actually stems from the general ideology of the centre (Son of Heaven) that bestows suzerainty to the outer circles.

[14] For more information about Le Tac see Baldanza (2016, 15–48).

and records are due to the realistic considerations of narrating the boundaries and the founding process of the country in different periods.

Figure 2. Guangxi–Annam border in Ming times

The local gazetteer *Guangxi tongzhi* (juan 45; see also *Ming Yitong zhi*, juan 90) furnishes the same information about two pillars on the Champa border, quoting also a Ming work entitled *Xishi'er*, written by a certain Wei Jun who held the post of education-intendant assistant for Guangxi province in Wanli times. In this work we finally come across a precise location for the two pillars: Wei maintains that one was at Pingxiang zhou and the other one at Qinzhou. The slopes of Fenmao Thatch (i.e., Shiwan shan) are said to be the place where Ma Yuan's pillars once stood (see figure 2), signalling a natural divide between the two countries: the two pillars change their position according also to the political situation.

CONCLUSIONS

There are several other sources which more or less report the same information, but I did not come across any testimony or direct evidence provided by someone who actually saw the pillars. There is also uncertainty about their dimensions and shape. It seems that there were different locations of the bronze pillars, as well as distances, as if they were mysteriously mobile yet nowhere to be seen. Vietnamese historians have also tried to find an explanation, mainly suggesting that the pillars might have disappeared underwater due to a change of the coastline, while some others argue that they might

be buried somewhere by the stones thrown by local people and/or some natural event. Contemporary Chinese scholarship claims that the actual position of the pillars is not as important as their historical value and does not reside in the object, or in the material of which it was made, nor even in any inscription but rather in what they represented as a concept.[15]

From the historiographical point of view, this further demonstrates how a fact reported by a certain source is reiterated by subsequent authors and is very rarely questioned. Although we cannot exclude the pillars' casual destruction or the underwater burial, or the bronze re-melting and recycling that in antiquity was extremely common worldwide, we certainly cannot deny the confusion between different versions and places, not to mention the reasons for which the pillars were said to have been produced and erected.

Nevertheless, the pillars did indeed exist for Vietnamese literati at least until the end of the Qing empire, as demonstrated by many poetic examples (Kelley 2005). Tan Vu Huy, a Vietnamese scholar thus expresses his feelings:

> Setting off in the morning from [Ning]ming department citadel,
> We searched for traces of the bronze pillars.
> A local man pointed far off,
> Two moss-covered piles of stones.
> My goodness, those are the bronze pillars,
> Where our realm once stood.…
> [Now] there is only morning mist and evening fog here,
> And all I can do is sigh at both past and present.
> Here, though, there is Parting Thatch,[16]
> Marking Heaven's divide between south and north.
> In the end the divided will unite,
> For how could this marvelous relic be in vain? (Kelley 2005, 193)

The pillars surely existed as a symbol of their country and of the culture they shared with China.

[15] See, for instance, Wang Yuanlin and Wu Liyong (2011) and Tao Zhengtong (2017).

[16] It is a translation of Fenmao Thatch.

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BORDERS OF MEMORY, MEMORY OF BORDERS: THE ANNAM BRONZE PILLARS

Summary

This paper focuses on the bronze pillars allegedly erected by the Chinese general Ma Yuan in the first century CE that were still supposed to mark the frontier between Ming China and Vietnam. Through a close reading of several sources, the paper demonstrates that across the centuries many contradictory explanations were given by Chinese and Vietnamese histories, suggesting that the columns were a symbol rather than an actual border for both populations; a symbol to signal a divide and a clear hierarchy but also a way to underline a common heritage and culture, whose memory or imagination lasted for centuries.

Keywords: memory; frontiers; Vietnam; bronze pillars; Chinese historiography; legitimation; identity; culture

GRANICE PAMIĘCI, PAMIĘĆ GRANIC. BRĄZOWE FILARY ANNAM

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł koncentruje się na brązowych filarach rzekomo wzniesionych przez chińskiego generała Ma Yuana w pierwszym wieku naszej ery, które nadal miały wyznaczać granicę między Chinami Ming a Wietnamem. Analizując kilka źródeł, autorka wykazuje, że na przestrzeni wieków chińscy i wietnamscy historycy podawali wiele sprzecznych wyjaśnień, co sugeruje, że kolumny były raczej symbolem niż rzeczywistą granicą dla obu populacji; symbolem sygnalizującym podział i wyraźną hierarchię, ale także sposobem na podkreślenie znaczenia wspólnego dziedzictwa i kultury, których pamięć lub wyobrażenia przetrwały wieki.

Słowa kluczowe: pamięć; granice; Wietnam; filary z brązu; chińska historiografia; legitymacja; tożsamość; kultura